

BURT WOLF

TRAVELS & TRADITIONS

CRUISING THE RHINE



The Rhine is one of the world's great rivers. It starts in the Swiss Alps and flows for 865 miles through six European countries ending up in the Netherlands and the North Sea. It connects to dozens of other rivers and canals forming a vast inland waterway. Berlin, Paris even Provence on the Mediterranean is reachable on this freshwater highway.

Traditionally, Rhine ships are long and sit low in the water. They're long because they can't be wide—the river is too narrow and the locks are even narrower. They can sit low in the water because they're not worried about ocean waves and heavy seas.



The ancient Romans understood the commercial value of the Rhine and maintained a Rhine fleet to protect its trading boats. Moving things on the Rhine was cheaper

than moving things on land. As a result, the river is lined with some of Europe's oldest and most famous cities --- Basel, Strasbourg, and Cologne are perfect examples.

The Rhine River has inspired painters, operas, symphonies, and books—and in recent years, tourists. So I decided to take a cruise along the Rhine from Amsterdam in the Netherlands to Basel in Switzerland.

We started out in Amsterdam and cruised its canals. on to Cologne in Germany with its thousand-year-old cathedral. The next stop was Koblenz to check out its



castles. We docked at Rüdesheim, a classic wine village. And Heidelberg for a drink at its 300-year-old tavern. Strasbourg for some of the best food in Europe. Then the medieval town of Breisach and finally the Black Forest. We ended up in Basel, Switzerland and headed home.

AMSTERDAM

Our flight from the United States arrived in Amsterdam, which has always been one of my favorite cities. Great art. Great beer. Great architecture. Great beer. Great shopping. And, of course, great beer.



We started our tour of Amsterdam by cruising the canals, which is the best way to get a sense of the city. Most historians see the 1600s as Holland's Golden Age because they dominated international trade---especially the spice trade from Indonesia.

The houses along these canals were built with the great wealth that came to Amsterdam as a result of its international trading.

Dutch ships owned by the people who lived in these houses carried many different things including wines and spirits. But besides carrying the wine, they also influenced the type of wines that were available.

Up until the 1600s, wine wouldn't last very long. It was undrinkable within six months, and you couldn't hold it from harvest to harvest. That was unacceptable to the Dutch, who wanted to ship wine all over the world. So they went to France and they actually taught the French how to make Cognac. They also helped them with their sweet wines and they introduced sulfites as a preservative. Here's to the Dutch.

Amsterdam has a unique distilled spirit called Jenever. It's a juniper-flavored liquor and was probably one of the precursors to early English Gin. The van Wees family has been making it for over 150 years.

FENNY VAN WEES

Jenever is made from grains. The Dutch went to the East Indies and the monks in Amsterdam—there were a lot of them during the 18th century—they started to experiment with all these herbs and they started to make Jenever in order to find medicine against the black disease. And they started to distill these herbs together with grains and that's how Jenever got started.

Just across town you can visit the House of Bols which has a museum dedicated to the cocktail.

SANDIE VAN DOODOORNE

This is the House of Bols, cocktail and Jenever experience. And we created this to allow people from all over the world to come and take a look at the world's oldest distilled brand, Bols, and to find out throughout about the world of cocktails and bartending and liquors and Jenevers.



All the five senses—what you touch, what you see, what you feel, what you smell—they all influence how you experience taste. So if you see something red for example, you have a certain experience of what you're gonna taste. But it could very well be a vanilla but if it's red that's really going to influence how you're going to taste that vanilla. And here at the House of Bols, you can experience the smelling and tasting and how all the senses influence what you taste.

Because the Dutch controlled the islands that now make up Indonesia, Indonesian food became a basic part of Dutch cuisine. Most locals go out for *indo* more often than they go out for traditional Dutch food.

The signature Indonesian meal in Holland is called a Rijsttafel which means “rice table”. You start with a plate of rice. Then you add an assortment of accompaniments. Curried meats, chicken, shrimp, vegetables, nuts, eggs, sauces, pickles and fruit. The objective is to end up with a balance of dishes that are sour, sweet, salty and spicy, all held together by the blandness of the rice. This elaborate meal was developed in Indonesia during the years when it was being exploited as a Dutch colony. Accordingly, in some circles, Rijsttafel is not considered a politically correct event, and you don't often see it in Indonesia. However, it's still around in Holland and Indonesian restaurants in Europe and the Caribbean and it can be fantastic.

