

Germany Vacation Diary 2008 – Part 3

Monday, April 28 – Boppard, Marksburg, Bacharach

I'm up early. The trains are already running and the sound of their passing on the opposite bank reverberates across the river valley. In the hotel restaurant downstairs, I order coffee and begin writing and planning the day. Suddenly there is a loud crash and a coffee cup goes flying across the carpet. As the waitress apologizes for the commotion, a middle-aged woman rushes to her aid, laughs, and says "Heil Hitler!" This breaks the tension and now everyone laughs. I reflect that she used a uniquely German expression that puts a gaffe in perspective by comparing it to the biggest blunder in German history, thereby diminishing its significance in great measure and relieving the perpetrator of embarrassment.



Karen with Jim Sunthimer, American ex-pat and proprietor of the Hotel Gunther Garni in Boppard.

After breakfast, Jim escorts me to the Internet terminal located in the reading room in a separate building behind the hotel. I catch up on email, and then return to the hotel for breakfast. Afterwards, Karen and I chat with Jim for awhile. Originally from Ohio, he's been in Germany for more than 30 years. He returns to Florida every year to visit his aged mother. His new son-in-law is looking for work in the IT field, so I suggested he have him contact me. As business is kind of slow, he nearly begs us to cancel our reservation in Bacharach and stay on. Of course, we demurred but thanked him for a wonderful stay.

After a stop at the TI in the main square, we head for the Bahnhof to buy tickets on the Hunsruck Mountain Railway. With the help of a German woman, we figure out how to buy the correct tickets for our short journey just as the train pulls in. Within a few minutes of leaving the station heading southwest, we begin our ascent into the nearby mountains. The train takes us through tunnels and over high bridges through a region known for its great hiking trails. The dense trees are various shades of green. Soon we are passing through wooded areas overlooking suburban developments. Within 30 minutes we arrive at our destination, Emmelshausen. Quite a few students get off the train. We recognize the town as one we passed through on our short journey from Brodenbach to Boppard yesterday. We get off the train, then realize it is going back to Boppard and hop on again. As we pull into the station, we notice the sky starting to cloud over which puts a damper on our plans to ride the Sesselbahn (chairlift) to the top of a nearby mountain.



View of Boppard on the Rhine River, from the Hunsruck Mountain Railway

As we head back in the direction of the TI, rain begins to fall. Karen decides this is a good time to visit the Christmas store as I revisit the TI for more information. Thirty minutes later, Karen has purchased small gifts for Donna. We find the Roman ruins a block away, deserted. Apparently construction of a parking garage was halted when these ruins were unearthed a few years ago. The wall and an entry gate to the old Roman compound are very well preserved. We decide to get out of the rain and grab a quick bite at the Severnstube. A large group of English students passes us en route to the restaurant. We order goulash soup, but they are out of it so we settle for a beef broth, bread, and beer and wine.

Refreshed, we jump in the car and drive a few feet to the auto ferry which whisks us across the Rhine. As we head north toward Braubach, we are soon rewarded with a view of Marksburg Castle. A true original, Marksburg is the only Rhine castle that was never destroyed by invading armies. We pass a large tower as we proceed through tiny Braubach to the short but steep road to the castle on

the outskirts of town. We park in the large lot, and on this rainy Monday there are plenty of spaces. We walk the last 200 yards up a steep driveway to the castle entrance. We pass underneath an arch which leads through a short tunnel into the main courtyard. The surface is not paved with cobblestones, but rough and uneven as if scrapped by a serrated knife. We buy our tickets in the tourist shop, where a large group has just finished a tour. Only one other couple is waiting and lucky for us, they speak English. Since this is the common language, our guide informs us that our tour will be conducted in English instead of German. Yea!

We pass through an outer door into a narrow channel that can easily be defended from the ramparts above. We continue through another door and into a dark covered area. The shields lining the wall bear the coats of arms of each entity that possessed the castle over the centuries. Our guide gives a chronology of events.

We ascend to the main courtyard under the keep. There is a well in the center, and a huge iron door built into the wall of the keep. Just beyond is a fortified gun emplacement. Cannons of different sizes have a commanding view of the Rhine below. The large caliber models developed by the 16th century were capable of hitting targets across the river, which may help to explain why Marksburg was never conquered.

We pass through a garden that lies at the base of the keep opposite the high wall facing the Rhine. Only medieval plants are grown here, including the poisonous Hemlock plant that killed Socrates in 399 BC.



