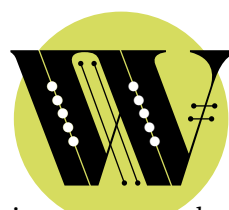


# Storybook Settings

A CRUISE ON THE RHINE, MAIN AND MOSELLE REVEALS CENTURIES OF GERMAN TRADITION **BY LESLIE FORSBERG**



**WE’VE CLIMBED** the cobbled riverside hill to Bamberg’s 13th century cathedral and adjacent rose garden, its formal paths and vivid blooms in an orderly grid, in contrast to the meandering streets and sinuous river below, veiled in morning mist like a bride. ¶ Stepping through a stone archway into a large square, our guide, Moritz, motions our group of 30 to take a

closer look at ornate carvings in the stonework. On the left, a recumbent man is accompanied by a sleeping dog. To the right, a cherub appears to pinch the toe of a woman. “It’s said that the sleeping man and dog signify the Main River, and the cherub pinching the woman shows the liveliness of the Regnitz,” he says; the Regnitz River dashes through the heart of the city. On a 12-day Cities of Light Viking river journey through Germany with my 22-year-old daughter, Kirsten, we

come to know the moods and scenic splendors of the Main, the Rhine and the Moselle with every ripple that shimmies beneath the hull of our floating home, the luxurious *Viking Idun*. While the tour begins in Paris and ends in Prague, we embark the 95-state-room ship in Bamberg and disembark in Trier, with buses filling in the gaps. ¶ The cruise wends its way through Germany’s verdant heartland, passing through 43 locks along its route. Medieval villages, historic

castles, proud palaces and lush vineyards abound—as do six UNESCO World Heritage sites: places so remarkable and drenched in history that visitors come from around the globe to experience them. But that doesn’t mean these places are museum relics. They’re very much thriving communities, with lively market squares, friendly merchants selling handicrafts and designer goods, and sidewalk cafes ideal for quaffing glasses of locally made beer or wine. »

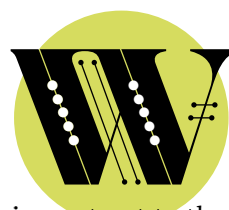


Cochem Castle, built around the year 1000, perches high on a hilltop above the Moselle River.

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SERGEY NOVIKOV /  
ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

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## BAMBERG

The narrow, placid Main River winds slowly through Germany's Franconia region. On our first day on the river, Kirsten and I mingle with tourists and locals in the town of Bamberg, known for *Rauchbier* (smoked beer). "Try at least a sip of it, to decide for yourself if it's drinkable. It has a really strong taste of ham," Moritz says. "The G.I.s who were here called it liquid salami."

We duck inside the dim interior of Schlenkerla, a brewpub that has been brewing this ancient concoction since 1405. The beer's smoky, malty essence saturates the air, and the tables are filled to bursting with lively patrons. After, we wander down Old Town streets, admiring shop windows filled with the expected—carved wooden souvenirs—and the unexpected—vivid, decidedly nontraditional dirndls that look as if they were designed by Björk.

Nearby, Old Town Hall, painted with frescos, stands in the middle of the rushing Regnitz River, connected to either side by bridges. A cadre of kayakers struggles upstream alongside the rapids and then, one by one, they turn and flash downstream, weaving around slalom poles as their coach on the bridge times them, shouting encouragement.

I'm enchanted by the opportunity to feel like we're a part of the daily fabric of life as locals go about their usual activities in small villages along our route. Sometimes we explore riverside towns, other days we select excursions to fascinating places nearby.



The Old Town Hall in Bamberg is situated in the middle of the River Regnitz. Left: By tradition, Schneebälle are cracked into bite-sized pieces with a wooden mallet.

## ROTHENBURG

On a day excursion from Würzburg, Rothenburg seems to exist inside a snow globe. One of the best-preserved medieval towns in Germany, Rothenburg boasts fairy tale-worthy half-timbered or stone buildings embraced by a high stone wall, with slots for arrows. As we walk along the wall, the village below seems miniature and idealized. Roses trail over doorways, and gilded signs denote the businesses within.

Even the town's famed sweets—*Schneebälle* (snow balls)—lend themselves to this fantasy vision. At Diller Schneeballenträume, a stern, long-faced woman takes our money and hands us fist-sized orbs of fried dough strips coated with powdered sugar. Shattering into bits at the first bite, these pastries leave us, along with other customers outside, doubling over with laughter as our noses, chins and cheeks are powdered with "snow."

Adding to the effect, Käthe Wohlfahrt's Christmas Village is a many-roomed fantasyland of Yuletide décor. In one room, cuckoo clocks, each set for a different time,



Buildings such as the *Alte Schmiede* (Old Blacksmith) lend to Rothenburg's fairy tale charm.

