

Germany Vacation Diary 2008 – Part 2

Around 9:30 we meet and make the short walk down the long concrete stairway into town. At the base of the stairway is the restaurant. On this chilly evening, everyone is inside. The heat lamps positioned close to our table keep us toasty. Kim describes her job as director of a Chiropractic Clinic. Tim is a retired from his successful business as a DJ for hire, which also explains how at ease he is on the dance floor. He now assists Kim in their chiropractic business, and they seem quite happy. Their children are both college age and attending school in California. We enjoy another great meal, and as we part company for the last time, Tim says to Kim "I don't think we've seen the last of them!" They leave for Frankfurt early in the morning, so hurry off to bed to catch a few winks.

Thursday, April 24 – Baden-Baden, Strasbourg

We leave on our day trip to [Strasbourg](#) around 10:30am. We spend a few minutes figuring out how to program the country code and town into the GPS, and then head up the hill from the hotel. As we make our way down a narrow street that runs behind the town and connects with Leopoldstrasse just before the tunnel, we are mystified by cars parked helter-skelter in both directions along the roadside. As we head out of town, the GPS proves to be a masterful guide, directing us in counter-intuitive fashion past the A-5 turnoff to the A-35 and into France. The GPS continues to direct us flawlessly into Strasbourg, at which point we are on our own.



View from a sidewalk café near the Cathedral in Strasbourg

We figure out from the signs how to get to one of several public parking garages, and seize our first opportunity to select Gare Wodli. In hindsight, the Rotunde garage would have been a better alternative, since it provides park and ride facilities right next to a tram stop. We park on the sixth floor and take the elevator down to street level. As we emerge from the garage into bright sunlight, we find ourselves handicapped for lack of a decent map. On the next corner is a major boulevard. A middle-aged woman sees our confusion and points to a street sign. I approach her with a smile and say, “cathedral?” referring to our destination in the center of town. She immediately understands, points, and gives directions in French. Karen is delighted to discover she remembers enough French to understand the basics, like “left” and “right”.

With a general heading but no specific plan, we walk three blocks to a canal, and then turn left on the other side onto a busy street. One block up on the corner, we find a café fronting a major intersection. This seems like a great place to stop and regroup. The tram stop is within shouting distance, and people are coming and going constantly. A friendly white-haired old Frenchman offers directions in French, and we smile and thank him politely, “Merci beaucoup!”

Two rows of small tables are packed together on the sidewalk, and waiters hustle to take orders from the many patrons already seated. We are lucky to find a table on the end, and relax under the heat lamps. Although the sun is shining, many people are wearing jackets against the morning chill. Looking at the menu, I consider a beer but opt for cold mineral water. Karen orders the same, and we watch the world go by for awhile. We are entertained by the radical (by USA standards) fashions and hairstyles. We tip our waiter, and then ask if he speaks English. He speaks only French and German, but we ask directions to the Cathedral anyway. Surprisingly, we are able to understand most of what he says despite the language barrier.



The Cathédrale de Notre Dame de Strasbourg

However, we enjoy the view and the ride, and exit at a stop outside the inner city. We study the tram map, and figure out that there are four tram lines (A, B, C, D). By locating the [Office de Tourisme](#) (Tourist Office) on the map, and are able to determine which line we need to take to get there.

We take Tram D toward Rotunde, and exit at a stop near the Cathedral. Although we can't see its spires, we use dead reckoning to find the Cathedral four blocks away. The huge surrounding plaza is filled with tourists, as are the shops ringing the area.

The [Cathédrale de Notre Dame de Strasbourg](#) soars over Strasbourg's old town. Built from 1190 - 1439, the highest medieval building in Europe with height of over 450 ft, it stands on the site of a Roman temple. The first works began in 1015, but fire destroyed most of the original Romanesque building. By the time work started on rebuilding it at the end of the twelfth century, the Gothic style had reached Alsace, and stonemasons and master builders who had worked at Chartres were soon bringing their skills to this new project.

We are free to take pictures inside the Cathedral. Its most intriguing feature is a towering [astronomical clock](#). First built in 1343, it has undergone several makeovers. The current clock dates from 1843. It features a perpetual calendar, a dial showing the positions of the planets, a display of the real position of the Sun and the Moon, and solar and lunar eclipses. The main attraction is the procession of the Apostles which occurs every day at 12:30pm.