Narrow entrance to Marksburg Castle was easily defended.

Our guide points out the privy that overhangs the garden, providing a ready source of fertilizer. The smoke stacks atop the next hill once polluted the city, but were put out of commission long ago. We re-enter the castle and come to a large banquet room, dominated by a large table and chairs in the center. Behind the table on the outer wall is a door, leading through a short passage to the privy. Our guide explains that during banquets it was common to leave the door open for guests to relieve themselves. As they lacked modesty, no one ever thought to the door behind them! The privy was regarded as a vulnerable point of entry during an attack and as such was heavily guarded.

We come to a room lined with warrior figures modeling uniforms worn throughout the ages. Lances, swords, and crossbows are mounted on the wall. Spears contained notched hooks and were used to pull riders off their horses. We arrive at the kitchen, where our guide demonstrates how the kettle was placed over the fire and raised and lowered via a notched bar. She points out one of the earliest refrigerators, explaining that people would place food items in the lower compartments where they would be chilled by the cold air from above. We pass through more rooms and end our

tour at the stable. Our guide explains that horses in medieval times were fitted with horseshoes much larger than those used today to withstand the stress of walking on the hard castle surfaces.

Throughout the tour, our guide has shown a sincere interest in the subject matter, and has gone above and beyond the usual requirements by explaining the details of daily life and demonstrating how things worked. We thank her and tell her it's the best tour we've enjoyed the whole trip.



Museum figures show how the fighting man's armor evolved over the centuries.

As we leave, Karen discovers a sign leading to an alternate pathway down. We descend a steep stairway to the parking lot. We cross back into Boppard, then retrace our route back to B9. Near the junction, we are almost blindsided by some kid driving fast around a corner. Once on B9, we time ourselves between Boppard and Bacharach. The wide two-lane road winds past St. Goar and the Loreley. As we approach the Loreley, we see the famous electronic signals that guide watercraft safely around the blind bend in the river. As we pull off the road and through the Marksburg arch into Bacharach, we've reached our destination in a little over 20 minutes.

We park in the small lot beneath the Rhein Hotel. Although the railroad track passes directly in front of the patio, we never hear the passing trains during our stay. We are greeted by one of the Stuber family, who escorts us quickly to our comfy room in the back. We shower and dress for dinner, and are served promptly at 6:00. We have chosen the fixed price meal, which includes grilled salmon as the main course. The whole meal is delicious.

After dinner, we take a brief walking tour of the town, which is nearly deserted. The castle on the hill is now a youth hostel. Karen finds a store with a huge doll display across from the old post office. Behind the post office are the ruins of an old cathedral, illuminated by pink spotlights. With no evidence of nightlife, we decide to retire to the hotel.

Tuesday, April 29 –Bacharach, Rudesheim, St. Goar

While planning the day at breakfast, we consider our options based on the weather. It's cool and overcast, which makes a boat ride less appealing than touring a neighboring town by car. We opt for a morning trip to Rudesheim, with an afternoon visit to St. Goar.

We cross the Rhine once again by ferry at Kaub between Bacharach and St. Goar, where an ancient toll castle sits prominently on a small island in the center of the river. We purchase a round-trip fare in the belief that we might get a discount. We don't – it's the same price as the ferry in Boppard, 4.30 € each way. Driving southeast, we pass several castles on the opposite bank which continue their ceaseless vigilance. Most appear to be intact. Juxtaposed next to one prominent castle is an open mining pit, which seems oddly out of place on the hillside. We wonder how the German government could allow the defacement of land whose primary value lies in attracting tourists.

Within 20 minutes we come to [Rudesheim](#). We can see a chairlift moving people along a hillside behind the town. Presumably they are being transported to the vineyard at the top of the hill. We pass along the busy main thoroughfare, make a U-turn and pull into the parking lot next to the TI. A perky, fashionably dressed blonde assists us with maps and information. In search of the [Drosselgasse](#), the lively, world-famous party street, we navigate the back streets and arrive at the main market square. We put a Euro in the parking meter and head off. We come to a street with shops and taverns, including a [Kathe Wohlfort Christmas Store](#). I try to distract Karen but I'm too late; she has already seen the store whose brightly lit trees draw her like a moth to a flame. As I attempt to video Karen walking into the store, an employee wags her matronly finger at me, saying words to the effect that it is *verboten* to video the store's contents.



