

ADVENTURES
IN THE

Rhineland

Tim Johnson

For many of us, a leisurely cruise up the scenic Rhine River is a once-in-a-lifetime trip – but unlike many of the world’s Iconic Journeys, it can be within reach! – here’s one trip of a lifetime that won’t require you to take out a second mortgage.



ICONIC *Journeys*

I went back to my room expecting a grand, unforgettable show—and I ended up, instead, with a rather satisfying nap. It was the day after a long trans-Atlantic flight and, my time zones still askew and circadian rhythms rather confused, I went back to my suite and flung wide open the sliding door on the balcony. Settling back onto my bed, I breathed in the warm spring air, and took in the beautiful view of the dramatic Rhine Gorge. And then, I fell asleep, snoring enthusiastically as a panorama of World Heritage Sites rolled past my closed, slumbering eyes. Fortunately, I awoke midway—and felt like I was in a dream. I opened my eyes to the sight of great citadels perched on the steep sides of the Gorge—which has, for centuries, served as one of Europe's most important trade routes, and once sat at the very heart of the Holy Roman Empire. Sitting up on my bed, I enjoyed the ever-changing sight of castle after castle, each hundreds of years old and every one seemingly more magnificent than the last.

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I was on board the Avalon *Expression* for its christening cruise, rolling upriver on the Main and Rhine from Frankfurt, all the way to Amsterdam. By almost any standard, the *Expression* is a lovely ship. It features two full decks of oversized suites, which boast wall-to-wall panoramic windows, plus a spacious sky deck with a whirlpool and an open-air bistro. But the ship's greatest feature is *definitely* its ability to deliver guests into the very heart of one of Europe's most stunning regions.

Not all of the attractions I saw along the way were equally dramatic—in fact, some bordered on the quirky. The day before sailing through the Rhine Gorge and its 400-foot

cliffs we visited Rudesheim, a picturesque river town, and its rather strange mechanical musical instrument museum. There, in a building that once served as a 15th century knight's residence, a demonstrative woman in a 19th century costume led us through Siegfried's Mechanical Music Cabinet, one of the world's largest displays of self-playing instruments. We saw everything from a simple banjo-tambourine combo that sprung to life with the flick of a switch to large, complicated, colourful items that included turbaned figurines and filled half the room, machines that would look very much at home at a carnival. Showing us a large piano that played itself by using a pneumatic system and perforated paper, she noted that these pieces were rare even in their day, and items of great pride to those who owned them. "The large models would've belonged to millionaires," she said with a grand wave of her hand. "And families would gather around the smaller pieces with coffee and cake, enjoying some music on a Sunday afternoon.

After the whimsical tour, I strolled around Rudesheim's picture-perfect old town. Taking a break, I sat down for a beverage in the open-air garden of a tavern in the famous Drosselgasse, a long, cobbled pedestrian lane that teems with tourists during the summer months. Settling in, I felt very German as I tipped back an ornate mug of "Rudesheim coffee," a dark blend that's flavoured with Asbach Uralt brandy, while a sturdy trio cranked out oom-pah-pah music on piano, fiddle and clarinet.

Refreshed, I hiked up into the vineyards that surround the town and produce globally renowned Riesling, passing under a cable car, and taking in views of the Medieval towers and rooftops of the town, clustered down close to the river.

Back on the ship, we continued upriver before docking at Koblenz. Here we celebrated the christening of the ship, with Patricia Shultz, author of the celebrated book, *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*,



