

German castles, cruises, boars in the vineyards

By Claudia Capos
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

COICHEM, Germany — The vision of ravenous wild boars feasting on succulent grapes in the family's vineyard along the Moselle River gives Stefania Ring's husband, Ulrich, some sleepless nights. The proprietress of Weinstube Zum Kapuziner, a popular wine tavern in Cochem, points toward the opposite bank of the river where Ulrich, a vintner, tends by hand the 40-year-old vines clinging to six acres of terraced ground in the Cond District.

"Early in the morning, my husband looks out the window and sees the wild boars eating our grapes," she says. "We are not allowed to shoot them, so they grow fat in our vineyard." Fortunately, the Rings still have plenty of grapes at harvest to produce a variety of Riesling specialty wines, which are offered for tastings in their upstairs tavern and sold by the bottle in their street-level wine shop on Moselpromenade.

Stefania brings a flight of white wines and a tray of finger food to the small table on the outdoor balcony where Doug and I are admiring the Moselle and watching white tour boats packed with boisterous passengers motor past. We sample four wines — a dry pinot blanc, a slightly sweeter blanc de noirs, a mineral-heavy riesling, and a honey-like riesling spatlese — while nibbling on salami, pretzels wrapped in ham, and green grapes. "The steep slate slopes make this wine-growing area special," Stefania says. "The old stone contains minerals you can taste in the wine, and that improve its aging. We are in a northern area, where the sun is low and not very intense. The steepness of the slopes increases the sun's intensity and warmth, which is also good for growing grapes."

The Moselle Valley's abundance of water and wine established Cochem as a thriving viticulture and wine trade center centuries ago, and continues to attract an estimated 2½ million visitors annually. But history has not always been kind to the town. The storied medieval settlement on the riverbank and its imperial castle, crowning the hilltop, were ravaged in 1688 by

French troops under the monarchy of Louis XIV, the Sun King, during the War of the Reunions. Decades of painstaking work were needed to rebuild Cochem according to a medieval ground plan and re-create its Old World craftsmanship and architecture.

Today, in the Altstadt, or old town, handsome half-timbered houses harbor wine cellars, gift shops, and restaurants along narrow, stone-paved alleyways. Elegant pastel-painted Baroque public buildings encircle airy squares, graced by statuesque fountains and bustling outdoor cafes. The lofty Cochem Reichsburg (roughly, castle of the empire) rises above the town like a storybook edifice cloaked in morning mist. Tucked into a long river bend, Cochem is now a popular jumping-off place for morning, afternoon, and full-day cruises along the Moselle, a serpentine waterway that meanders through Germany's oldest wine-growing area, linking the ancient Roman cities of Trier and Koblenz.

After our wine-tasting, we stroll to the boat pier and board the Stadt Zell for an afternoon cruise. We find seats on the sun-dappled upper deck and order two Bitburger Pils beers, schnitzchen and Holander kase. The tour boat glides beneath the scalloped Moselle bridge, headed toward Koblenz, and wends its way past rainbow-colored townhouses and steeple-topped stone churches. We scan the vineyards stitched into the slopes hoping to see a wily wild boar or two. We see farmers pruning vines high on terraces and cyclists pedaling along a bike path by the river, but not a single boar.

The Stadt Zell's tour guide regales us with historical tidbits about towns along the route where the boat lets passengers on and off. Our first stop, Klotten, is famed for its wine-making and the jagged ruins of Coraidelstein castle, built in 960. Our next stop, Pommern, rests upon the site of a Stone Age settlement and contains the ruins of a Roman temple and villas. The twin towns of Treis-Karden, connected by a bridge over the river, were shaped by shifting political and religious tides over the centuries. Treis, a bustling market town during the Middle Ages, encircles a Late Gothic church while Karden is known for the



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

A gargoyle on the castle in Cochem, Germany, has a vantage point over the Moselle Valley, its steep vineyards, and the riverside town.

three-towered church of St. Castor, which preserves part of a Romanesque cloister.

