

Trier, Germany and its treasures

BY Anne Z. Cooke/Tribune News Service Jul 12, 2015 (0)



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, I didn't board the afternoon local train until late.

Hurrying down Trier's main street at 10 p.m., the sudden sight of a glowing pink hulk stopped me dead in my tracks. 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 sites. Seen in daylight, the Porta Nigra is a dirty gray. But that first shimmering apparition, the gate at night as it might have looked lit by Roman torches, made Trier come alive.

Early the next morning groups of tourists were already milling around in front of the Tourism Office. 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 breastplate 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 seemed designed for kids with a taste for gore. The "Devil in Trier" promised a spooky immersion in the Middle Age's darkest years. The tour I picked, walking through the old town streets, sounded dry by comparison, but focused on history. 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. 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. 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, 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.

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 for 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 of 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 in the Gothic, Classic and Baroque buildings standing cheek by jowl, and the stubby stone cross (installed in A.D. 958) that identified the spot as a bishop-licensed market. 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.