COLOGNE

We departed Amsterdam, and sailed through the night and the next morning. That afternoon we arrived in Cologne Germany. Cologne was built by the ancient Romans in 38 AD at a point where the Rhine River crossed a major east-west trade route. It was an ideal spot for commercial development and by the Middle Ages it had become the largest and one of the richest cities in northern Europe. And once again it was a city's position on a major river that made it rich.



But Cologne's wealth and fame is also the result of its religious relics. In the middle of the 1100s, Emperor Barbarossa, who lived in Milan, gave the remains of the Three Kings to the Archbishop of Cologne who brought them home, placed in a golden shrine, and built a fantastic cathedral to hold that shrine. Pilgrims came from all over Europe to visit “Holy Cologne.” Even today, over five million visitors come here each year.

Just down the river from where we docked is The Chocolate Museum which is housed in a boat shaped structure on the bank of the Rhine. Inside the displays will take you on a journey through 3,000 years of chocolate history, from the Aztec's to modern day industrial production. There's a small working chocolate factory where you can see how the cacao bean is processed into chocolate and how the liquid is formed into finished products. The factory produces about 1,000 pounds of chocolate a day and you can take part in the process.

That afternoon I brought everybody onboard over to Haxenhaus to meet my friend Willie and have a beer on me.



Cologne has its own beer called *Kolsch*. It's a light colored, slightly bitter and hoppy ale and by law it must be brewed within the city limits. *Kolch* is served in a thin small glass that is marked to hold about seven ounces. It has no carbonation so it tastes best the moment it

comes out of the keg. With a small glass you drink the beer quickly. Waiters come by and refill your glass until you put a coaster over the glass which signals that you're finished.

That evening, there was a classical music concert by a trio called La Strada.

KOBLENZ

During the night, we sailed to Koblenz Germany. In the year 9 BC, the ancient Romans set-up a camp at the spot where the Rhine River meets the Mosel River. The point where two or more rivers meet is known as a "confluence." In Latin the word is *confluentes*, which is what the Romans called their settlement. Over the years, the name got shortened to Koblenz

Koblenz was the home of an Archbishop and a Prince Elector who selected the Emperor. As Archbishop he had to defend himself against the devil and as Prince Elector he had to defend himself against other princes who wanted his lands. He had a lot of defending to do and he made Koblenz his stronghold, which is why the city has so many defensive castles.



Today, Koblenz is the cultural and economic center of Germany's Central Rhine Valley. Koblenz has a number of bizarre statues. This statue of a young boy looks perfectly normal;

however, every 2 minutes a stream of water shoots from his mouth and drenches unsuspecting viewers.

They also have a town clock with a face that sticks its tongue out on the hour. It's all quite strange because the people of Koblenz are quite welcoming. It must be a problem with their sculptors.

THE RHINE GORGE

At mid-day we headed up river to the Rhine Gorge.

The Rhine Gorge is the most picturesque part of the river. It runs for about forty miles and has been declared a World Heritage Site. For hundreds of years those romantic castles belonged to a bunch of the nastiest guys on the planet.



Known as Teutonic knights they set themselves up as independent rulers, fortified the high points along the narrow gorge and charged a toll for every ship that came by. If you couldn't pay the toll you lost your cargo and in many cases you lost your life. It wasn't until the middle of the 1800s that these guys were finally subdued and a treaty was signed by all the countries along the Rhine making it a free and open highway to ships of all nations.

So they finally got rid of the Teutonic knights, but they

still had the problem of the Lorelei. The story goes that a beautiful woman named Lorelei lived on a rock which towers some 400 feet above the river. Her thing was to sing an enchanted song which distracted the boatmen. They lost control of their craft, crashed into the rocks and drowned.



RÜDESHEIM



Later that afternoon we docked in Rüdesheim. The Romans arrived in this neighborhood about 2,000 years ago and taught the local population to build more maneuverable ships and stone houses. They also showed them the best technique for cultivating vines and making wine. The Rüdesheim vineyards ended up providing wine for the Roman troops.

During the first half of the 1800s, Rüdesheim became a main stop for steamboats and railroads and suddenly it became a destination for tourists. Most of the sightseers came from England which was in its Romantic Period. Rüdesheim's old courtyards and winding alleys lined with half-timbered houses were just what they were looking for.

We concluded our evening in Rüdesheim with a visit to the Rüdesheimer Schloss – or more appropriately – Rüdesheimer schloshed. Their specialty is a Rüdesheimer coffee which consists of sweet coffee, a substantial hit of the local brandy, and a topping of whipped cream with chocolate shavings.