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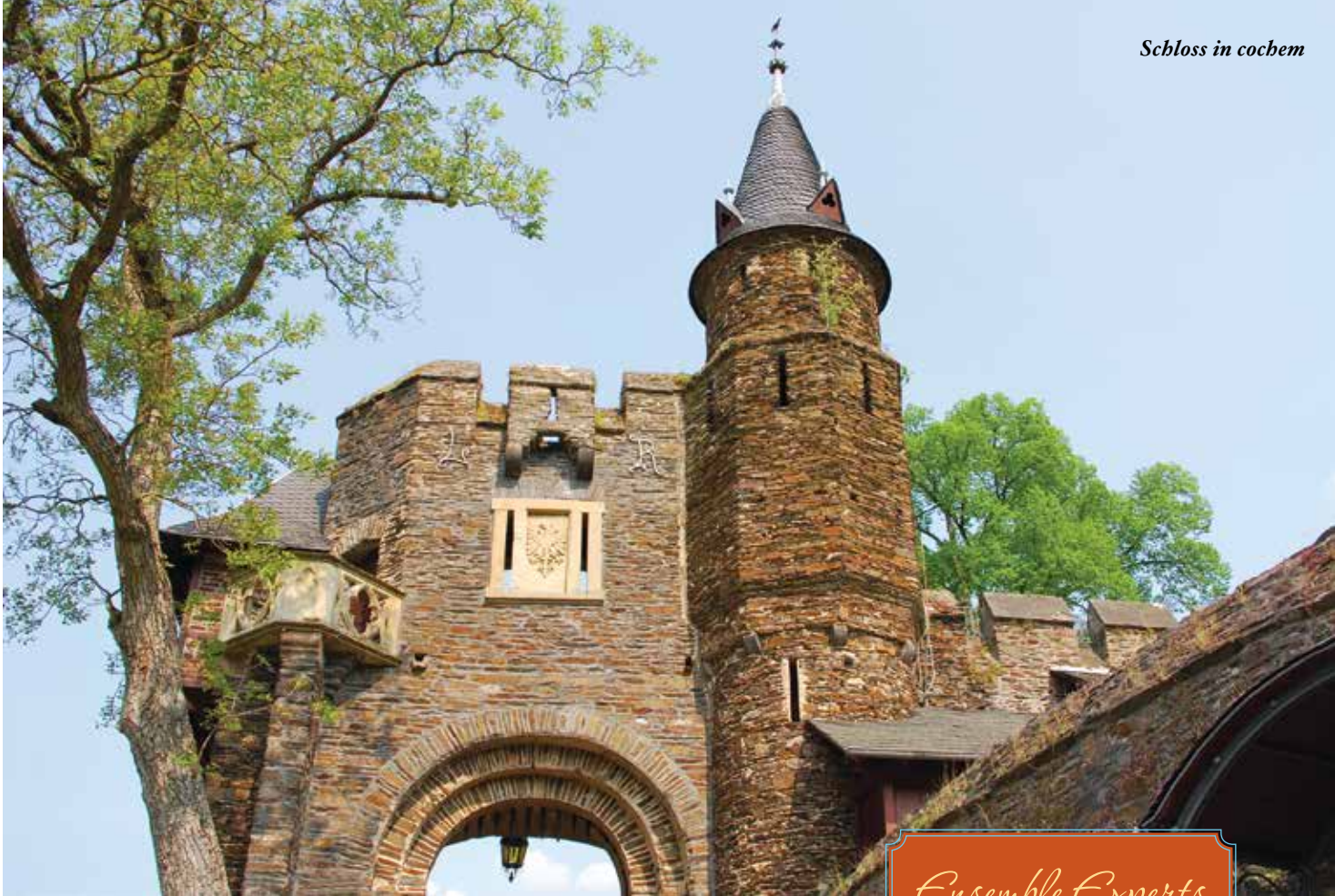
cracking the Champagne over the bow. I boarded a motor coach and wound through the Moselle River Valley, tracing the bends of the narrow waterway as it snaked past terraced vineyards and through charming villages. Arriving at Cochem, a small town that climbs the slopes on either side of the Moselle, I joined a tour group and ascended to its imperial castle, which sits at the very top of a high green hillside, like a royal crown atop a king's head.

Both Cochem and its castle have a very long memory. The town was founded sometime in the 800s, construction on the castle began around the year 1000, and King Conrad III of Germany declared it an imperial castle in 1151. Not far from the French border, the town proved an enticing prize for Gallic troops, who besieged Cochem during the 30 Years' War and, under the direction of Louis XIV, sacked it, reducing its castle to rubble in 1689. Fortunately, the castle also had a French benefactor. In the 19th century, the ruins and land were purchased by Louis Frédéric Jacques Ravené, a Huguenot descendant, who began reconstruction on the castle in 1868. His financing restored the building to grandiose splendour, rebuilding it in a renaissance and gothic style, and today it looks *just* like a child's conception of a fairytale castle—my tour took in towers and turrets and ivy climbing walls on the outside, while I marveled at big chandeliers, ornate woodwork and shining, knightly armour within.

Back on board, we steamed further through the Rhineland. The view from the ship provided a unique perspective on our breath-taking surroundings, as we passed long barges weighed down low with goods bound for ports downriver, and looked up from water level to the area's lovely vineyards and farms and ancient villages. Our final stop along the way was in Cologne, where my guide Marcus answered a question that had been weighing on my mind—*yes*, this *is* where the first manly scent was fabricated and marketed.

As he led me through streets rebuilt after heavy bombing in the Second World War, Marcus told me about the city's two most famous smells, a formulation called 4711 that has been around since 1799, and Farina, which is even older than that. Widely recognized as the world's first cologne, Farina was the brainchild of Italian-born designer Giovanni Maria Farina. His subtle fragrance, Eau de Cologne—a concoction

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Facade of a half-timbered House

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named to honour his adopted hometown—quickly became world famous and was soon found in royal courts all across Europe after he first mixed it up in 1709. It's still sold here from a street corner shop with rich red awnings, something that Marcus pointed out as we walked toward Cologne's *other* great claim to fame.

When we arrived at the cathedral, I could scarcely believe its size—to say it's the largest church I've ever seen doesn't quite capture it, not at all. Bordered by a vast square, the people in the foreground appeared tiny, and the passing cars looked like matchbox toys. I gazed up at a forest of flying buttresses as Marcus explained that the Cathedral of Cologne took some six centuries to construct, with work beginning back in 1248 and completed in 1880. One of the biggest churches in Europe, the cathedral was built by the archbishop of Cologne to house the bones of the Three Wise Men, and inside, I strolled by the golden Shrine of the Three Kings, which, legend has it, holds those relics.


Leaving the building, I took one last look at the front of the building—at

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its two soaring spires and the largest church facade in the world. Taking a moment to reflect, I marveled at the castles and cathedrals I had explored here, in just a few days, in the Rhineland. Strolling back to the ship, I looked forward to the sites that still lay ahead—the western reaches of Germany, the low country of Holland and, beyond that, the canals and castles of Amsterdam.