



Cruising the Rhine

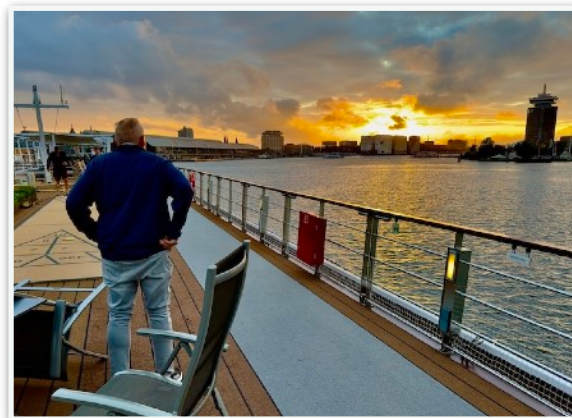
(July 21-28, 2024)

We boarded the Viking Kara river boat in time for a quick freshen-up, followed by attendance in the main room for the Captain's greeting, and an orientation* to the coming cruise. A bathtub-sized martini seemed to be a good idea, at the time.



In short order we 'slipped the surly bonds' that attached us to the dock and enjoyed a gorgeous sunset while we departed Amsterdam.

* Decades ago I read an article about an early group of exchange students from China who had arrived in the US to attend school at Stanford – but first they had to attend "Orientation.")



As the mighty Rhine River crosses the Dutch border from Germany it splits into numerous channels on its way to the North Sea, and a large portion of the Netherlands becomes the vast Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt River Delta. Much of the Dutch population lives in this vast Delta, which covers almost 10,000 sq miles and contains numerous canals built over the centuries. It's a country of water and they've become some of the world's best hydro-engineers.

Upon leaving Amsterdam we made our way into the shallow IJsselmeer while entering the Amsterdam-Rhine Canal, which was built long ago to connect the port of Amsterdam to the River Waal, the main shipping artery of the Rhine, as it enters the ocean near Rotterdam, which has long been Europe's largest port.

Kinderdijk



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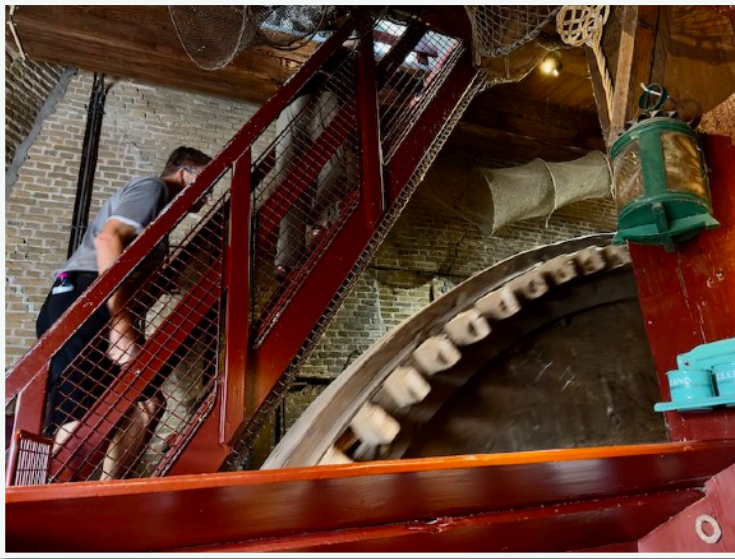
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We spent our first night aboard the Kara sleeping peacefully through our passage on the Canal, which is “the world’s most frequented artificial waterway with an annual average of 100,000 ships,” according to Wikipedia. We awoke in the rural lands of Kinderdijk, our first stop on this legendary ‘river road’ into Germany and the heart of Central Europe, on our way to Basel, Switzerland. This is where ancient windmills, like a painting in the Rijksmuseum, dot the horizon.



We’re soon at the foot of one of these ancient and efficient mechanical wonders, with this one dating from 1738. It’s a huge structure, like those that crazy old Don Quixote mistook for monsters on the plains of Spain and attempted to defeat. As the gigantic old blades sweep low just past us, anyone who’s ever hoisted main and jib sails can appreciate the power these things generate from a modest breeze.





Once inside, we carefully avoid the huge old gears grinding away just beside a narrow stairway that climbs to the attending family's living quarters. Like most homes in the Netherlands, where land is scarce, the spaces are small and efficient. And wonderfully cosy.

The family garden is efficiently planned and productive, like others we've seen in Europe. The soil is rich and the mingling of marigolds among the crops helps to lessen the need for anti-pest remedies. And a



nice little home-built punt can be handy for getting around, when your neighborhood is mostly water.

One of the advantages of this cruise is having well-informed guides at each day-stop to give us a deeper understanding of the people we meet and the lives they live. Among other things, we learn that the important task of the windmills in the Kinderdijk area is to manage water levels by lifting the water that continually leaks through the ground into channels leading to the North Sea. Living below sea level requires a lot of maintenance.



Here's a short NAT GEO video about the windmills:

www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/holland-kinderdijk-windmills-unesco-world-heritage-site

And another from UNESCO:

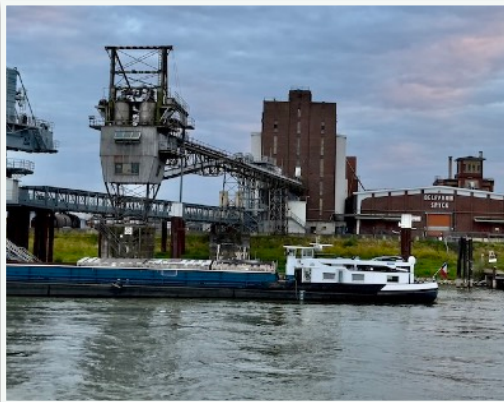
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3PjRG0BrxM



After a stout morning's outing we're back aboard the Kara for a good lunch and to meet the entire staff.

Then we settle into comfortable chairs to experience the tremendous commercial river life of the mighty Rhine. Over the next week we'll see plenty of low-slung river vessels transporting every bulk good you can imagine – from gravel to grain – on this important water highway. The small cars resting on the stern of many vessels belong to the captain and crew who are contracted to deliver the vessels. After they reach their port of call, the cars are lifted off and the crew drives home while the vessel unloads.