HEIDELBERG

Overnight we sailed to Mannheim where we took a bus to Heidelberg. According to archeological research our European ancestors have been living in this neighborhood for over 600,000 years.

Heidelberg was a Celtic settlement, the site of a Roman fort, and for 500 years, starting in the early 1200s, the hometown of the mighty counts who elected the kings of Germany.

The counts were responsible for three of the most important things in Heidelberg. First is their castle, which they started building in the 1300s and finished about 400 years later.



The most interesting way to get to the castle is on the funicular. This section of track is the oldest funicular railway in Germany and considered to be a historic landmark. It uses the original wooden cars that were built in 1907. The ride up offers some fabulous views of the Rhine Valley.

The oldest part of the Heidelberg Castle complex is the Gothic House which was the home of the Elector Ruprecht III. The Friedrich Wing dates to the early 1600s and has a classic Renaissance façade decorated with statues of the kings of Germany.



The sculptural decorations in the Otto-Heinrich Wing include Biblical characters, Roman gods and the virtues. The one thing in the castle that almost everyone feels they need to see is the

Heidelberg Tun, a wine vat with a capacity that is given at something in the area of 50,000 gallons. The original vat on this site was built in 1591 and used to collect taxes that were paid in wine.

The one that's here today was installed about 250 years ago and probably never held any wine at all. Its primary objective appears to be to enclose vast quantities of emptiness-- a concept that fascinates over three million people a year who actually pay to come and look at it.



That afternoon we visited the Church of the Holy Ghost where we were treated to an organ concert. The church dates to 1398 and has a unique history of serving both Catholic and Protestant congregations at the same time.

STRASBOURG

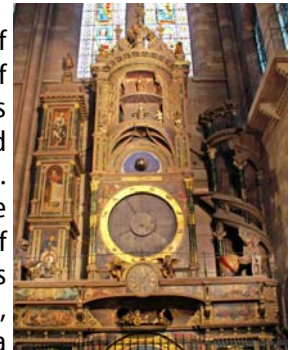
Strasbourg is the capital city in the Northeast region of France, known as Alsace, which has an unusual history.

Thousands of years ago, it started as a Celtic village. When the ancient Romans colonized the area it became a garrison town. In the 5th century it was taken by the Franks. During the Middle Ages Strasbourg became part of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1681, the king of France invaded and took control. Ten years later, at the end of the Franco-Prussian War, it was given back to Germany. Then back to France at the end of the First World War. The Germans occupied it during the Second World War. At the end of which it was returned to France again. Today, everyone in Strasbourg speaks French, but they also speak German as a second language—just in case.

The city is crisscrossed with a network of canals that connect it to river systems that run throughout France.

The Petit France District is the most picturesque part of the city.

We also had a guided tour of Strasbourg's Cathedral of Notre-Dame, which was started in the 11th century and completed in the 15th century. It was worth the wait. It's made of red sandstone and in spite of the many architectural styles that went into its construction, it holds together as a harmonious structure.



The cathedral has an astronomical clock that was originally built during the 1300s and everyday at 12:30 it presents a group of allegorical and mythological creatures. The clock's body has a planetarium based on the 17th century theories of Copernicus.

BREISACH

The next morning we docked in Breisach at the edge of the Black Forest. Until the 11th century, when monks began to set-up isolated monasteries, nobody was interested in entering the Black Forest. It had a reputation for being filled with thieves, and wild-man-eating boars. But in the 1500s, farmers along the Rhine began to clear the land and move into the forest.

There isn't much left to the thick pine forest and the thieves appear to have gone into the mortgage business or running offshore corporations. And the wild boars... they're in television.

The area is also famous for its Black Forest Cake.

But its most famous product is probably the cuckoo clock. During the 1600s, Black Forest wood carvers started producing wooden clocks that were sold all over Europe, but there was nothing cuckoo about them. In the 1850s, a local artist designed a clock with a little house on the front. Shortly thereafter, some unknown mastermind placed a bird inside the house, developed a mechanism that allowed the bird to come out on the hour, and announced its presence by yelling "cuckoo". I wouldn't say these clocks were cuckoo, but some of them appear to be a little neurotic.

Up river from Strasbourg, the Rhine becomes a stairway to paradise—a man-made canal with seven giant locks that raise the river to the height of the Swiss city of Basel.

Basel is the highest point on the Rhine and the city where our cruise ended.

As the boat pulled back out into the river the captain sounded three bells---the old Rhine custom that marks a prayer: "In God's name, a good voyage".



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