Rudesheim is famous for its special coffee and The Drosselgasse

Karen assures me she won't be long, so I wander off and find the Drosselgasse a block away. Three college-age American males swagger down the street in search of the first open bar and antifreeze; it is cold but they are wearing T-shirts. After a few minutes, Karen emerges from the

store and together we walk down Drosselgasse. We pass several taverns, restaurants and gift stores. Recorded oom-pah music plays nearby as the shops prepare for their official 11am opening. Meanwhile, we can't resist an ad for coffee and strudel as we pass a café. Delectable pastries line the shelves, and our waiter talks us into trying the special and justly famous Rudesheim coffee. He brings the coffee, brandy, and whipped cream. First he pours a small amount of brandy into the coffee cup and lights it. Next, he stirs in two sugar cube and stirs them as he blowtorches them until they melt. Finally, he smothers the flame with coffee, and adds the remaining brandy and tops it off with whipped cream and chocolate flakes. Then he presents the apple strudel and we are in pastry heaven!

After nearly an hour we have to beat feet back to the car to avoid a parking ticket. We retrace our route to Kaub and board the ferry. When we purchased a round trip fare, the agent had given us two tickets. I present one ticket and the agent starts making noises until I figure out he wants to see the second ticket. This pacifies him, and we are on our way. Back on the west side of the Rhine, we roll off the ferry then up to the main road and head north toward St. Goar.

St. Goar is a classic Rhine town, complete with a walking street and a ruined castle. We park at the south end of the walking street and go in search of the TI. Looking toward the end of the street, Burg Rheinfels dominates the skyline from its position on a hill overlooking the town. Across from the Rathaus is a tourist shop featuring the world's largest hanging cuckoo clock mounted above the doorway. To one side is a large teddy bear with a sign around its neck proclaiming that it was made by the company that originated the teddy bear. We follow the signs for the Puppen and Teddy Museum and find the entrance on a back street. There are at least three floors of dolls and teddy bears to explore, and Karen is in Puppen Heaven!



Rheinfels Castle, a well-preserved ruin and modern hotel, stands watch of St. Goar

Before I head off to the spa in Bad Salzig, Karen and I agree to meet at the TI in 2.5 hours. I arrive in Bad Salzig, just south of Boppard, in about 13 minutes. I follow the signs to Kurhaus and soon locate the spa in a wooded area above the town. As I enter the lobby, I see signs for therapy and wellness and begin to feel like I've entered a hospital. The comportment of the two women dressed in white behind the counter does nothing to dispel this illusion. Neither seems to speak English well, as I try to find out if I'm in the right place to visit the Sauna. Finally, another woman appears who understands my question, and today happens to be for women only. So, I return to St. Goar and find a café to while away the time while waiting for Karen. As I'm reading about the Burg Rheinfels tour in Rick Steve's guidebook, I hear some Americans reading out loud from the same passage – small world! I finish my beer and head toward the tourist store on the corner, where I spot Karen's telltale Charger cap and ponytail. The proprietor, a woman in her sixties, speaks perfect English and kindly offers us a taste of a special apricot liqueur. It tastes delicious, but it is prohibitively expensive, over 28 € for about 250 ml. We thank her and leave.

We take the short, windy road up to Burg Rheinfels and park. After a short walk across an old bridge over what used to be the moat, we arrive at the entrance. The [Burg Rheinfels Hotel](#) off to the right features a tourist shop and premium lodging. Following the Rick Steves walking tour, we set out to explore this magnificent ruined castle. Our first stop is the museum, where we see scale models of the castle as it appeared in its heyday. The ruins today comprise only a fraction of the original complex, which extended over several acres. We also see a Celtic gravestone that predates the birth of Christ. The carvings are still distinguishable on the 7-foot obelisk.



The ruins of Burg Rheinfels are all that remain of what was once a much larger, dominant fortress

We leave the museum and enter a courtyard which became the inner sanctuary for thousands of residents when the castle was attacked. A path leading uphill takes us to a well and a pile of catapult balls stacked neatly nearby. Our next objective is the tower in the southeast corner. A

German flag is waving from the top in the warm afternoon breeze. A stairway leads us up to the rampart, and then we ascend the tower via a steep ladder. We are rewarded with a commanding view of the Rhine River looking north and south, and St. Goar far below.