We pass beneath the distinctive red bridge at Emmerich am Rhein that marks the border of the Netherlands, and then we're in Germany. The bridge connects Emmerich to Kleve and is the longest suspension bridge in Germany. Around 500 ships pass beneath it every day.



And upon entering Germany I might wish I'd packed an old book, called *Germany on \$50*, that I found in Eric Patterson's book store about 60 years ago. It was published in 1934, during the Great Depression, and offered a choice between traveling across either Northern or Southern Germany – with each route costing a total of only \$50. The author, Sydney A Clarke, is a cheapskate of 'lynx eye' who encourages the frugal traveler to save his pfennigs by

enjoying picnics in the park, as he steers the reader away from First Class hotels and trains. He says,

“The frankness of my economics may shock some readers but this book knows not how to blush. If it did, if the apologetic tone were to creep in, the usefulness of the volume would creep out.”

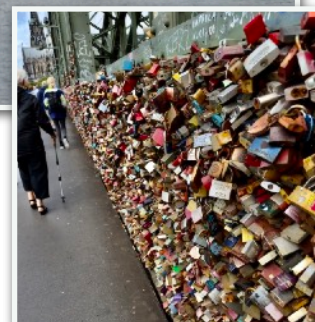
He mentions meals on Cologne’s Hohe Strasse (High Street) “costing 25 or 30 cents. And satisfy your thirst with a big glass of cold foamy beer for 6 or 7 or 8 cents.”

He touts the tidiness of Germans, and their cleanliness – “This passion embraces soap, in which Germany’s per capital consumption is far ahead of other lands.” And he finds no difference in the cleanliness factor between the best hotels and the more thrifty.

Yet while low prices may have been a boon for wealthy travelers, others were dealing with the ravages of the Depression. By 1923 inflation was so bad in Germany that many postage stamps were over-printed at millions of Marks, with some as much as 50 million Marks. And the punitive impoverishment of Germany after the First World War only set the stage for another terrible war.

Cologne

Soon the iconic twin towers of Cologne’s famous Cathedral, the Kölner Dom, come into view. Colorful and newly-restored 19th century buildings of the new Rheinauhafen (Rhine Harbor) district grace the waterfront.



We’re soon securely docked and hiking

over the classic old railroad bridge called the Hohenzollernbrücke (Germans love long names!), with its heavy load of ‘love locks’ proclaiming love, and foreverish? connections.

Apparently they are very popular in Cologne these days and the city authorities have embraced them as a local attraction – although they’re seen as a nuisance in Paris and other places.

My first encounter with love locks was in 2011, on a bridge in Tenerife, in the Canary Islands. But it seems they date from a Serbian legend prior to World War I, when two lovers, named Nada and Relja, clamped their lock onto a small bridge in the pretty spa town of Vrnjačka Banja. Relja later jilted Nada and she died of a broken heart, so maybe it’s not such a great idea.

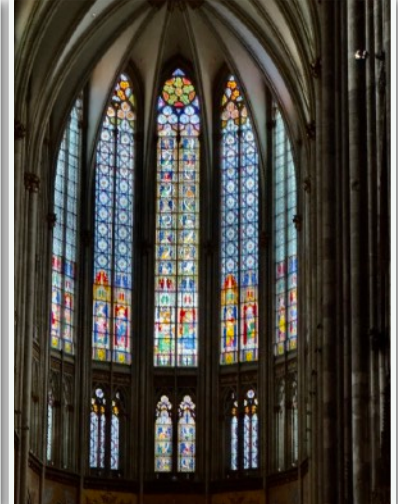
We pass the equestrian statue of Kaiser Wilhelm II, riding boldly toward the Dom. Wilhelm’s difficult breach birth in 1859 led to a crippled left arm. And the probability of mild brain damage, from an excessive use of chloroform during the procedure, led him to irrational decisions and frequent outbursts of rage. He assumed the throne of the German Empire at the age of 29 and his aggressive 30-year reign led it to great power in central



Europe, while needlessly antagonizing the British and the French. His defeat in World War I led to the collapse of the new German Empire, along with the old and feeble Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires. He hoped that Adolph Hitler would restore him as Emperor, but the European 'old order' was a thing of the past, and Hitler considered him a fool. He lived in exile in The Netherlands, and died in 1941 at the age of 82. German monarchists still visit his grave at the small town of Doorn, just a bit SE of Utrecht.

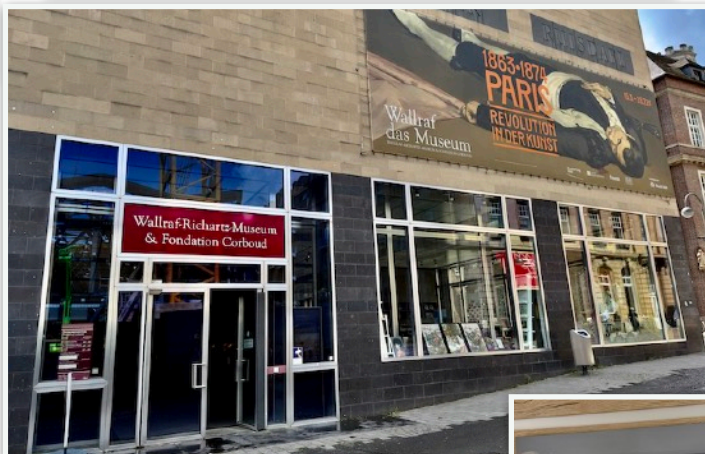
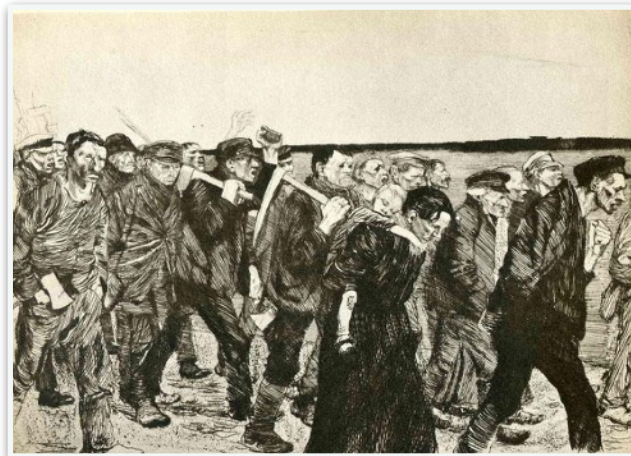


