

German river cruise is trip into history and legend

BY GRETCHEN HITCH
CORRESPONDENT

When my husband and I received the brochure from Alumni College Abroad on the legendary Rhine River, we made reservations to revisit Germany. Scenery along the Rhine River Gorge was the high point of all the vistas, villages and castles.

Starting at Mainz, our cruiser first passed Ehrenfels castle or the "Mouse Tower" built by the Archbishops of Mainz to collect tolls from passing merchants in the Rhine Gorge near Bingen. Our excellent guide recounted the legend of the Mouse Tower in the middle of the Rhine River: During a famine in the year 969, the starving peasants implored the Archbishop of Mainz to sell the grain in his granaries, but he refused, waiting for higher prices. When they marched on his castle, he ordered the granaries opened. The peasants rushed in and he clamped the barn door and set it afire. A jangle of mice ran out of the barn, following the Archbishop, who rushed to the Mouse Tower castle. The mice pursued him. All that was left of that bishop was a skeleton.

The next River Rhine spectacle is Castle Reichenstein, which also has its legend, but with a happier ending. In the Middle Ages, a beautiful girl, Gerda, who lived in the castle, fell in love with a prince who lived with his uncle in nearby Castle Reichenstein. The prince's uncle tried to arrange a marriage for the prince with Gerda's father, but then the uncle fell in love with Gerda and he decided to marry the young woman himself. During the ride to the wedding chapel, Gerda's horse bolted, the uncle unfortunately fell to his death when his horse reared up, and the young couple was married as first planned.

Next, the awaited Lorelei, a quartite rock, 435 feet high, narrows the river valley creating a treacherous bend. According to legend, seven blond virgins singing on the rock lured sailors to their doom at this narrowest part of the river. Coming up is Rheinfels Castle, the largest on the Rhine, built in 1245 by the Count of Katzenellenbogen.

The cruise on the legendary River Rhine sponsored by

Alumni Campus Abroad in June was described as "Unrivaled scenic beauty that crowns the banks." The Rhine originates in Switzerland and winds its way through six countries, but the passage through the gorge between Mainz and Koblenz with its formidable castles is spectacular. Our starting point was Brelsach, and on the first day's outing, three busses took the passengers to 12th century Freiburg with its cathedral on Munsterplatz surrounded by a daily outdoor farmers' market. Luncheon at the half-timbered Black Forest Inn climaxed with Black Forest Cake, and the tour bus took us on to Strasbourg, France. With Euros as the currency now, crossing the border was seamless in every way.

Located in France's Alsace region, Strasbourg's been back and forth as part of France and Germany 14 times. A lecture on the emerging European Community at the Council of Europe emphasized the educational focus. The wines of Alsace were tasted on the Route du Vin in its medieval village of Obernai in the Vosges foothills. At Ebersmunster, the group listened to an organ concert in an exquisite abbey.

The next morning, while the ship departed Strasbourg for Greffern, Germany, we set out on an excursion to Baden-Baden, the luxurious casino and resort with its Roman Caracalla Baths. After the ship was docked in Speyer, the busses drove to the unmatched university town of Heidelberg on the Neckar River, with its dramatic medieval castle ruins overlooking the Roman bridge, one of the few spared in World War II bombings.

Exploring Heidelberg's student bars, the Seppi and the Red Ox Inn, where the Student Prince is said to have been visited, followed. Soon it was on to Speyer with its Romanesque Cathedral. By now, the domes or cathedrals began to meld together in a Romanesque-Gothic collage of spires. In Worms, the group studied Martin Luther and the Reformation and yet another magnificent cathedral where Luther tackled his reformation thesis on the door in 1517.

An excursion to Mainz and the Gutenberg Museum

showed the vast importance of movable type invented there by Johannes Gutenberg.

On to Berlin, its museums and its construction cranes. The German capital changed after the fall of the wall in 1989 to a reunited Berlin, and a constant wave of rebuilding has resulted in countless cranes on many building sites and a constant roar of equipment.

As tourists in Berlin, after Unter den Linden, it's the museums that have to be seen and the five are on the Spree River's Museum Island in the former East Berlin. In March, an article in the New York Times said, "The museums carried the scars of German history. In the 1930's, The Nazis stripped them of what was called degenerate modern art. (After World War II) West Berlin's response was to convert palaces in the Charlottenburg district into museums and build the Neue Nationalgalerie near the Berlin Wall." After a visit, a tour of the Alte (old) Nationalgalerie is essential.

The German aim, the Times said, is to eventually link all the Berlin Museums with their 4,000 years of art by 2008. The Pergamon Museum, with its 40 meter high marble Greek altar and 113 meter frieze of Greek statues—discovered in 1864 by Carl Humann in Pergamon—excavated with Turkish government permission and somehow brought to Berlin.

Probably the most famous of antiquities opened in 1930 at Berlin's Pergamon Museum, "a monument to Greek art," with its goddess Athena Hellenistic sculpture, one of many on display.

An unexpected treat was the timeless bust of Nefertiti (1340 B.C.) at the Agytisches (Egyptian) Museum. But disappointing in June, the famous Brandenburg Gate—called the quintessential symbol of Berlin—was enveloped in plastic for repairs.

Inspired by the Athenian entrance to Acropolis and finished in 1795, it was the memorable scene at the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It is scheduled to reopen in September 2002.

Gretchen Hitch is a Bloomfield Village resident and former long-time columnist for the Observer & Eccentric.



According to legend, Castle Reichenstein was home to a prince who married the beautiful Gerda after an involved courtship.



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