

# Passion for the *unique*

Andrew Iwasyszyn, head of special interest product and innovation at Saga, talks about group trips for the 2020 Oberammergau Passion Play.

• A scene from the 2010 run of the Passion Play in Oberammergau.

Oberammergau is a town in the Bavarian Alps, Germany, known for its once-a-decade performance of the world-famous Passion Play, with the next season running from 16th May until 4th October, 2020.

**Q. Andrew, where does your personal interest in Oberammergau come from?**

**A.** The region around the village of Oberammergau itself is just stunning. It's quite an underrated destination for UK travellers, but it's very close to the Austrian state of Tyrol, full of lush valleys and rolling hills. I've holidayed in the region with family, which is how my interest began. The Passion Play combines the stunning scenery and the area's historical importance and gives you so much to enjoy.

**Q. Please explain a bit about the Passion Play itself.**

**A.** This religious play has been performed since 1634 as a tradition by the inhabitants of the village of Oberammergau. The legend goes that the villagers promised to perform the story of Christ to protect themselves from the plague, and succeeded – so it's been performed every ten years ever since and has been going for almost 400 years.

**Q. How long has Saga been selling Passion Play holidays?**

**A.** Decades – and it's always been a big project. Obviously trends change in what people want in their holidays but we're really pleased that for 2020 we've had more interest than ever before – and of course, there's still a couple of years to go until the actual event.

The 2020 holidays went on sale last year, to test the water and the response was fantastic. There are all sorts of holiday package combinations because of the village's location, it's so close to Austria and Italy and of course many great parts of Germany. We've had to add new dates to existing packages, come up with new ones, and increase the capacity overall.

**Q. Why do you think the event is so popular?**

**A.** The fact that it's every ten years makes it quite unusual and is something you'll find on many a bucket list. It's also very authentic, run and performed every decade by the villagers. For example all the performers have to have lived in the village for 20 years and all males actors must start growing their beard 15 months before, with the exception of those playing Romans! This is something really special.

**Q. Please could you give some examples of the related tours and holidays Saga is offering?**

**A.** One of the most popular is a seven-night The Alps and The Passion Play itinerary. Guests will spend a night in Munich, then five nights in the heart of the Tyrol region, before transferring to see the performance. The excursions will give guests a feel for the region, including tours of Munich, Innsbruck, Lake Achen, Salzburg, and Kitzbuhel.

Another popular trip is Oberammergau Passion Play and the Sound of Music; a six-night holiday taking in Salzkammergut and Salzburg before attending the play. There's also a trip that combines Oberammergau with the picturesque Lake Maggiore, which has been so popular we've already created a new series.

**Q. Are there any particular Passion Play breaks you would recommend to groups?**

**A.** All trips lend themselves to a group, but if I had to choose I'd recommend the Oberammergau and a Four-Country river cruise. This cruise calls at places such as Bratislava, Vienna, Durnstein, Melk and Passau. The ship has two lounges so groups could book these out privately for special activities. Plus the beauty of a river cruise is that you can do as much or as little as you want – take an excursion of the region, do a wine tour, or just spend time enjoying scenery from the sun deck.

**Q. Saga is also running holidays to the Passion Play in Sordevelo, Italy. Can you tell us a bit about that?**

**A.** There's a bit of mystery with Sordevelo, the text dates back to the 1500s and for many years was performed in Rome. There's a debate about how the text ended up in Sordevelo but it seems it was smuggled out of Rome to be protected. Similar to the Passion Play, it is performed in a small village by the locals who want to keep it alive through theatrical performance.

This Passion Play runs once every five years throughout the summer and is a nice alternative if people have seen the Oberammergau play or want something more intimate (it's on a smaller scale). Here at Saga we're running seven night packages that have had a lot of interest so far. The next showing is also in 2020.

**Q. What benefits will groups have when holidaying with Saga?**

**A.** The dedicated groups team is very experienced, and we can arrange lots of different things, like travel insurance, getting to the airport, and excursions to meet special interests. We offer one free place in ten for every Oberammergau holiday, and we're happy to meet specific requirements for groups, be it marine history or food and drink. We've worked with a lot of groups over the years; we know every group has their own style or specialism – we can tailor our programmes to these. ■

**Useful contact:**

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