The Cologne Cathedral, Germany's largest, is so massive that it's difficult to take an undistorted photo without being at a great distance. Colorfully bedecked priests welcome us into the sanctuary and its



impressive windows. It took 632 years to build this place, and it somehow escaped all the bombing of WWII. The transept window, by contemporary artist Gerhard Richter, contains 11,500 squares in 72 colors, to become a 'symphony of light' in the afternoon sun. And behind the main altar lie the actual remains, so they say, of the Three Kings who showed up that night long ago in Bethlehem.

The broad platz just in front is a meeting place for the world, as they emerge from trains arriving in the Hauptbahnhof, and where a young woman can play her sax for a few Euros.

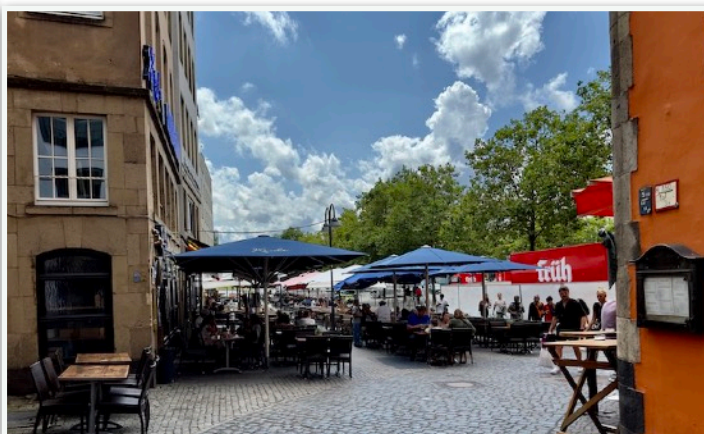


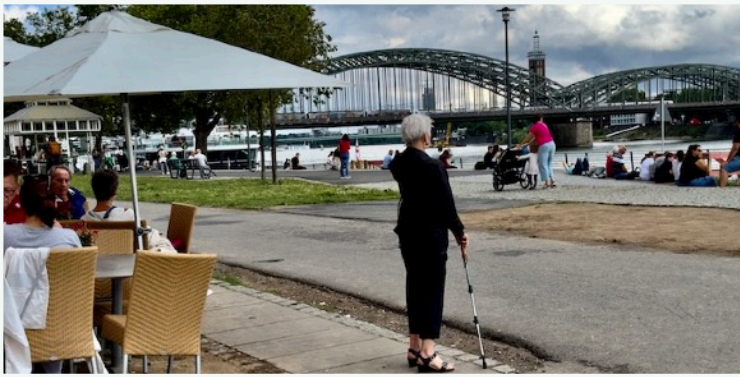
its famous collection of artists, from Rembrandt, Rubens and Canaletto to Monet, Van Gogh and Cezanne. Not having several extra days to wander and explore each city stop is one of the problems with any kind of cruise.



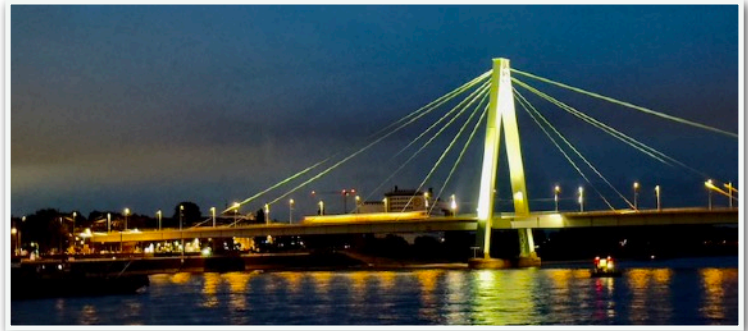
So we grab a few more Euros and settle for exploring the winding back roads that lead down to the waterfront. We find a few other sites and we learn a bit more about Cologne, because we might just return some day.

But on a drizzly day we soon find ourselves hugging bowls of warm and delicious soup, as we discuss our next move. We have a bit of time before reboarding the ship, but not enough time for a visit to the Käthe Kollwitz museum and a deeper dive into her compelling Socialist art. Or a stop at the nearby Walraff-Richartz, with





Soon we're back aboard the **Kara**, with time to admire the extensive onboard herb garden that brings fresh flavor to each meal. After the sun sets that evening we're heading onward up the river, while the lights of Cologne sparkle across the water.



In the morning we awake to more of river life along the Rhine. A German cabin cruiser flies the flag. There will be mileage markers, imposing hilltop castles, and bankside encampments of 'caravans' jostling for a view. We'll see plenty of these campers, tent trailers, and RVs in the next few days as we make our way up the river.



Koblenz

The old city of **Koblenz**, our next stop, is a place of parks and quiet streets. This is where the Moselle River meets the Rhine, after leaving its source in the Vosges mountains of western France near Switzerland, and winding northward through vineyards and villages. This junction of two large rivers has been occupied since at least 1000 BCE, and in 9 BCE it became the

site of an important fort under the Roman general Drusus. He was the younger brother of the Emperor Tiberius, who conquered many of the fractious German tribes until his death in 9 BCE from a horse riding accident. When Tacitus, the Roman historian, observed that ‘Rome has no greater ally than the disorganization of her enemies,’ he had the Germans in mind. These days, the imposing Ehrenbreitstein Fortress dominates this historic spot from its perch on a hill just across the Rhine.



impetuous Wilhelm II, who dismissed Bismarck, and lost the short-lived German Empire after WWI. Europe has a way of surrounding us with deep history.



