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The once and future city: Trier and its treasures

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TRIER, GERMANY — Arriving in Trier on a dark and moonless night, was never part of the plan.

Ten days in Germany, three Rhineland cities, train tickets, hotel reservations: I was organized, with times, places and a day-by-day itinerary. But after wasting more than two hours in the Dusseldorf Bahnhof (train station), searching for misplaced luggage and missing the early trains to Trier, on the winding Moselle River, I didn't board the afternoon local train until late.

Hurrying down Trier's main street at 10 p.m., coaxing my suitcase over the cobblestones, the sudden sight of a glowing pink hulk looming up in the gloom stopped me dead in my tracks. The ghost of the Roman Empire, hovering in the night?

Stranger things have happened.

Then I realized it was the Porta Nigra, Trier's best preserved Roman ruin, illuminated at night by spotlights. Massive sandstone blocks, 98 feet high and twice as wide, the second century gate is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, one of Trier's nine such Heritage sites, historic monuments all.

Seen in daylight, the Porta Nigra is a dirty grey, mottled by 1,800 years of weather, hence the name, "black gate." But that first shimmering apparition, the gate at night as it might have looked lit by Roman torches, made Trier come alive.

It was early when I returned the next morning, but groups of tourists were already milling around in front of the Tourism Office, sipping take-out coffees, perusing brochures and waiting for their guides. While they snapped pictures of the Porta Nigra, I went to the office to pick up a city map and ask about guided tours.

"We've got something for every age," said the desk clerk, handing me a color brochure. The most popular tours, she said, were the afternoon tours to the wineries and vineyards along the Moselle

River. Some tours went by bus, she said, or I could go by river boat.

In the meantime, I might want to try the Roman Ruins tour led by a centurion in a breast plate and helmet; or the Toga Tour of Roman Trier, with guide and visitors clad in what looked like ribbon-trimmed sheets. The gladiator-led adventure to the Amphitheater, complete with imagined battle scenes, seemed designed for kids with a taste for gore. The "Devil in Trier" promised a spooky immersion in the Middle Age's darkest years. "Beware of witchcraft!" she advised, smiling.

The tour I picked, walking through the old town streets, sounded dry by comparison, but focused on history, always good for a warm-up. Meanwhile, the Chinese tourists taking "selfies" headed out, making a beeline for a modest three-story pink house with a historic marker on the wall, and a "Euroshop" (a 99 cent store!) on the ground floor.

"They want to see where Karl Marx grew up," said Elke Schmeier, the group's guide. "His house and the museum down the street are the first thing Chinese tourists ask about," she said. "They're surprised when they hear that Marx came from a middle-class family."

The Chinese weren't the only visitors learning something new. By now, I realized that Trier, the lively, modern German town, and Treveris, the Roman city founded by Augustus Caesar in 17 B.C., were one and the same. The difference was geography.

Trier today sits comfortably in the midst of Western Europe, minutes from Luxembourg and close to France, all European Union members. Sharing the euro, the town's 105,000 residents share a regional sensibility with their neighbors. But Treveris, the capital of the Roman Empire's northwest sector, was an outlier on the frontier, a bulwark on the border between civilization and hostile barbarian hordes.

Still, the Romans built for the ages, even in a trackless forest. Trier was surrounded by a defensive wall and its streets were surveyed and paved. Residents lived in modest villas and enjoyed monumental public buildings, with a temple (later a church), imperial throne room and a 20,000-seat amphitheater for gladiator games. Two enormous public baths, supplied by six miles of bricked, underground tunnels, boasted heating, cold and hot clean water and drains for steam rooms, baths and massage rooms.

"Look at this Roman cement," said Schmeier, tapping the spaces between bricks in one of the tunnels. "Still good since the fourth century. Now look at the cement in the restored tunnel over there. Eroding after 60 years. What does that tell you?"