There are lots of teenagers hanging out near the Cathedral's south entrance, adjacent to the high school. There is a mini-train stop on the traffic loop that runs by the Cathedral and circles around past ministerial buildings. We board the train and wait. Soon, a French mother and her adorable 4 year-old daughter and 6 year-old son sit down in the car ahead of us. The girl is munching a hot dog from Doner Kebab that is almost as big as she is, while making faces at Karen, and is tolerated by her mother. Encouraged by our laughter, the girl's face becomes more animated. The headphones provide commentary in seven languages. Our tour takes us past Gutenberg Square, then past St. Thomas Church and a schoolyard with kids yelling through "prison bars". The road narrows as we enter Petite France. The train stops next to a restaurant and we are close enough to converse with the patrons seated at outdoor dining tables. We say "bon appetit!" to one couple. We pass into a square with a biergarten and a jaw-dropping view of half-timbered houses dating from the 1300's lining a canal. Tanners, fishermen, and merchantmen once lived and worked here. Our train pauses on a bridge over the canal to allow us to view the first of three towers with openings for the canal water to pass underneath. The tour continues past ancient and still functioning government buildings, and then up Fish Market Street and finally back to Cathedral Square.

We ascend the Cathedral tower via a spiraling staircase, all 66 meters to the observation platform near the top of the spires. The views of the city to the east and west are impressive. We can make out the route we took on the train to Petite France, past the St. Thomas Church landmark. Back in the plaza, we find the Office de Tourisme and purchase a map (better late than never) for 1 €. We retrace our route to Petite France in search of the Restaurant de St. Martin, recommended by our guidebook. We deduce that it might be located near the Pont St. Martin, and our hunch is correct.



The antics of this young tourist were equally entertaining

The restaurant is in a venerable wooden building overlooking the canal. We take a seat near the window, and can hear the water rushing through the canal lock. A canal tour boat enters the lock and the gate closes behind it. Our waiter brings our meal of mixed grill (chicken and steak), pomme frites, salads, lamb, and an “icky Pinot Noir” according to Karen (it’s pink and tastes cheap). However, the beer is just fine. A group of young Americans enters, and tell the waiter they are there “to drink”. They barely look old enough to drive.

We wander back over the bridge to the Christmas Store, where Karen loses herself for 20 minutes in the basement. When she resurfaces, we wander down the narrow street to the Heineken Biergarten overlooking the canal that we passed on the mini-train. It’s crowded and service seems slow. We decide to move on and stop at a Winstub frequented by the locals. In the Alsace-Lorraine region of France, Winstubs are ubiquitous. Similar in appearance and atmosphere to English pubs, wine not beer is the beverage of choice. Be that as it may, I order a tall local brew while Karen opts for a medium dry Reisling.

A few steps from the Winstub is a pastry shop. As we pass by, the sales clerk offers us a taste of an intriguing confection. Her strategy works. We select several pieces of different types of pastries, and the total comes to just over 11 €. After sampling a few more, we decide they are worth it!

We return by Tram D-Rotunde to the Place de Gare. From there, it’s a short walk to the Wodli Garage. When we arrive at the exit check point, there is only an automated machine that accepts only debit cards for payment. Not good if all you have is cash, travelers cheques, or a credit card!



Half-timbered houses dating from the 1300's line a canal in Petite France

Although it's well past 6:00 pm, we run into stop-and-go traffic en route to the autobahn. Finally, it begins to clear up and we make good time the rest of the way back to Baden-Baden. We arrive 45 minutes later at 7:40pm, in time for one last visit to Caracalla.

Friday, April 25 – Baden-Baden, Trier, Zell

We awake around 6:30 am to fair weather, and then pack and finish breakfast by 10:00. I walk down Stein Strasse one last time to take hi-res photos of Friedrichsbad and Caracalla.

In the car, we set the GPS for our destination, Trier, and head off. Along the way, our GPS is true, guiding us through several autobahn changes that we probably would have missed without it. We refuel at a station outside of Trier and arrive around 1:30, three hours after leaving Baden-Baden. We enter Trier and immediately run into heavy traffic. Using our inadequate Internet map, we find enough street names to guide us through the convoluted maze of one-way streets. The lack of street signs, or the poor placement of the ones we can see, makes navigation haphazard at best. Growing increasingly frustrated, we swear at the arrogant (and obviously suicidal) pedestrians who step off the curb toward their near-certain demise, almost daring us to hit them.

