

Good Times Keep Rolling In West German Valley

By Patricia Arrigoni

MOSEL VALLEY, West Germany – When I arrived in the Mosel Valley in the early spring, only a few patches of snow lay upon the fields. The days dawned foggy, then grew sunny as the hours passed. Women in bright red blouses and printed scarves began their yearly task of tying the grape trees on the steep hills above the rushing rivers.

The Mosel Valley (spelled “Moselle” in German) is the second largest grape-growing region in West Germany. Virtually undiscovered by tourists, it still retains a quaint atmosphere that has been lost in the more popular Rhine wine-growing region.

Beginning at Koblenz where the Mosel and Rhine Rivers meet, the water rushes south in a series of tortuous curves to the ancient Roman city of Trier, where viniculture (the science of making wine) began 2,000 years ago. The total distance is 545 kilometers or about 338 miles. In between are dozens of castles and fortresses overlooking innumerable tiny villages and the towns of Cochem, Traben-Trarbach, and Berncastel.

To explore the Mosel is to discover medieval timber-frame houses, ancient wineries in caves, bustling marketplaces, cobblestone streets, gabled houses, residential palaces, unique carvings, and stone churches.

At Berncastel is the 500-year-old St. Nicholas Hospital (Cusanus Covent), situated on the bank of the Mosel and now a wine museum. To stroll through the exhibits is a trip back to the Middle Ages. There are ancient vats and wooden wine presses, scales and spinning wheels, beer steins, gold and silver decorated “Trinkhorns” made from giant steer horns, and samples of wine glasses dating from 1700 A.D.

Berncastel also retains a medieval marketplace, a 1608 Renaissance town hall, and a 14th century parish church called St. Michael.

Koblenz was a medieval city built from the nucleus of an old Roman town which is still perceptible in the old town center. Visitors today may tour St. Castor, a Gothic church built between 836 A.D. and the 12th century;

a 14th-century medieval bridge across the Mosel River; a Jesuit church and college; and an 18th century palace.

Trier, the most ancient town in Germany, was established as a Roman colony in 15 B.C. by the Emperor Augustus. Remaining today are well-restored Roman ruins including the Porta Nigra (2nd century), an impressive three and four-story “black gate,” the Imperial Thermal Springs from the 4th century; a 4th century basilica possibly built by the Emperor Constantine as a state hall; an amphitheater; and a Roman bridge from the 2nd century.

Perhaps the best time to visit the Mosel Valley is when the wine festivals are in full swing, which is from April through November, with the most important ones in late summer and early fall.

These festivals give the different wineries a chance to pass out free samples. A U.S. serviceman stationed in West Germany described the festivals:

“There were pitchers upon pitchers of wine poured in the celebration. Some people camped, and other brought motor homes. There were festival rides, people in costumes, and dancing until 4:00 a.m. Firework displays were shot out over the Mosel lasting 45 minutes. A “waterfall” of sparks lit up the castle, the hills, and the river below.

A popular summer activity in the Mosel region is Germany’s equivalent to America’s marathon foot races. The Burgermeister (local mayor) of Barenbach, about 25 minutes from the Mosel at Traben-Trarbach, told me that 6,000 people participated in a “volkmarch” the year before. It began with food and drink, and ended the same way. Entrants paid a fee to walk six to 12 miles. CB radios were used to handle emergencies, and medals were given out to the winner.

For information on hotels and pensions, restaurants, boat tours and wine festivals, write the Tourist Information Center, Gestade 5550, Bernkastel, West Germany.