

Floating through a fairy tale: Castle viewing and wine tasting on the Rhine and Moselle rivers



Pfalz castle once served as a toll station on the Rhine. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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By Katherine Rodeghier

“Oh, look, there’s another one,” cried the woman behind me. She could not contain her excitement at seeing yet another castle perched on a hillside.

The Sun Deck of the Scenic Opal proved the perfect place for castle-spotting as it cruised through Germany's Rhine River Gorge where more than 40 of these fanciful remnants from the Middle Ages loom over terraced vineyards and wine villages. The Upper Middle Rhine Valley has more castles and ruins than anywhere on the planet, making it a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the most appealing landscapes in Europe.

And how nice to enjoy it while lounging in the fresh air as one of the ship's smiling waiters comes by with a tray of drinks.

For me, cruising through the Rhine Gorge was a highlight of the "Charming Castles and Vineyards of the Rhine and Moselle" itinerary with Scenic Luxury Cruises and Tours. But there were many more memorable experiences during the eight-day journey between Frankfurt, Germany, and Basel, Switzerland, including visits to cities in both Germany and France. Some passengers also took a shore excursion to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

With 163 guests and a 1:3 crew-to-passenger ratio, the ship never seemed cramped. My husband and I enjoyed the luxury of a butler, the complimentary laundry service and five dining venues. In the Panorama Bar & Lounge, the social heart of the ship, friendly bartenders poured drinks throughout the day and evening, all included in the fare.

And while we relished relaxing on the Sun Deck and chatting up fellow passengers in the lounge, we also cherished private time on the balcony of our suite, lowering the window to feel the breeze and hear church bells tolling as we passed yet another riverside village.



The 163-passenger Scenic Opal is one of 12 vessels operated in Europe by Scenic Luxury Cruises and Tours. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Rhine and Moselle meet

After transferring from Frankfurt airport, we boarded the ship in Mainz, Germany. Cruise director Alex Thurein filled us in on Scenic Freechoice shore excursions, a broad range of activities in several fitness levels we'd take in the days ahead.

We chose a guided walking tour in Koblenz for our first morning, stopping at Deutsches Eck, the “German Corner,” at the confluence of the Rhine and Moselle rivers. A massive equestrian statue of Kaiser Wilhelm I overlooks the site, but another sculpture later in our walk amused me more. The “Spitting Boy” atop a fountain near the City Hall directs a stream of water at passersby at unpredictable intervals.

We managed to stay dry enough for a post-tour spin around Koblenz on the ship’s e-bikes, zipping along the riverfront using the maps and narration on Scenic’s Tailormade app as a pocket guide. The app also displayed the ship’s daily program, and during sightseeing tours it broadcast the voice of guides through our headphones.

Wines of the Moselle

Vineyards along the Moselle — Mosel in German — earn high marks for their Rieslings. In the riverside town Bernkastel-Kues, guide Peter Werland led us past one such vineyard made famous when a 14th-century archbishop elector of the Holy Roman Empire took ill. None of the healers could cure him, but when given a cup of wine from Bernkastel he immediately recovered. In gratitude, he issued an official doctor’s degree to the growing site and the wine became known as Bernkasteler Doctor.

Of course, I wanted a taste. After Werland took us past Bernkastel’s Renaissance-style Rathaus (town hall) and through the market square where preserved half-timbered buildings date from the 13th century, we set off to find a wine café. None we entered served Doctor by the glass, so we crossed to the Kues side of the river and struck gold at Vinothek wine bar. I sipped my glass of golden Doctor on the sunny terrace and swear it cured my lingering case of jet lag.

After dinner, we left Bernkastel on a motor coach ride to Trier, Germany, for a classical concert in the UNESCO-listed Liebfrauenkirche. Completed in 1260, it is the earliest church built in French High Gothic style outside France. The melodies of Brahms and Bach filled the sanctuary, empty except for our group. These Scenic Enrich experiences, private after-hours access to events on shore, are offered at least once during cruises on each of its 12 river ships in Europe.



Reichsburg Castle dates from A.D. 1000 but was transformed in a major rebuild in the 1800s. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

Castles galore

As I sipped morning coffee on my balcony, the Scenic Opal cruised into Cochem, passing rows of pastel-hued houses lining the riverbank with vineyards rising behind them. The city has the steepest vineyard in Europe, guide Silvia Gunther told us during our walking tour. “The winegrowers say they always have one leg shorter than the other.” Every summer, visiting hikers must be rescued by helicopter having neglected to bring a hat and enough water as they climbed up along the vines.