As we miss the turnoff to the train station, which harbors the tourist office and our last hope of salvation, Karen catches a glimpse of the old Roman baths – just as we remember them from the Germany guidebook videos. “Look!” she cries. “The ruins! Taking this as my cue from the *National Lampoon's Vacation* flick, I slow the car and do my best impression of Chevy Chase as [Clark W. Griswold viewing the Grand Canyon](#). A la Clark, I bob my head up and down a few times and say, “There! Now we've seen them!”. With a renewed sense of resolve, I then make a questionable U-turn and find the street leading to the train station.



View of the southern Mosel Valley near Wallich

Yet, it is to be another cruel mirage; the street that held such promise twists and turns and diverts us past the station. As we drive by helplessly, we feel mocked by the large clock face on the station's façade. Considering our options, we realize that the volume of traffic coming towards us makes a U-turn impractical, if not dangerous. After we pull off the road to consult our map, the prospect of driving straight on to Zell becomes ever more attractive. "See ya later, Trier!" says Karen, with a tone of finality.

Reinvigorated by our decision, we reprogram the GPS for Wallich, a moderate-sized town on the main highway near Zell. We are soon on the autobahn, heading back the way we came. Before long, we see a turnoff for B53 and gratefully take it. Within minutes we come to the first roundabout and follow the signs toward the towns of the Mosel Valley.

The B53 is an interior road that winds along the peaceful Mosel River, past vineyards planted on incredibly steep hillsides. Every 2 to 5 KM we encounter another quaint town of half-timbered buildings. The name of each vineyard appears in Gothic letters: "Weinhotel" or "Wienstube (tavern)", with lots of "Zimmer Frei (vacancy)" signs. In late April, tourists – the lifeblood of the region – are only just beginning to come out of hibernation.

Within 90 minutes, we arrive at Traben-Trarbach and pass under the arch on the bridge. Fifteen minutes later, we arrive in Zell. At the Hotel Zum Grunen Kranz, we are greeted by an energetic German who speaks excellent English. We park in front along the promenade facing the river, and take several trips to bring all of our luggage up the small lift to Room 22 on the 3rd floor. Our room is fresh and bright, with a large balcony overlooking the Mosel.



Castle ruins overlooking the Mosel River have been converted to a restaurant with a fine view

After getting settled, we mosey up the street out back and find a small, smoky restaurant (the proprietor is friendly but smokes like a chimney). We split a steak dinner with salad and a delicious soup made from white asparagus. On the advice of our waitress, we dry a medium and then a dry “Schwartz Kat Reisling” for which the region is known.

After dinner, we stop by a small wine shop and buy one bottle of medium Reisling and one red Spatenburger, plus two small bottles of Schnapps to “settle the stomach”, as the locals say. Back in the hotel, I try the sauna and nearly fall asleep before a middle-aged woman enters. She and her husband are relaxing on lounges in the darkened pool area. In the sauna, it’s quiet and very relaxing.



Karen explores downtown Zell

Saturday, April 26 – Zell, Bielstein

The morning sky is clear and sunny. The shower in the sauna is hot and strong, and feels great. We enjoy an excellent breakfast in the 2nd floor restaurant overlooking the Mosel River. I watch a lone swan drift across the river as barges slowly cruise by. Workers are preparing a passenger boat for departure as I write. After breakfast, I wash my clothes in the bathroom sink and hang them to dry over the radiator in the bathroom.

We depart for Bielstein about 9:30, passing through several small towns: Bullay, Neef, and Bremm. After half an hour, we round a bend in the river and then spot tiny Bielstein. Once a thriving trade center on the Mosel, it is now a dreamy fairytale town of half-timbered houses. We park just off the highway and hike up the narrow main street, eyeing the high water marks from past floods on the side of a building. The most recent was in 1993, and rose over 6 feet from ground level! We pass a square containing the Rathaus (town hall) and Burgerhaus (Mayor’s house), and continue up the

hill. Impressive displays of regional wines can be seen in store windows, and in racks and baskets out front. A three-bottle box of Reisling costs a mere 9 or 10 €.