As long as Trier was one of Rome's capitals, it prospered. But the town declined after A.D. 316, when Emperor Constantine II moved the capital from Rome to Constantinople (now Istanbul). Later, after the empire disintegrated, in 476 or thereabouts, the medieval church ruled the city, gradually ceding control to regional princes, ambitious power brokers and eventually to nation states.

But building continued. Churches, cathedrals, town halls, narrow houses, prisons and palaces, each squeezed in beside, in front of, behind and even on top of older buildings. Roman pediments and columns gave way to Romanesque churches, then to early and late Gothic cathedrals, followed by Renaissance, Baroque, rococo, romantic, neo-classic, art deco and modern structures.

Old favorites were saved and enlarged. War damage was repaired. Roman blocks were carted away and reused, or saved for restoration. When the bricks wobbled or the paint peeled, the buildings were repaired. And the colors! Brick red, candy-land pink, baby blue, green, white with gold flourishes, tan with mustard trim, yellow tweaked with orange, and white, timber-framed houses with beams edged in red. Peaked roofs so steep they must have been a fashion trend, like a silk tie or 5-inch spike heels.

In fact, exploring historic Trier was as entertaining as a Disneyland tour (excuse me, Trier) is entertaining. The decorative flourishes on facades, doors and windows - swirls, angles, arches, spirals, scrolls, petals and leaves - were beyond counting, beyond imagining almost.

Especially intriguing was the fourth century Constantine Basilica, also brick, an enormous throne room, now restored with a coffered ceiling. So broad and tall that the Porta Nigra could fit inside, the basilica proved its worth as a Roman hall, church, concert venue and lately, now that it's equipped with chairs, as a place or tourists to sit and be amazed.

But for real amazement, the Cathedral and Liebfrauenkirche (church) complex took the gold. Significant enough to warrant its own fact-packed tour, the architecture deserved a close look, with enough time to see how the column, windows and side aisles work together.

The first building on the site was a square Roman structure, possibly a palace.

Converted to a "house church," it was lengthened at least twice before the Romanesque Cathedral was built right on top it, in the 11th century. In the 13th century the early Gothic Liebfrauenkirche was erected next door, adjoining the Romanesque cathedral. Today the two stand as one, sharing a common wall and cloister.

The tour completed, some of us headed for a favorite local spot, the Weinstube Kesselstatt. A clubby hideaway with dark wood paneling and tables, it was a perfect place to order bratwurst with potatoes and sauerkraut, and a typical wine, a Saar River Riesling.

Afterward, I wandered over to the 10th century Market Square to take it all in again, the Gothic, Classic and Baroque buildings standing cheek by jowl, and in the middle, the stubby stone cross (installed in A.D. 958) that identified the spot as a bishop-licensed market. You sold your cabbage and onions here or not at all.

Five hundred years later, in the year 1495, the St. Peter Fountain, the base adorned by four blue and white, gold-fringed figures, representing the four virtues, was installed, adding panache to the square. It took a while coming, but here in Trier, it could last forever.

THE NITTY GRITTY:

ON ROUTE: Air Berlin flies nonstop to Dusseldorf from Los Angeles; San Francisco; Miami; Fort Myers, Fla.; and Vancouver, British Columbia. Food is excellent, coach seats comfortable, spacious upper class has 19 beds, some in pairs. Connects from Dusseldorf to Berlin and other German cities.

STAYING: Highly recommended, the Hotel Casa Chiara, is on Engelstrasse 8. Find various prices and dates at www.casa-chiara.de. On a quiet street, this excellent 20-room hotel is a 15-minute walk from the Trier train station and a convenient five minutes from the Porta Nigra gate. Modest exterior, but immaculate rooms, small with remodeled bathroom, closet, TV, window that opens, desk, chair, king bed and down quilt. Very friendly manager and reception clerks; delicious breakfast, with choice of meat, fruit, eggs, breads, coffee and tea served in bright, modern room overlooking open courtyard. Parking garage at rear.

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