TOP: RAGA JOSE FUSTE; SCHNEEBÄLLE: HYEON-JEONG SUK

transfix viewers as the clocks chime at odd intervals, cuckoos flinging themselves out of tiny doors as miniature men chop wood with Lilliputian axes, or lift teensy steins of beer to their lips.

## HEIDELBERG

I'm excited by the prospect of meeting local students for lunch, a promised part of our day trip to Heidelberg, the seat of the country's oldest university. (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität was founded more than six centuries ago, in 1386.) Expecting to meet a Günther or a Gretel, I'm surprised when the student joining us for lunch to tell tales of student life here is a bright-eyed science major by the name of Becky, from Lancashire, England. We learn that Heidelberg's university has drawn students from around the globe for centuries. The mix of international students lends a learned, cosmopolitan feel to this Baroque city, which is filled with sidewalk cafes and fun boutiques beneath the imposing ruins of Heidelberg Castle.

In a castle cellar we learn about the town's mascot, a tiny court jester and prodigious drinker called Perkeo, who legendarily downed between 5 and 8 gallons of wine a day. When asked whether he'd like another glass of wine, he typically answered, in Italian, "*Perché no?*" (Why not? ... hence his name). A statue of the comical character presides over the world's largest wine barrel, the Heidelberg Tun, 21 feet tall and reputedly made from 130 oak trees.

## THE MIDDLE RHINE

The slowly meandering Main behind us, we enter the broad Rhine River at Mainz, whose claims to fame are the Gutenberg Museum—home to two original Gutenberg Bibles (the first major book printed using movable type, ushering in the era of mass-produced books) and other exceptionally rare, gorgeously illuminated texts. On a hilltop, St. Stephen's Church boasts nine dreamy, cobalt stained-glass windows crafted by Marc Chagall.

Just beyond, we enter the legendary Middle Rhine. The morning is cool, and Kirsten and I bundle up in thick blankets in top-deck chairs as we settle in for the show, to the sound of a murmuring engine. Waitstaff brings out a much-welcome tray of hot chocolate and we join others, watching intently as forested riverbanks rise up around us, while castle ruins perch on promontories right and left, like sand castles left behind by children after a day at the beach.

Our cruise host introduces each castle



Chagall's stained glass in St. Stephen's Church, in Mainz.



Regional wines fill the cellars at Vinothek, in Bernkastel-Kues.

with fanfare as it appears around a bend: Maus (Mouse) Castle—never harmed during WWII. Its rival, Katz (Cat) Castle. Rheinfels Castle, for 500 years the largest castle on the river. And the curious Pfalzgrafenstein Castle, in the middle of the river, resembling a ship. Hours pass as, awestruck, we spy dozens of castles, learn how chains across the river once forced voyagers to pay tolls, and hear tales of alliances and wars, legends and heroes.

## BERNKASTEL

Finally, we enter the placid Moselle River, which runs through the heart of Riesling country. Everywhere we look, steep vineyards spill down to the river from rocky heights. In the charming riverside town of Bernkastel-Kues, I find my personal wine Nirvana at the Moselle Wine Museum and Vinothek.

I'm a riesling lover—not something you always want to admit at home; most find it too sweet. Here, though, my personal predilection is celebrated. In two immense, underground wine cellars with vaulted brick ceilings, we're encouraged to sip and sample from as many as 150 varieties of local wine, helping ourselves from numbered bottles in chilled barrels. Each wine is explained in detail, a placard proclaiming its residual sugar, acid, alcohol content and other properties, along with its pedigree—where and how it's grown, who the winemaker is, even the history of the vineyard.

After sampling more than two dozen wines, I am down to two, but can't decide which I prefer. Kirsten impishly suggests a blind taste test, switching the glasses round and round. I take a sip from the first glass proffered. "It tastes like heaven!" I sigh, to Kirsten's amusement. I've found my all-time favorite. I buy two bottles of "my" riesling, a 2014 Werner Apotheke Riesling Spätlese, to enjoy at home.

It's not the only thing I'll enjoy once we return from the trip. I'll savor sweet memories of exploring historic castles and storybook villages with my daughter, enjoying regional foods and wines, and feeling a cozy sense of familiarity with people and places that were once only dreams. 🍷

### IF YOU GO:

Spring through fall is peak season for river cruising in countries across Europe, with the holiday season popular for cruises to European Christmas markets. Viking, AmaWaterways and Uniworld are among the top cruise lines offering river sailings through Germany.

STAINED GLASS: WERNER DIETERICH