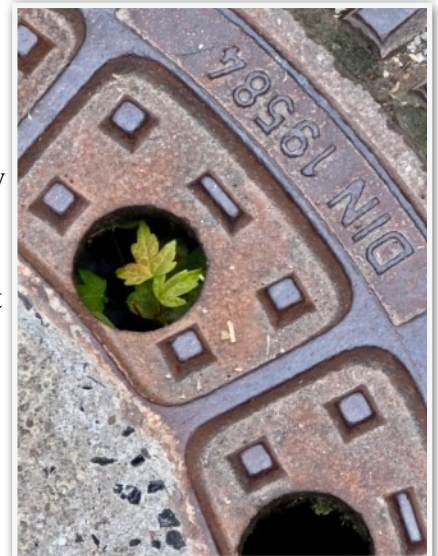
And among that fraught history we find a small bronze marker nestled among the granite stones just beneath my feet. It's called a 'Stolperstein,' or stumbling block, and it reads, "Here lived Adolf Appel, born 1890, Murdered by the Gestapo, Dead 31.7.1936."



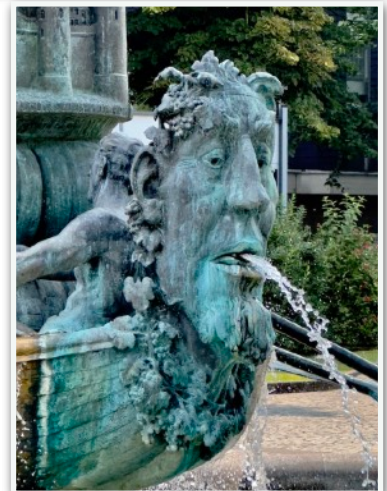
We are confronted early in our visit to Koblenz by a towering horse-mounted statue of Wilhelm I, the first German Emperor after the unification of the German states, in 1870 following the Franco-Prussian War under the 'Iron Chancellor' Otto von Bismarck. It was his grandson, the



I pause to admire the aspirations of a new little life, a tiny plant with grand hopes to break free of its current bondage of steel and concrete. It's a dream that many of us share – until a maintenance crew comes to quash its tiny efforts.



The charming streets of Koblenz have much of interest, along with a bit of the commonplace. We could explore these streets more deeply during an



extended stay, and maybe find a new favorite bakery, or a compelling Karamell shop, or even enjoy a fresh ‘Cubano’ – although that’s doubtful. Yet we’re only here for the day, and gain just enough German to know that a ‘Haarschnitt’ is a haircut.

There’s mischief afoot here in the Rhineland as we encounter the town’s famous Schängelbrunnen, the ‘spitting boy’ statue to honor the town’s mischievous youth. He sprays unsuspecting visitors, who don’t



avoid ‘the wet spot,’ and his image even adorns the town’s manhole covers.

A 6-foot thumb bursting through the granite stones gets our attention at the Sammlung Ludwig Museum Koblenz, along with a “Kelly Bag” (as in Princess Grace) by Hermès and a Chanel #5 bottle, both made of

CoreTen steel. They and others adorn a public park, the Blumenhof, that’s just by the Museum. “Le Pouse/The Thumb (1965)” by César, is one of a series by the artist, and we recall a much larger version in a traffic circle in Marseilles. The artist says that associations with Julius Caesar’s famous thumb gesture are “quite desirable.” We’d like to spend the afternoon wandering this noted museum, but again, we don’t have time to appreciate the many post-war modernist treasures (de Kooning, Dubuffet, Rauschenberg, Warhol, Picasso, Tinguely...) that await inside. And the challenging work of Niki de Saint Phalle is always a special attraction.



Yet it’s been a good day’s wander and we’re in need of refreshment so we stop for an afternoon espresso – sitting right next to some of the prime funsters sharing our river boat. From here we’ll all head back to the boat, to spend more time with that interesting bunch on our way up the river.



The Rhine Gorge and Rüdesheim

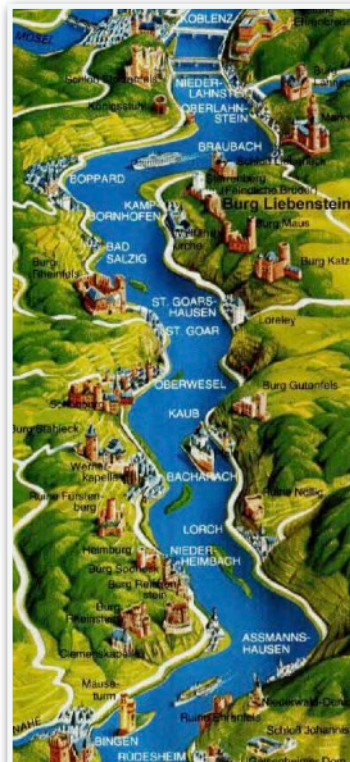
As nice as Koblenz is, it's also the gateway to the famous castle-encrusted Rhine Gorge – the most anticipated section of the trip. We'll share it with a variety of boats on this busy river past the vineyards, and more riverside caravan parks, where they get away from it all by taking it all with them – like in the US. But those campers do look more comfortable than the 'pup tent and leaky air mattress' routine of our youth.



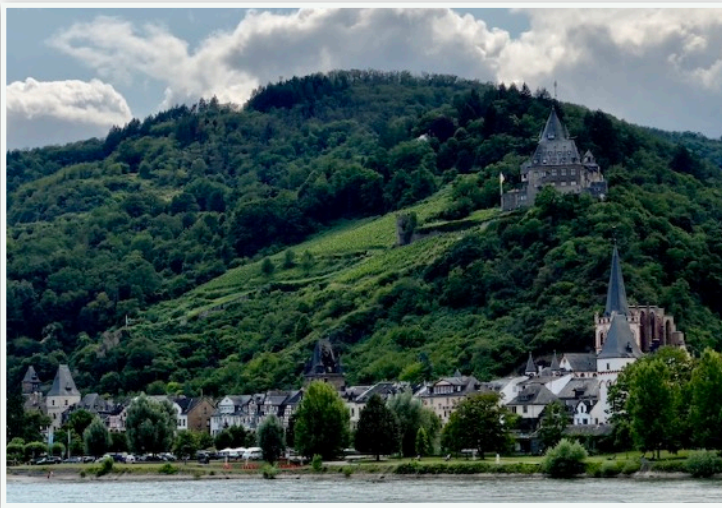
Soon we're at Loreleystadt-St Goarshaven, by the huge rock of Lorelei and the famous statue of the river goddess who lured so many boatmen to their deaths. It's a charming old legend but this ancient danger is still a hazard: in 2011 a ship loaded with 2400 tons of

sulfuric acid crashed near here and blocked the entire river for a while.

