

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



FAIRYTALE CASTLES ON THE RHINE



You may not know this, but travel is a bug. A nice bug, not a nasty bug. But a bug, nonetheless, and highly contagious. It gets under your skin and spreads tell-tale symptoms: like itchy feet, a restless curiosity, and a hankering to go somewhere ... *anywhere* ... just GO!

It's the GOING, exploring, discovering, dreaming, that keeps you coming back for more. And the journey IS more important than the destination. I can confirm that. However, there are some destinations that stand out from the rest.

One of those, in my opinion, is a gorgeous stretch of river that runs through the middle of Germany. That river is the Rhine ... and this particular stretch, the Rhine Valley, is strewn with fairytale castles, postcard-pretty villages, and landscapes that ache your eyeballs.

The Rhine is not the longest river in the world, but it *is* one of the most romantic. It starts life high in the Swiss Alps, swoops through alpine forests and over tumbling waterfalls, and flows briefly into France ... snaking westward through grand German cities and a chain of medieval towns (with cobbled streets, pastel-coloured houses, clock-towers and window boxes) ... before emptying out near the Dutch port of Rotterdam. The 65km-long Rhine Valley oozes such scenic beauty and old-world history that it's been named a



Cologne Cathedral

World Heritage Site. And the best, most relaxing way to see it is from the deck of a luxury river boat.

We boarded our floating hotel, the *Amadeus Elegant*, in Amsterdam, one lunchtime in May – and motored off next day through the tranquil flatlands of Holland. Our route bypassed Duisburg and Essen (West German industrial centres), prior to stopping in Cologne – dominated by its dark, looming Gothic Cathedral.

We got chilled-to-the-bone exploring the unseasonably-cold city – and stiff-necked staring up at the Cathedral's





Coblenz

teetering towers. But, back on ship, some five-star pampering and a four-course feast soon had us warmed-up and ready to party.

The morning after, while we yawned and woke up, the *Elegant* docked in Coblenz (where the Rhine and Moselle rivers merge). And, armed with warm-layers, we went ashore to wander the

Old Quarter (badly damaged in WW2). There's history here stretching back 2000 years, plus a huge castle (the Ehrenbreitstein fortress) that overlooks the town – and we Kiwis were all agog.

But our agog changed to gaga, that afternoon, as we cruised through the most famous and most spectacular stretch of the Rhine Valley. It was magical! I mean, try to picture wide green waterways squeezing through narrow, winding gorges ... precipitous wooded cliffs hosting ancient Neolithic landmarks and Roman remains ... high-up terraces smothered in vineyards (“winyards” say the locals, when talking to us *wisitors*) ... neat riverside towns, ornate stately homes, domed churches with spires stabbing the skyline ... and dark, dense forests punctuated (like scenes out of *Beauty & the Beast*) by castle after hilltop castle.

From both banks of the Rhine people waved us welcome, walked their dogs, rode their bikes, tended their gardens, fished, or just stood there watching us glide slowly along their beloved waterway.



PHOTO: DREAMTIME



Some 40 castles were built around here in the 12th and 13th centuries (fortified walls, turrets, moats, the works) by feudal lords trying to defend their turf. Many have been restored or converted into hotels – but others are quietly crumbling, their dark secrets still lurking in damp dungeons.

This region has powerfully influenced writers, poets, artists, composers (not hard to see why). And around one bend upstream we came upon the legendary 150-metre-high Lorelei Rock, where (according to one of those dark secrets) a beautiful blonde maiden once threw herself to her death over a faithless lover – and now lures sailors onto nearby reefs with her hypnotic songs.

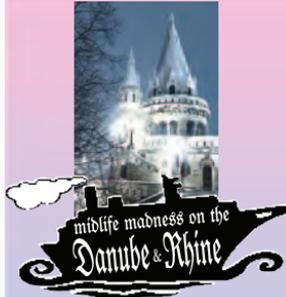


I listened hard, but couldn't hear the girl – and the Elegant avoided the rocks. (Phew!) Instead, as a highlight-finale, we docked in another gorgeous old town – Rudesheim – where we rode the Winzerexpress (tourist-train) up to the Drogelgasse (centre of town) and spent a delightful hour marvelling at the audio-ingenuity of long-gone centuries in a unique museum: *Siegfried's Mechanical Music Cabinet ...*

Magical? You betcha!



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