We walk the perimeter wall until we come to the northeast corner, where we find narrow slits cut into the wall for defenders. There is enough room for an archer with a crossbow to lie down and take aim at the enemy approaching from the green fields far below. We continue along the north wall and come to a blind corner. As we make the turn, we are confronted with a slit in the wall about 20 feet away. Thoop! We're dead, shot by an archer. There are long channels cut into the wall into which hot, black pitch was poured as another defensive measure.

We proceed to an open field below the old drawbridge – the moat. Just beyond we make a disturbing discovery: a small room cut into the wall that used to be the dungeon. Prisoners were lowered by rope from a hole in the ceiling into a foul, dark hole. We can see square holes cut into the wall that used to hold the beams which was all that separated prisoners from the putrid waste that accumulated in the pit. Yuck!



View of St. Goar and Rhine River traffic. Castles are as abundant here as 7-11 stores in San Diego

We pass through a dark, narrow tunnel which emerges into a cavernous room with a high arched ceiling. Notches on the wall indicate where a drawbridge was once attached, while the waterline of a moat is also visible. Although converted into a vast storage pantry, the lower section of this room was once underwater. There is a small room at the center of the far wall. In it are stored heating lamps and other materials that suggest this room is now used for parties. It would be just the place to hold VIKING PARTY XXX!

We climb up the steps and out into the sunlight, glad to be free of the dark, clammy room. We make a brief stop at the tourist shop, and venture out onto the patio with its commanding view of the Rhine. We think about ordering soup and drinks, but then remember that our parking “meter” is about to expire. We decide to leave, and return down the hill to St. Goar where we pick up some mineral water and wine from the local drug store. We then make the short drive back to Bacharach in time for our 6:00 pm dinner of beef stroganoff.

We decide to explore the town after dinner, and the town is just as lively (not!) as the night before. Rick Steves' book mentions a wine tasting room nearby, Bastian's Weinhaus. It lies just beyond the town's oldest building, the red and white half-timbered Altes Haus dating to 1368. Just as we find it, an American couple named [Casey and Beth](#) show up. They are also staying at the Rhein Hotel, and invite us to join them. Soon, we are joined by another couple, [Adam and Rachael](#). It turns out that both couples are from northern California, and Casey and Adam both work in the wine industry. By the way they talk about the industry, they seem very happy with their career choices. Before long we are joined by a Canadian couple, [Josh and Renata](#). They are in the early stages of a trip that will take them through Europe and Russia and ultimately to Beijing for the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. They are writing a [Blog](#) on a travel journal Web site ([Travelpod.com](#)) that chronicles their journey.

Our hostess brings each couple a tray of 12 glasses of local wines. All Rieslings, they range from sweet to dry. After sampling each vintage, we nibble on bread to clear our palates. Nearly 3 hours later, we unanimously select #4 the Bastian Bacharacher Insel Wein Reisling Halbtrocken as our favorite (Halbtrocken means half dry). Josh orders 3 bottles of it for all to consume. When we split up the bill, each couple's share comes to only 20 €.



The Altes Haus (oldest house) in Bacharach, originally built in 1368 and now a happy Weinstube

Wednesday, April 30 – Bacharach, Stuttgart

The next morning we decide to head straight for Stuttgart. It doesn't take us long to pack, since we never really un-packed. Karen takes photos of the unusual paintings in the room (painted by ???) and wonders if they are originals. A doll figure sits on a stool at the end of the hallway, propped against the wall. On the way out, I find Casey and Beth having breakfast in the dining room and we chat about Cochem and Marksburg Castle.

As we drive south, we pass through Bingen, the last town on the Rhine en route to the Autobahn. The GPS directs us flawlessly and soon we are heading toward Karlsruhe on the A5. Karen sleeps most of the way, and at one point we take the wrong off ramp; the GPS guides us to the next route (A6), but fails to indicate the direction (i.e., toward Heilbron or Karlsruhe?). After consulting the map, we backtrack and head toward Karlsruhe. Thirty minutes later, we head southeast toward Stuttgart. I remember taking this route on the trip in October 2006 and getting stuck in traffic for an hour due to construction work. Little has changed since then; a few miles outside Stuttgart, traffic coming from the other direction is backed up for miles due to – you guessed it – construction work. Luckily, there is no construction on our side of the autobahn and we continue on at normal speed. Note to self: before the next trip, find a Web site or get a GPS that describes real-time traffic conditions on German highways.