Our ship stops and holds its position just off-channel below the huge Lorelei rock, as our Captain explains that another ship coming downriver needs passage room through this notorious bottleneck. We're the 'burdened' vessel here because it's far easier for an upriver vessel to maintain its position against the current than one coming downstream, and a glance at the water swilling past the buoys shows the power of the Rhine. Soon a long barge appears around the rock to pass us, and we're cleared to proceed. We can learn a lot from a river passage.



We spend our day cruising upstream into the most romantic section of the Rhine, the castle-filled canyon that stretches from Koblenz to beyond Rudesheim. Books have been written about these castles, and the Roman garrison forts that preceded many of them, extorting passage fees from the boats that passed their way. Every few miles we pass another of these charming relics and ruins, some of which date back to the 12th century. The twin-towered Katz castle



was built by the dominant Counts of Katzenelbogen, near the smaller one built by the Elector of Trier – which the Katz family derided as the ‘Maus’ castle. Both are pointed out by river tour guides.

We don’t dock at the charming village of Bacharach, but the KD (Kölner-Dusseldorf) Line does and it looks like a fine place to spend a few days in a medieval setting. (BTW, Burt Bacharach, with 52 Top 40 hits, was born in Kansas City, MO, and not here.)



More info, and other Rhine options:

Some of the castles are now hotels and this site gives a brief overview of 53 different Rhine castles:

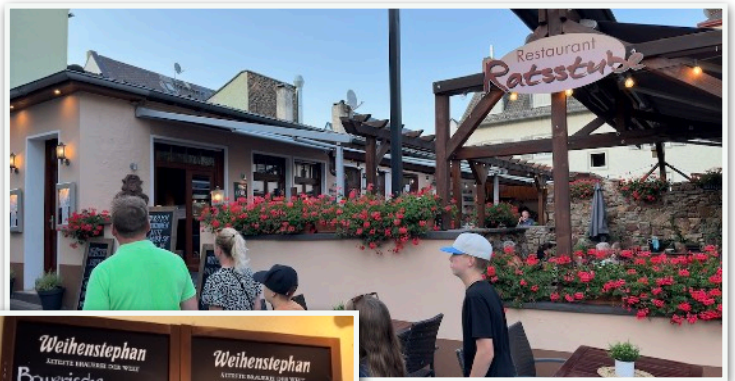
www.werenotinkansasanyomore.com/rhine-river-castles-map/

And more info on Rhine Castles:

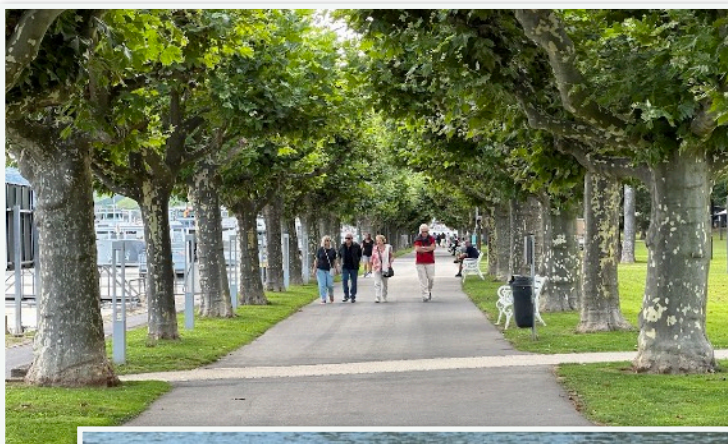
thewondermap.com/rhine-river-valley/

There's frequent train service on both sides of the river, and ferries cross over for nosing around the idyllic Middle Rhine countryside. Several cruise companies offer one-way or return tickets to many of the river towns. (Note: Farhten' means 'trips'.)

Meanwhile, we enjoy an afternoon tot at the onboard bar – along with the merriment of Team Barb, a family of twenty or so who are celebrating their spry grandmother's birthday.

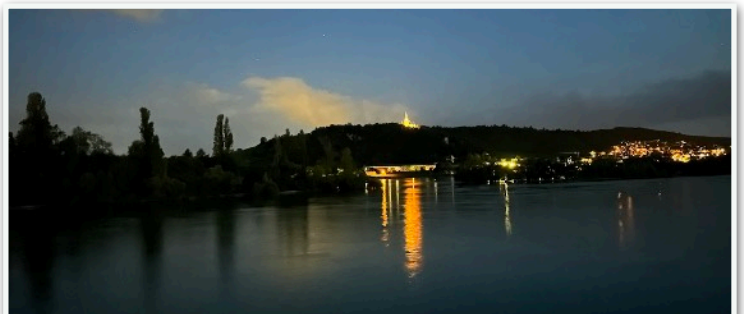


We dock for the afternoon at Rüdesheim to explore another quiet and leafy German town. A local bar serves Weihenstephan beer from Freising, Bavaria, which bills itself as “The Oldest Brewery in the World.” They have six beers on tap and 20 more



Bavarian beers available. Our busy translation app says that ‘schmankerl’ means delicacy, and Zillertaler Küche is a cake from the Ziller Valley in Austria’s Tyrol. They also offer Wurst, Sauerkraut and Brot mit Butter. It’s a beer-friendly and food-friendly place, and a good lunch is soon on our table.

And as the sun sets over the beautiful valley of the Middle Rhine, we depart in the night for our next destination, the charming town of Speyer.

