

TRAVEL

Discover Ludwig's royal digs in Germany

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Remember the line in comedian Steve Martin's song about how King Tut gave his life for tourism?

In a way, so did King Ludwig II of Bavaria.

Deposed in 1886 on the grounds of insanity by subjects tired of financing their king's fantasy palaces, Ludwig and his psychiatrist died mysteriously in an Alpine lake shortly after. Suicide or murder, no one living knows for sure.

But the reclusive Ludwig's private playgrounds—Neuschwanstein, Linderhof and Neues Schloss on Herrenchiemsee Island—were immediately opened to tourists and remain Germany's most popular attractions.

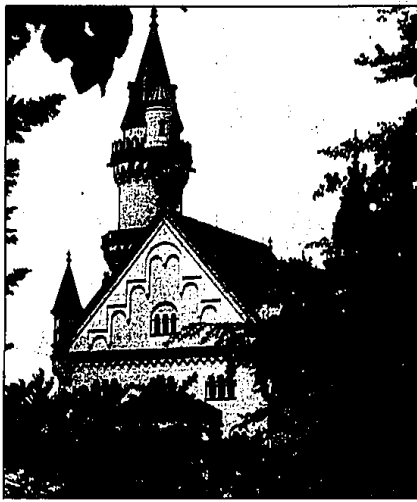
"Don't call him the Mad King, we call him the Romantic King," said our Neuschwanstein tour guide, rolling the "R" for emphasis.

That's today. The Bavarians of 1886 had other ideas.

If ever a ruler fiddled around while his kingdom was foundering, that ruler was Ludwig. He signed away most of his own power when Germany reunified in 1871. An early patron of Richard Wagner, Ludwig retreated into a dream world, spinning tales in stone glorifying Wagnerian operas and the legends of the Holy Grail and King Arthur.

Once a handsome, slim fairytale prince, at his death at age 40 Ludwig was obese and toothless, the latter due to too much candy, according to a tour guide. Endlessly debated by the historians are two facets of the king: his sanity and his sexuality. Was he really off his rocker? Was he gay?

Does it matter? If you want palaces, palaces, palaces, Alpine scenery, splendor and romantic excess as only a Victorian could envision, Ludwig is your monarch. Each schloss—the German word for castle or palace—



Look familiar?: Neuschwanstein, Germany's most photographed tourist attraction, was the model for Walt Disney's Cinderella palace.

was built to illustrate the love of myth that dominated the vision of a king's life.

Whether you're an independent traveler or one of dozens crammed onto a bus, you'll only get through the royal digs as part of a group tour. Typically, visitors to Munich sign up with a day-tripping bus tour firm. If you can get to the sites on your own steam, you'll have more time to look around the gardens, but will still be herded with German efficiency through the palaces. And put that camera away. Inside photography is verboten.

Linderhof

Finished in 1878, Linderhof, near Oberammergau, is the only one of the palaces to have a lived-in feel. Built to recall the Rococo style, it has an overstuffed, rather claustrophobic Victorian ambience. Statuary commemorating the king's favorite bird, the peacock, is much in evidence, as is heavy blue velvet drapery in the king's bedchamber.

To spare Ludwig the unsavory sight of his servants, the dining room features a table that can be lowered into the kitchen, set for dinner and zoomed back up.

■ The king is as good for Bavarian tourism as Graceland and its king is for Memphis

Linderhof's gardens are magnificent. Among the palace's most renowned features is the grotto with an artificial lake, where the king would daydream in a boat shaped like a golden shell while the colors of the mood lighting flitted from red to blue.

Neuschwanstein

Even in the spring, the crowds at Neuschwanstein, Germany's most visited tourist attraction, are heavy. Expect a teeming horde in the summer. But it wasn't just Ludwig who made Neuschwanstein, a theatrical-set designer's take on a medieval castle, world renowned. Walt Disney helped, too, patterning the Sleeping Beauty castle after Ludwig's retreat.

You have a choice of how you want to get to this hilltop hideaway: on foot, by tram or by a horse-drawn wagon. Once there, the view of the Bavarian Alps will compete with the castle for your awestruck appreciation.

Inside, the tour leaders give pride of place to the breathtaking Minstrels' Hall, with its frescoes featuring the tales of Parsifal. Equally impressive is Ludwig's Byzantine-inspired throne room, with its mosaic floor and golden ceiling.

But just as memorable is the royal bed chamber, with a wooden canopied bed that took 14 master woodcarvers four years to create.

Neues Schloss

On Herrenchiemsee Island on Chiemsee, an Alpine lake, this palace is further off the beaten track. Information on where and how to take the ferry there is available at hotels in resort towns along the lake, including the town of Stock, near Prien.

Starting in 1878, Ludwig commissioned his own replica of Ver-

sailles, ringed with the formal gardens. Uncompleted at his death in 1886, what exists is amazing, including the fact that Ludwig only lived out his Sun King fantasies here for 10 days. Herrenchiemsee is lighter and brighter than the other palaces, altogether a summer home on the grandest scale.

The king even had a Hall of Mirrors, larger than at Versailles; shunning the public pomp favored by the French monarchs, this hall was for Ludwig's private pleasure. According to one of his biographers, Ludwig believed he was the reincarnation of Louis XIV.

A fascinating aspect of Herrenchiemsee is the museum dedicated to Ludwig II, from his christening gown to his death mask. The collection includes the monarch's robe of state and crown, plus the companion robe made for the beautiful fiancée Ludwig jilted before the wedding.

In a way, with his weight, extravagance and lingering star status, Ludwig was as much Bavaria's Elvis as the region's King Tut.

The king is as good for Bavarian tourism as Graceland and his king is for Memphis. Seen today on souvenirs such as a mug and statuettes, the agoraphobic coffee-obsessed king has even inspired his own cult, with some admirers adopting his personal style of puffy hair-do and goatee.

Clearly, there was method in that madness.

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