Karen poses with a statue in the Kurpark adjacent to our hotel, the Mercure Bad Cannstatt

As we arrive in the suburbs of Stuttgart, I recognize a sign for Vaihingen (sp?), which I know is a district in the southern part of town. Once again, the GPS directs us flawlessly through traffic until we find ourselves looking at Kurpark, the large park near the [Mercure Bad Cannstatt](#) hotel on Teinacher Strasse where we will stay in Stuttgart. The hotel is easy to recognize from photos on its Web site. I park across the street and then approach the reservation desk, where I meet Sandra

Langenbach with whom I corresponded. Thankfully, she says our room is ready for check-in even though it's barely one o'clock.

We park in the underground garage and haul our luggage to the 3rd floor, where we have a Junior Suite. The room is large, separated into a living room and a bedroom. We have two TVs and a minibar refrigerator. We have to turn the car in to the rental agency at the train station, so we go downstairs to ask directions. We squeeze the car through the small garage exit, noticing all of the scratches on the concrete wall from too many near misses. As we head out, the GPS is of no use since we are unable to program it with Hauptbahnhof as the destination.

We fill up the tank at an Aral station, and then blunder through a few turns in the busy downtown area before getting our bearings. Using the map, Karen guides us to the Hauptbahnhof. Through some miracle, I find a parking spot in front of the station. Once inside, I follow the iconic signs for car rental return and find Eurocar. At the desk I ask directions to Avis, and the agent points to a small corner of the station nearby where I find the office tucked away out of sight. After a short wait, the Avis agent appears and issues complex instructions for car return: drive around to the west side of the station and then look for a bank building. Follow the signs to the parking garage; there are no signs for car rental return. Drive down to the 2nd level, and then locate the area where all rental cars are returned. Park anywhere, and then bring the keys and documentation packet back to the desk in the station. He says, "Good luck, agent Hunt" and then self-destructs in a flash of smoke and flames. I look at him like he's nuts, and then repeat the instructions to make sure I understand them.



Stuttgart's public transportation system is world-class

Again by some minor miracle, we locate the parking garage and nearly enter the wrong level, but then notice the small signs pointing to Avis, Hertz, and others. We eventually find the parking area,

and say goodbye to our faithful chariot. As we proceed through the exit, we find ourselves once again in the train station. When I reach the Avis desk, I provide the keys, documentation, and space number, then smile and say “Mission accomplished!!”

We head downstairs to the vast underground mall of shops and restaurants that lies between the station and the walking street across the broad boulevard. We locate the TI and find it to be the largest and well-provisioned of any we have visited. The agent provides maps and advice about places to visit, including the Staat Museum and SchwabenQuellen. We purchase a 3-TageTicket Stuttgart (3-day transportation pass) for 9.90 € each after showing proof of our hotel stay.

It is starting to cloud over and sprinkle. We head back underground and find a convenience store, where we pick up a few essentials: beer, wine, cheese, salami, crackers, and paprika chips. We follow the metro signs for direction Hedelfingen (U9) and soon find our train. The U-Bahn train rises out of the underground and onto the city streets. After a few stops, we realize we’ve gone too far and need to backtrack. We munch paprika chips while waiting for the next train, which arrives within 10 minutes. We get off at Stockach and catch the U2 train toward Neugereut. We pass by the huge Neckar Park and then over the Neckar River. A few stops later, we exit at Kursaal and are disoriented for a moment. The Mineralbad Canstatt is directly across from the platform, with the Kurpark behind us. Then Karen recognizes our hotel building. The entrance is a mere 100 feet from our U-Bahn stop!



The soothing saunascape of Mineralbad Canstatt is only steps from the tram and our hotel

We pause in our room to eat lunch and take a well-deserved rest. Afterwards, I decide to sample Mineralbad Canstatt, all of a 2 minute walk from the hotel. I check in and head upstairs to the changing room. There are several saunas of various temperatures, a steam room, a solarium, and

a separate facility outside that houses a large room-sized sauna. It is not very crowded on a Wednesday night, so I enjoy 3 hours of blissful relaxation.

I return about 7pm, and Karen and I decide we're in the mood for a Doner Kebab. We ask the receptionist (Claudia) where we might be able to find a Turkish fast food restaurant. Her English is good, like all hotel staff, and she is able to help us locate a place near Wilhelmstrasse, a major U-Bahn stop nearby. We find a restaurant on the corner that serves very tasty lamb kebabs along with salad and rice.



Spring has sprung in the Kurpark!