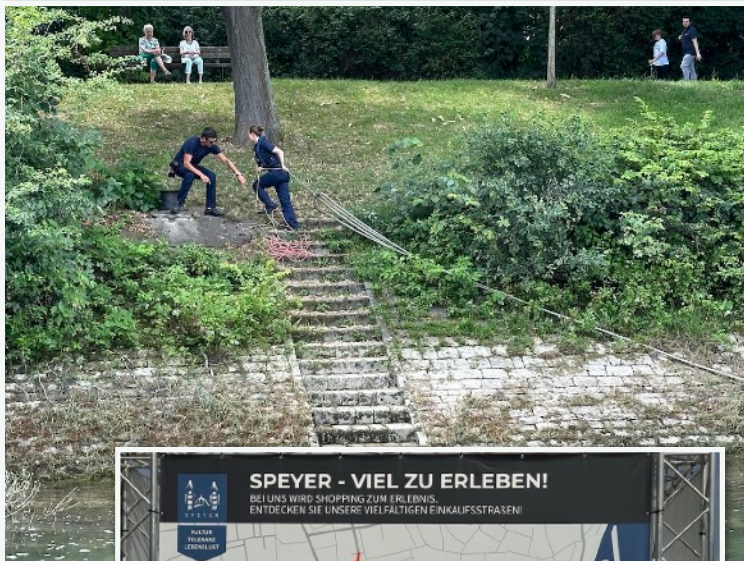


Speyer

The Rhine becomes less charming as we leave the castle-encrusted Gorge and pass by the industrial powerhouse of Mannheim, on our way to a day-stop at Speyer. We pass the city of Mainz, and that's where the Main River branches off easterly toward Frankfurt and Würzburg. It's the route that Rhine-Main-Danube cross-Europe cruises take on their way from the North Sea to the Black Sea.



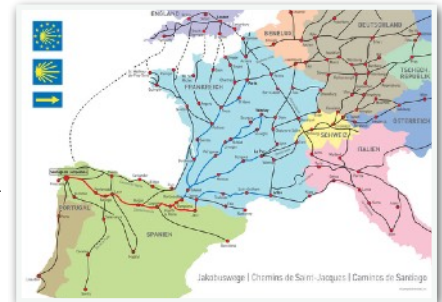
The onshore crew ties us securely to the bollards at Speyer, another small town (pop 50,000) of trees and ancient buildings and fountains – and the Kaiserdom, a



Romanesque cathedral of colossal proportions that was begun in 1030 AD by Salian Emperor Konrad II. It would surely be a special experience to attend an organ concert in this massive hall measuring 134m (439 ft) in length. But maybe on a return visit.

Speyer lies along a branch of the **Jakobsweg** (the St James Way), a warren of pathways that lead across Europe to the pilgrimage church of Santiago de Compostela, in northwestern Spain. While the classic route passes over the Pyrenees at Roncevalles, we've seen those yellow shell and arrow markers in many European towns – even in distant Bratislava, Slovakia – pointing the way for the faithful. The tradition is to continue to Finisterra, and burn your socks while overlooking the Sea – but the authorities now discourage that practice.

Friends of ours have done chunks of The Way in Spain, Portugal, and southern France, as portrayed in that 2010 Martin Sheen



movie “The Way”. The tall (3m/10ft) Jakobspilger statue on the Maximilianstrasse, Speyer’s centerpiece old Roman road, honors those who passed through here over the centuries. It was a gift to the city of Speyer in 1990 – on the occasion of the town’s 2000th birthday.

It’s a warm day and we head for the leafy patio of the nearest gasthaus. The sign translates as, “A day without beer won’t kill you...but why take the risk?” We’re convinced that our good health is important, and we order a round of cold ones.



The bottom of the sign reads, “Show us your most beautiful Biergarten-Moment.” On Instagram. We’re certainly having a beautiful Biergarten-Moment, but not sure anyone else would be interested.

Aboard **our van back to the river** we pass the city’s impressive Technik Museum, with a gigantic Lufthansa 747 dominating the skyline. (How did they get it here?!?) You can actually climb up into the thing, and spend even more hours exploring U-boats and many other rare technical marvels of the day. And of course we don’t have the time.



We spend a few more minutes ashore with local people enjoying their riverfront. And we marvel at the ingenious bicycle-contraptions they use to get their families around town. Why waste expensive gas when you can get some exercise on a beautiful day?



Our nearby ship awaits, and we go onward to our next day-stop along the fabled Rhine, at Strasbourg. About halfway between Speyer and Strasbourg, the Rhine becomes the border between Germany and France for the next 184km, until we reach Basel at the Swiss border.



- An interesting side note: The common Ashkenazi name of Shapiro, which according to various sources means either “beautiful” or “radiant,” or even “shepherd,” comes from Spira, the medieval name for Speyer.

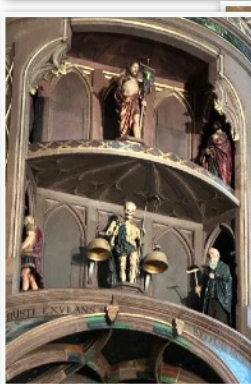
Strasbourg

The French Alsatian city of Strasbourg is next on the Itinerary. This pretty place is the seat of the European Parliament, and a fine city for wandering. Strasbourg, Amsterdam and London are the only places on this entire 4-month European circle trip that we’ve been to before, and we enjoy the chance for a return visit.



There are fine pieces of public sculpture here in Strasbourg and we fondly recall the beguiling bakeries and markets that are overflowing with the best of local foods.

The city’s massive Cathédral Notre-Dame is built of red sandstone and is yet another impressive European church to behold. It dates from 1439 and contains ancient stained glass windows that bathe the interior in a warm light.



But our favorite recollections are of the bustling squares, the tall and distinctive half-timbered homes, and finding a good place to enjoy some local food.



Winding lanes lead to flower-hung canals in the Petit France district, and quiet corners to enjoy.

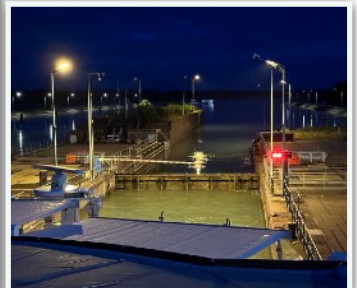
But there's another memory that we also recall, and it's a sad one. By sheer happenstance, and completely unknown to us, we were visiting Strasbourg in June of 2018 while Anthony Bourdain was filming an episode there for his show, "Parts Unknown." We never saw him or the film crew, but we awoke one morning soon



after we'd left to the tragic news that he'd just hung himself at the Hotel Chambard in the tiny vineyard town of Kaysersberg Vignoble, just outside of Colmar, only a half hour train ride from our rental.