Perched atop one such vineyard stands Reichsburg Castle, where a costumed knight led us past suits of armor through the trophy room, dining room and cellar. Though it dates from A.D. 1000, a major rebuild in the 1800s removed much of the crumbling original castle, so what remains is more Disney fantasy than authentic structure.

We saw dozens of the real thing the next morning cruising through the Rhine Gorge as the Tailormade app ticked off details when we approached each one. Some castles perched on hilltops; others claimed river frontage. Some remain in ruins, others have been repurposed as museums, hotels, restaurants and private homes. The 12th-century Schonburg Castle, for example, operates as a four-star hotel and restaurant.

My favorite castle, the gleaming white Pfalz, stands on an island in the middle of the river where its medieval owners demanded tolls from passing ships. A short distance upriver, the Opal

passed the Loreley statue standing on a spit of shore below 433-foot-tall Loreley Rock. Legend has it a sultry siren stood atop the promontory luring distracted sailors to their deaths on the rocks below.

Coffee and a concert

We exited the Rhine Gorge in Rudesheim and chose an excursion hiking up through vineyards. Though the slope wasn't as steep as in Cochem, it proved challenging enough and we were happy to reach the Niederwald Monument, our destination at the top. Built between 1871 and 1883, it commemorates the unification of Germany after the Franco-Prussian War and has a panoramic view of the Rhine valley. A cable car swept us over the tops of the vines on the return to Rudesheim.



The crew served warm drinks to passengers on the Sun Deck of the Scenic Opal as it cruised through the Rhine Gorge. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

I didn't have time to sample Rudesheim coffee in a local café, but Scenic Opal's bartender made a mug for me on board, flambeeing Asbach Uralt brandy with a sugar cube before pouring in hot coffee and topping it with whipped cream. It became my nightcap while enjoying after-dinner entertainment, usually performances in the lounge by the crew or entertainers from on shore. One memorable evening a violinist named Vladimir came from Frankfurt to play classics as well as his renditions of Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir," Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," Michael Jackson's "Beat It" and various songs by The Beatles.

Fairy-tale France

For our last two ports in Germany, we chose excursions to the Alsace region of France. The old sections of both Strasbourg and Colmar resemble storybook settings of cobblestone streets and half-timbered houses dating from the 1400s to the 1700s. Because stone was expensive, the common man built houses of wood timbers packed with whatever materials were on hand: horsehair, mud, straw, animal manure. In the Petite France quarter of Strasbourg, the second floor of the half-timbered Tanner's House protrudes over the street and has hooks used for hanging animal skins.

We spent our free time in Strasbourg relaxing with a drink in the square next to the massive cathedral. When its bells rang on the hour, we toasted our good timing and listened to the chimes echoing off the surrounding buildings. The cathedral's first stone was set in 1277 and its lacy stone facade rises to a 466-foot spire, tallest in Europe until the 19th century.



The massive Strasbourg cathedral dominates a square in the capital of the Alsace region of France. *Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

The Alsace ping-ponged between Germany and France for several centuries, most recently following the Franco-Prussian War and World Wars I and II, said Colmar guide Susanna Kritzer. A man born here in the 1870s might have changed his nationality five times. Colmar was one of

the last cities liberated by the U.S. in the 1940s. Movie star Audie Murphy was a soldier who nearly died in the battle depicted in his 1955 film “To Hell and Back.”

People of the Alsace speak the Alsatian dialect, celebrate both French and German holidays and enjoy foods of both countries: foie gras, sausages and sauerkraut. We sampled these and more in the international and regional dishes on board the Scenic Opal. For our final dinner, we dined at Table la Rive, a chef’s table with a six-course degustation menu with wine pairing set up in the rear of the main dining room. It was a feast for a king in this castle-strewn region of Europe.

If you go

Scenic Luxury Cruises “Charming Castles and Vineyards of the Rhine and Moselle” itinerary is offered on select dates spring through fall and can be started from either Frankfurt or Basel. Fares from \$4,957 include shore excursions, airport transfers, gratuities, dining in up to five restaurants, room service, laundry service and alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks night and day, not just during meals. Look for deals such as 2 for 1.

Details: (857)-837-0429, [scenicusa.com/tours/charming-castles--vineyards-of-the-rhine--moselle/14564](https://www.scenicusa.com/tours/charming-castles--vineyards-of-the-rhine--moselle/14564). A 12-day itinerary adds land tours in Switzerland.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a media cruise sponsored by Scenic Luxury Cruises and Tours.*

<https://www.dailyherald.com/20240201/travel/floating-through-a-fairy-tale-castle-viewing-and-wine-tasting-on-the-rhine-and-moselle-rivers/>