Sharon Mosley of Bainbridge, Ga., who is sailing with her daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter, tells us she canceled an earlier Rhine River cruise after heavy rainfall and flooding prevented tour boats from navigating the waterway. Her second choice was the Moselle. "I like the slower pace of this boat, because we're able to see the scenery along the river," she says. "Everything is so picturesque."

As the Stadt Zell returns to Cochem, the Reichsburg beckons to us from atop its vineyard-clad pinnacle. We disembark and enter the Altstadt through a low archway, one of seven remaining stone gateways from the town's 14th-century fortifications. Our somewhat circuitous path up to the castle takes us past Cochem's Town Hall on Marketplace Square and the half-timbered Schiefes House (crooked house) on Herrenstrasse that seems poised to tip over on unwary passers-by. Mud-spattered Dutch cyclists hoist

their beer steins for a picture in front of the Old Dutch Cochem, a popular bar on Oberbachstrasse.

We reach Schlossstrasse and begin climbing up the steeply angled street leading to the Reichsburg. Midway, we stop to catch our breath at the Walter J. Oster wine cellar. Walter's son, Christian, tells us the low-vaulted-ceiling cellar dates 600 years and has been owned by his winemaking family since 1780. After fortifying ourselves with a taste of crisp riesling and fruity Bacchus wine, we continue our upward climb to the castle entrance.

Nearly 180 years after the castle was burned down by the French, the ruins were purchased for 300 gold marks by Berlin merchant Louis Ravene. He restored it in a romantic neo-Gothic style, accented by turrets, archways, and gargoyles, for his family's summer home. During a 40-minute guided tour, we marvel at the rich oak carvings in the grand dining hall, the savage-looking boar's head in the hunters' room, and the quirky witches' tower, which survived the destruction of 1688. From the schlossbergkeller terrace, the checkerboard town and deeply shadowed Moselle appear like a splendid tapestry bathed in golden afternoon sunlight.

Church bells clang as we scurry back down Schlossstrasse to the Moselpromenade, stopping to buy a replica antique Masonic sword at the BelMondo gift shop. A local oom-pah band pumps out familiar German

IF YOU GO . . .

Where to stay

Hotel Weinhof
Moselpromenade 27
011-49-2671-7462
www.hotel-weinhof.de
Doubles from \$126.
Hotel am Markt
Markt 14
011-49-2671-9165627
www.hotel-am-markt-cochem.de
Doubles from \$147.

Where to eat

Cochem Castle Restaurant
Schlossstrasse 36
011-49-2671-255
www.reichsburg-cochem.de
Castle tour and medieval-style feast with music, entertainment, and traditional knighting ceremony. Advance bookings required. \$60 per person.
Weinstube Zum Kapuziner
Moselpromenade
Pater-Martin-Strasse 10
011-49-2671-1418
www.moselweingut-ring.de
Wine tastings from \$6.

What to do

Cochem chairlift, or Sesselbahn
011-49-2671-989-063
www.cochemer-sesselbahn.de
Take the lift from the station at Endertstrasse 44 up to the Pinner Kreuz for a panoramic view of the Reichsburg and the Moselle River. Round-trip \$8.50
Kolb Passenger Ship Services Cochem agent
011-49-2671-7378
www.moselrundfahrten.de/en/index.php
Enjoy a leisurely boat ride on the Moselle River. One- and two-hour, half-day and full-day round-trip excursions. Timetables and tickets available at waterfront kiosks.

Where to shop

BelMondo
Moselpromenade 16a
011-49-2671-7316
www.belmondo-cochem.de
Offers a wide range of high-quality gifts and souvenirs.

tunes on Carl-Fritz Nicolay Platz, and tantalizing aromas fill the early evening air. Wild boar meat is listed on the menu boards at several restaurants, giving some assurance that vintner Ulrich Ring will sleep a little sounder tonight.

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