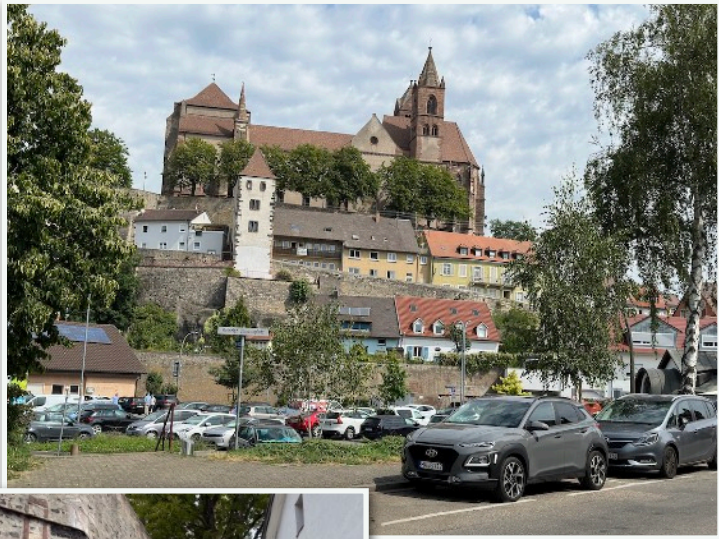
Our 2018 Dispatch from Strasbourg and Heidelberg: dispatches.wilkeskinsman.com/tierra_de_tortugas/2018/07/summer-2018-strasbourg-to-heidelberg.html

After dinner that evening everybody is awake as we enter one of the locks on the Rhine. According to various sources, there are 10 locks on the Rhine, and all of them are located between Amsterdam and Basel. So it appears we've passed through most of them while sleeping in our cabin. Incoming water rapidly fills the lock and lifts us to the upper level, then we exit when they lift the gate and we get the green light.

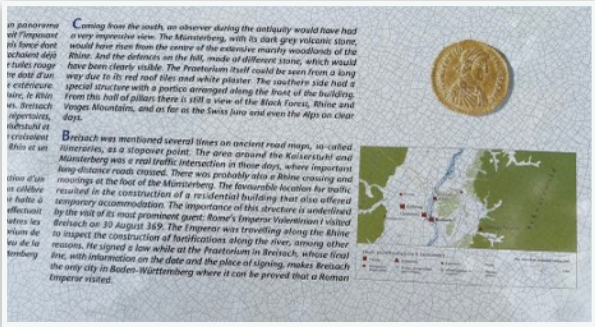


Breisach

Breisach’s Stephansmünster, the church that rises high above the town, has been a visual point of reference here for centuries. A sign reading, ‘Münster’ directs us to the stairway and either we’ll find that church up there – or maybe The Munster Family!



It’s a worthy climb on a nice sunny day, where we find ourselves looking over the rooftops and the river to the distant peaks of the Schwarzwald, the Black Forest. And on a clear winter’s day, they say you can even see snowcapped peaks of the Alps.



And it's no surprise that we find the familiar yellow shell sign of the Jakobsweg up here. It wasn't easy being a pilgrim in those days, trekking maybe a thousand miles and having to pray at every hilltop church along The Way.



On this nice day we're sharing the hilltop with a multi-country band of motorscooteristas on their Vespas, who are here for an outing. There's a mix of pretty new models and well-kept old classics from Germany, Italy, France, and maybe a few more countries.



And somehow it reminds me of "Vicious Cycles" that old 1967 stop-action comedy short where The Wild Ones meet The Mild Ones.
www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/1386irl/vicious_cycles_a_stop_action_biker_comedy_filmed/?rdt=47959

The gathering of scooters from many countries reminds me of a young Chinese woman we'd met earlier in London. This was her first trip abroad and she spoke good English that she learned in school. She mentioned attempting to speak with various other travelers who looked Chinese to her, but were from Japan, Korea, or other Asian countries. And when she asked if we could tell the difference between the various Europeans we encountered on our travels, our answer was generally no. We simply enjoyed being among the great swirl of languages that is Europe. Yet when they spoke English, we could often tell if they were native speakers or still retained a charming accent. Then we'd ask where they were from, and learn another thing or two about the grand European experience that we've come to enjoy.

The church is also kind enough to post a Kryptogramm, for people with a penchant for those things. Apparently the original is at the portal of Gaudí's Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, but I must have missed it.



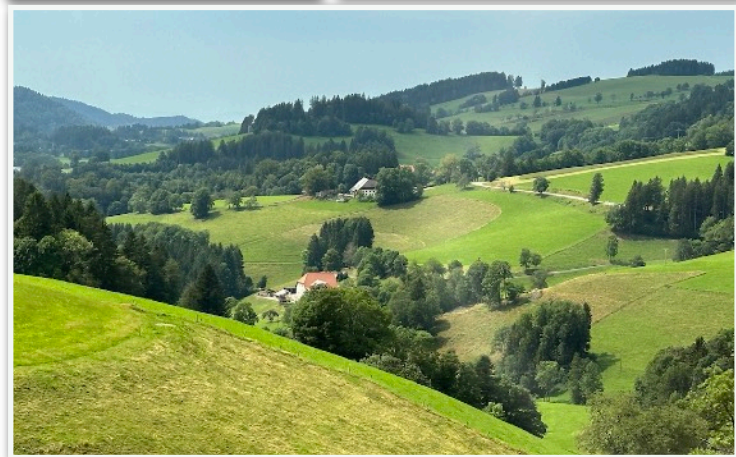
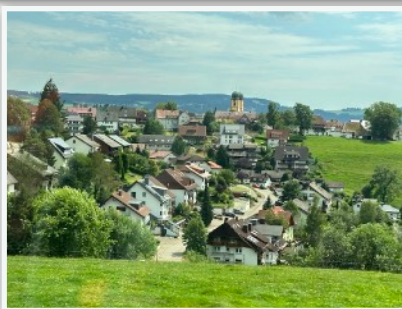
We'll miss a whole series of organ concerts by international artists happening in nearby Freiburg. But at least we find a quiet place in the town below the church to enjoy a cold beer on a warm day. And they even accept Swiss Francs, which we don't yet have...