We follow the signs directing us to the Mitternich Castle ruins atop the hill overlooking the town. The castle was once home to robber barons who charged merchants a toll for transporting their goods down the Mosel. Like many castles in the region, it was destroyed by the French in the 17th century. After a short hike up a steep hill, we explore the ruins and then relax at the restaurant overlooking the river. As we savor a generous glass of Reisling and a tall Hefewiezen, we watch the river barges far below make their way slowly up river. Afterwards, we ascend the 12-story keep, which affords a spectacular view of the valley.

We exit the compound and follow the road up the hill south of the keep, past a vineyard. Soon we come to the Jewish cemetery in a quiet, peaceful grove of oak trees. The headstones, the surrounding fence, and even the trees are covered with lichens. Noticing fresh flowers placed on some of the graves, we learn that the cemetery is maintained by the Jewish community in Koblenz.



View of Bielstein from the Mitternich Castle watchtower

Back in town, we pass a tour group and recognize some of the guests from our hotel. Driving back, we stop in Neef to visit the Puppen Museum. Karen is disappointed to find out that it doesn't open until June, long after tourist season has begun. Back in Zell, Karen spends the afternoon window shopping and taking pictures of the town. I drive 20 minutes to the [Moseltherme](#) in Bad Wildstein. I find it after driving through the narrow streets of Trarbach. Moseltherme is small by comparison with Caracalla. It has a large indoor and outdoor swimming pool, and a sauna-steam room-solarium complex featuring three saunas in the 70 to 100 deg. C range. There are maybe a dozen people lounging or in the saunas. There's an area outside for sunbathing, and it's a warm day. One couple is constantly joking with each other, but otherwise it is pretty quiet.

After three hours I feel very relaxed. I drive back through the windy streets of Trarbach, and then back to Zell. We arrive promptly at 7:15 at the restaurant entrance, per our host's instructions. However, he is nowhere in sight. Soon, he arrives and hastily apologizes for being late, explaining that he is busy upstairs catering to a large group. He promises to return in a few minutes to give us a tour of his wine cellar. Soon, our host leads us across the back street and raises the security grate, and we enter a dark, cool room. Its walls are lined with wine storage racks filled with varieties of the trademark Schwartz Kat Reisling. He starts us off with an inexpensive (3.5 € per bottle) medium dry Reisling, followed by a dry vintage. As we progress through increasingly more expensive Reislings, our host saves the best medium and best dry varieties for last. At only 7 € each, our host says that's nothing to pay for a good bottle. He relates that he worked for a vineyard in Napa Valley for a year. He says he knew a "garage vintner" who produced a limited volume of excellent wine each year, and would throw out the whole batch if it didn't measure up to his standards. Our host grins and confides, "it was good, but f**king expensive!" Suddenly, the rowdy group from upstairs begins drifting in and fingering the bottles on the shelves. They are obviously feeling no pain, and our host gently reins them in. "You have to know how to handle them," he says jokingly. Karen asks why he returned to Germany, and he explains simply "I'm German!" He adds that while he likes the American people, he doesn't care for our government's international policies. In this, he is representative of the pacifist view ingrained in the post-war generation of Germans.

We finally settle down to a wonderful dinner.



View of the Mosel River from our balcony at the Hotel Zum Grunen Kranz

Sunday, April 27 – Cochem, Burg Eltz, Boppard

It's another glorious, sunny, warm day. We leave Zell right after finishing an early breakfast. As we check out, our hostess offers us a complimentary bottle of the regional Reisling. Our host failed to deliver the four bottles we offered to purchase from the wine cellar, or the sample of French liqueur at dinner last night, but his intentions were good. Our hostess provides directions to the Marienburg ruin across the river. We follow the signs up a windy, switchback road up a hillside to a turnoff leading to an old church. As we drive up the steep driveway, we come to a small parking lot overlooking the next valley. There is no sign of a ruin, but we hear children playing in the church courtyard and the view of the next valley is spectacular. A branch of the Mosel curves its way around a small town. It's Sunday, so the church bells are ringing practically non-stop. A train makes its way around the valley perimeter, and a campground hugs the river just outside of town.

Satisfied that our trip wasn't in vain, we head back down the steep driveway and pull off for one last shot of Zell. Thirty minutes later, we approach the outskirts of Cochem. As we arrive in the center of town along the river, swarms of tourists already crowd Cochem's cafes and shops and it's barely 10a.m.! We buy a walking map of Cochem and head up a nearby shopping street. Karen buys a backpack style leather purse and is quite pleased with it – and it's a bargain at 10 €. We consider stopping to eat, but decide to climb the steep hill to the Reichsburg Castle.

