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Travel | Reise: Christmas cruising along the Rhine

Textile travellers enjoy cruise

A chance to cruise along the Rhine River from Cologne to Zurich exploring Christmas markets along the way and enjoying the excitement, colour and traditions of a European Christmas were just too enticing for a large group of New Zealand textile enthusiasts and their partners in the run-up to Christmas last year.

And wow do they know how to celebrate Christmas! If you are a sucker for Christmas decorations, greenery and lights then this a great way to experience it from the luxury of a canal boat stopping off every day at a new venue to explore cities and towns, historic

buildings, the hustle and bustle of the Christmas markets as well as sampling traditional Christmas treats washed down with ever-available mugs of hot glühwein – merely to keep the winter chill away of course!

On board the canal boat (Tauck's MS Inspire) the cosmopolitan crew also did their best to keep our Christmas spirits high with lots of activities including decorating gingerbread houses (a team including two of our embroiderers won of course – nothing to do with rigged voting!), sampling fantastic local wines and food, decorating a giant Christmas tree and a present swap. We were also shown how to cook some of the many varieties of special Christmas cookies which we enjoyed sampling on board and in the markets. The meals on board were magnificent with an ever-changing variety presented, so very easy to put on weight. As one of our tour guides suggested: "You embark as passengers and we off-load you as cargo!"

Our first experience of the



Christmas cruise | Cruising along the picturesque Rhine.



Christmas cruise | The Köln market with its giant Christmas tree in the shadow of the cathedral.

markets was in the giant one right next door to Köln's Gothic Cathedral. It was quite an experience for us Kiwis who are not used to being in such crowds – there was nowhere to move and it was hard to see anything. A trip back there the following morning was much more enjoyable with less people about. We tried lots of foods including fantastic giant bacon, onion and cheese decorated pretzels and potato fritters with apple sauce.

Köln Cathedral is well-worth visiting for the magnificent soaring architecture and gloriously coloured stained glass windows, along with the Shrine of the Magi which is a fabulous piece of medieval goldwork weighing about 300 kilograms. It supposedly houses the relics of the Three Wise Men along with several martyrs.

As we travelled we were introduced to

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Travel | Reise: Christmas cruising along the Rhine



Christmas cruise | The embroidery class miniature scene in the Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel.



Christmas cruise | Extraordinary miniature dolls house, Spielzeug Welten Museum Basel (Toy Worlds Museum).

regional specialties such as Rüdeshimer coffee – with brandy and whipped cream, specialty German sausages served with sauerkraut and noodles, lebkuchen, pfeffernüsse.

On our way to Rüdeshim we spent the morning cruising the picturesque Rhine River, passing small villages, old castles, vineyards clinging to the steep cliffs, all very 'fairy tale' and beautiful. Many of the castles and towns were ablaze with Christmas lights and with the short and grey winter days of December, the lights and Christmas greenery decorating doorways and streets created a magical setting.

Heidelberg is a fantastic old city – Germany's first university was established there in 1386 – and it is dominated by the vast Schloss which towers over the town. Originally a fortified Gothic castle, it is mostly in ruins, but has been home to many rulers over the years who have all added and remodeled the buildings. It is also the home of the Heidelberg Kiss, a delicious dark chocolate treat created as a token of affection for the university students to give to their sweethearts. If it was accepted, then the young woman welcomed the young man's attentions.

Baden-Baden with its spa baths and casino

has been a popular destination for centuries – the Romans were very keen on the thermal waters and bathers have been visiting there for the health-giving properties of the water to cure skin complaints and rheumatism. The casino building is beautiful, decorated in the style of French palaces and is well worth a visit. We were treated to lunch and Christmas carols sung by the children of the Convent School of the Holy Grave to keep us all in the Christmas mood which was followed by shopping in the Christmas markets.

We also made a foray into France, spending a day in picturesque Strasbourg with its heritage-listed old town and shop windows




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Travel | Reise: Christmas cruising along the Rhine



Christmas cruise | The singing Christmas tree in Zurich.

filled to bursting with Christmas cookies, decorations and delights. There are several markets here, many of them themed.

Our trip ended with several days in Switzerland, trips to Lucerne and Mt Pilatus, Basel, Zurich and St Gallen kept us all entertained.

One of the delights of Basel was the Dollhouse (or Spielzeug Welten) Museum which is the largest museum of its kind in Europe. Located over several floors it was crammed with dolls, bears, toys and other childhood memorabilia all arranged in charming vignettes. A particular feature of the museum was the extraordinary collection

of miniatures and dollhouses with the most amazing attention to detail. When we visited it was also hosting an amazing handbag exhibition which featured the 'Kitchen Sink Handbag' - based on the statement that women carry around everything but the kitchen sink - this one had a sink and faucet! The handbags spanned about 150 years, demonstrating the way they had changed over the years. The Basel Christmas market was set amongst trees all decorated with starry lights and the day there ended with carols on the steps of the cathedral.

Zurich was our final destination and a chance to do last minute shopping for

Christmas at the many and varied markets. One of the best was in the gigantic Zurich Railway Station decorated for the occasion with a breath-taking Swarovski crystal Christmas tree.

One of the special features was the Singing Christmas Tree - an amazing structure which would probably have given OSH a heart attack here in New Zealand. The choir climbed up ladders inside to reach their spots on the tiers of the tree beautifully decorated with a myriad of lights before singing traditional carols. What a fantastic way to end a magical trip along the Rhine.

Felicity Willis



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