Der Schwarzwald (the Black Forest)

We're scheduled onto a bus for the Black Forest, with a friendly lady aboard in a hat crowned with red apples to explain where we're going. She reminds me of cousins of mine.

The bus takes us through gorgeous countryside and into the deeply-forested mountains of southern Germany. We pass idyllic villages with flower-bedecked bridges over rushing streams, pretty farms and pastures, and mountain towns in secluded valleys. The soothing sounds of Beethoven's glorious Pastorale come easily to mind on a day like this.



We arrive at Hofgut Sternen, a wood-working operation and cuckoo clock factory that grew from humble origins over the past 700 years. And there's a helpful sign to tell us that we're about 16,606 kilometers from Sydney, Australia, but only 0.02 km from Cuckoo Clocks. And there's a St James Way yellow shell marker on the post.



Their clock selection ranges from tiny and cute, to elaborately extravagant. The functioning farmers and farm animals must require an amazing attention to detail, and probably justify the prices.

But alas, neither the intricate clocks





(€2000+) nor the ultra-cool wooden bicycle (€4950) will fold adequately to fit into my rolling bag for the remaining 3-month duration of our Euro trip.

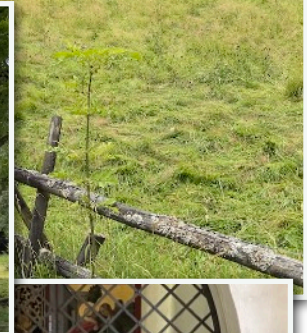
And **up here in the high reaches of the Black Forest**, we encounter The Way of St James, which they call Der Jakobus Pilgerweg.



According to the map, this section starts at Basel and passes through Himmelreich (Heavenly Kingdom) on the long trek to Santiago de Compostela, in northwestern Spain. The total distance along the Basel-Genf-Le Puy en Velay-St Jean pied du Port route to the shrine at Santiago de Compostela is 2312 km (1436.6 miles) – so better take your lunch. But local bahnhofs (train stations) are also shown, in case you're a bit less pure about the whole thing.



We enjoy an easy afternoon stroll along a short part of The Way, past the old Toll Station and gateway, along a wooden fence through rolling meadows to the simple Chapel of St Oswald, dating from 1148.



An historical marker mentions the “**charnel house,**” the extension to the right of the entry, where human bones are kept to make room for new burials when the cemetery is full. The skeletons of those evicted are now stored in the cellar behind a locked grate. Other examples would be St Bride’s Church in Fleet Street, London – and the desiccated ‘*mumias*’ of Guanajuato – which are on display for a fee.



We top off the afternoon with a class on how to make the perfect Black Forest Torte. It’s an elaborate process, befitting of such a famous concoction.



And yet we soon must leave the streams and mountains of the legendary Black Forest, to pass a pretty field of flowers, and head back to our boat, the Viking Kara, for one final night aboard.



As we drift off into one final sleep in ultra-plush sheets on the Viking Kara, the water ripples softly beneath us and we might well dream of Wagner’s *Das Rheingold*, where the guardian Rheinmaidens are outwitted by Alberich, the evil dwarf who steals their gold from the river bottom. He has a ring



fashioned from the gold, giving him the power to enslave his fellow Nibelungs.

After the defeat of Alberich, and the Gods have entered Valhalla, Brunnhilde captures the Ring and returns it to the Rheinmaidens at the bottom of the



Rhine – it's complicated. So did we sail over that golden Ring in the nighttime somewhere on our way upstream? Such is the stuff of dreams. And of madness.

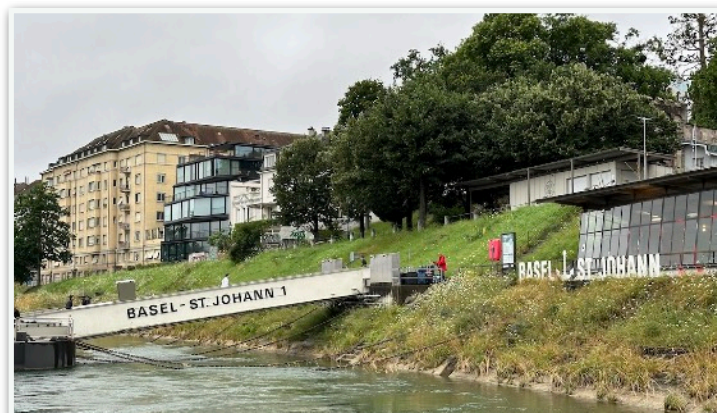
After Wagner was exiled from Dresden for his youthful socialist activities, he later returned to Germany after 12 years away, and it's said that he was deeply moved upon re-crossing the fabled Rhine to his homeland.

The gods enter Valhalla.

Go to Full Screen to capture all the majesty of George Szell and the fabulous Cleveland Symphony Orchestra:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBVgsYcJ5GQ

Basel

In the morning we dock at Basel, Switzerland, having cruised most of the navigable length of the 1320 km Rhine. After a final breakfast aboard we drag our bags ashore, and we're back to our plebeian roots. We bid farewell to all that fine luxury, but we look forward to exploring the city of Basel at our own pace.



A few thoughts:

We had a fine trip on the Viking Kara, the food and complimentary wine were very good, and it was informative as a 'survey course' way of travel. We were even upgraded from a French Balcony to a Full Balcony cabin, so we have no complaints about the trip and are glad we could afford it. But an expensive cruise really isn't our thing, and for the price of 8 days of luxury on the Rhine, we can spend about a month and a half riding on local trains, sleeping in nice-enough 3-star hotels, and walking endless miles of village lanes. But the Viking Line was a good one-time experience, and we have no regrets.

So stay tuned for the next couple of weeks on our 2024 Euro trip, as we explore some interesting places in beautiful Switzerland.

—PRW & CJK