The tour is in German, but our guide offers occasional explanations in English. We meet two American girls who work for Price Waterhouse in Berlin. The gal from L.A. says she arrived in January and says that we came at a really good time; the weather has been crappy and depressing until now. She and her friend like to take day trips from Berlin. She says she is on assignment for six months, but already sounds homesick.



The Reichsburg Castle oversees the town of Cochem

Our guide shows us secret doorways leading to legendary castle passageways between the rooms. The privys hang out from the walls high above the ground, and were considered vulnerable to attack. We are shown only eight of the fifty rooms in the castle, but most others are empty. The Hunting Room has several mounted animal heads; the Armory has a large balcony offering gorgeous views of town, and up and down the river. The well in the courtyard is over 50 feet deep; our guide drops a small rock in so we can appreciate how long it takes to hit the water. A large mosaic of St. Christopher high on the keep has been preserved since medieval times, although the castle was rebuilt in the 1870's. We say goodbye to our compatriots as we stop for lunch at the café at the top of the hill. We are surprised to find that our meal of bratwurst with mixed salads and a glass of beer and wine comes to under 10 €. We ask for mustard, but our waiter acts confused. "Mustard??" he repeats. A German couple at the next table interprets for us, but we never get the mustard. Karen retrieves a yellow dispenser, but it contains mayo instead.



The Hunting Room in Reichsburg Castle. The antler motif is still de rigueur

We return to town, hit the restroom, and marvel once again at the crowd – which now includes a biker convention. As we prepare to leave, tourists begin to jockey for our parking space. We follow the signs to [Burg Eltz](#), which takes us through another small town instead of Moselkern. We end up at a dirt parking lot, about a ¾ of a kilometer hike from the castle. The trail leads downhill through meadows and tall trees. Suddenly we come to an overlook with a dramatic view of the castle below. We can also see the Elz Creek winding around the base of the castle. We continue downhill through the forest for 15 minutes, and then cross the creek and proceed up a long stairway and finally across the drawbridge. We enter the main court yard by crossing a rough "driveway". Unlike Sleeping Beauty's Castle at Disneyland, there are no neat cobblestones – just a long slab of rock scoured by deep, uneven grooves. If navigation is hazardous for humans, it's painful to imagine how it must have been for horses overburdened by knights in armor.



Burg Eltz

We learn that an English tour begins in 20 minutes, so head downstairs to check out the Treasury, a two-floor collection of gilded ornaments and jewels, and all manner of weaponry and armor. The tour begins in a room with lances and crossbows displayed on the wall. After I snap a few quick pics, we're reminded that the castle is privately owned and pictures are not allowed. The next room, called the Knights Room, features a large table and hearth. We proceed through several more rooms, one of which displays portraits of the current owners. Perhaps the most evocative room is the kitchen, with its huge hearth, sink, hanging baskets, and "refrigerator".

The hike back is steep and tiring. Back at the car, we have a shot of J.D. for medicinal purposes, and then push on toward Boppard. The "short cut" on the map is a steep, narrow, and extremely windy road, lending a new definition to the term "hairpin curve". At one point, a tour bus squeezes itself onto the shoulder of the road to let us pass. After 15 minutes, we come to Bucholtz, a small town with the first "track homes" we've seen in Germany. We follow the signs into Boppard, and then stumble onto the onramp for B9 South. On a hunch, I make a U-turn at a main street junction. Yep, it's Marienstrasse! As we follow it toward our hotel, the Rhine River suddenly comes into view.

We park in front of our hotel, the [Gunther Garni](#), and introduce ourselves to the owner, an American expatriate named Jim Sunthimer. Our room is spacious, clean, and functional, with a large bath tub and a panoramic view of the Rhine. The auto ferry dock is a mere 50 feet from our hotel. Passenger ships are tied up for the night. We wash the road grime off in the bathtub and then dress for dinner. We ask Jim's wife for a recommendation, and she directs us to Severnstube Tavern around the corner, a place that is popular with the locals. The food is inexpensive and good. I order pork medallions, while Karen orders what amounts to ham. Both meals included the familiar spring salad.



View of the Rhine River from the balcony of Hotel Günther Garni, Boppard