



REFLECTIONS

RÜDESHEIM, GERMANY



THE MEDIEVAL CASTLES OF THE ROMANTIC RHINE

FACTS OR FAIRYTALE

For Rhine River travelers, it's fairly common knowledge that the Neuschwanstein Castle famously served as the inspiration for Disneyland's Sleeping Beauty Castle, and that the Grimm Brothers' fairytales were inspired by the dense Black Forest that runs alongside the Rhine. With its steep slopes and medieval castles, the "Romantic Rhine," aka the Upper Middle Rhine Valley, has inspired painters and poets since the German Romanticism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Nowhere in Europe can you find as many castles so close together as along this dramatic 40-mile stretch, one of the most magnificent and oldest cultural landscapes in Europe.

The Rhine begins as an Alpine stream, churning through deep gorges and plunging some 75 feet over the spectacular Rheinfall waterfall. But it's the Middle Rhine flowing through the Rhine River Gorge from Bingen to Rudesheim and Koblenz that has exercised such a powerful influence on the literary scene. Here you'll find the setting for many of the bedtime fairytale stories of your youth, castles filled with princesses and Prince Charmings, dark valleys and woods where Hansel and Gretel lost their way. With its vineyards, hilltop castles and medieval villages, the seductive beauty of the Romantic Rhine is one of the most common themes in the literature of German Romanticism. However, travel back in time and you'll find that fiction is quite different from fact.

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According to Thomas Hobbes, life in the Middle Ages was “nasty, brutish and short,” the countryside the domain of outlaw bands and armies, the only difference being how large they were. The fact is that most of the castles along the Rhine began not as palaces for princes, but as armored bunkers to protect the fiefdoms of landowners. They had all the romance of a fallout shelter; their lofty towers used only to spy trespassers before they arrived at their door. However, with the Thirty Years War and conflicts of the 17th and 18th centuries, the castle fortresses became obsolete, ineffective protection against the ever-growing armies and cannons, and most of them fell into ruin or were destroyed.

Suddenly in the late 19th century, everything changed. A wave of nationalism swept Europe. Under the Prussian leadership of Bismarck, the Germanic cluster of mini-states came together as a single powerful nation. A great surge in German patriotism prompted a more fanciful interpretation of Germany’s “roots.” Ruins were rebuilt, mosaics replaced, and decrepitude reversed — all to make the relics of the Middle Ages look more convincingly medieval. At the same time, modern tourism also took hold, so there was not only a nationalist spirit, but also an economic incentive to rebuild. Many princes and wealthy individuals began to restore fortresses such as Stolzenfels Castle, the most outstanding work of the Romantic Rhine, and Germany’s new romantic perspective was expressed by leading writer and poets of the time. In 1801, Clemens Brentano created the most famous of the Rhine myths, the story of the beautiful, sad enchantress Lore Lay, when he published his ballad *At Bacharach on the Rhine*. The poems of Friedrich Schlegel and Adelheid of Stolterfot introduced a new, more, romantic perspective of Germany to travelers. And in England, Lord Byron made the Rhine area enormously popular with his verse narrative, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.

The romantic view of the Rhine was soon shared by artists such as Christian Georg Shültz the younger, and William Turner, one of the 19th century’s greatest landscape painters, who painted scenes of the Rhine (heavily influenced by the Romantic novelists) that the public wanted to see: a wild and rugged terrain with solitary castles perched on steep cliffs. The most popular romantic Rhine views were the oil paintings of Nikolai von Astudin which were reproduced in postcards and other formats and distributed widely, helping to transform the Rhine into one of the most popular travel destinations in Europe.

With its rich cultural and historic background and charming Drosselgasse cobbled street, Rudesheim itself is one of the most intriguing villages on the Rhine River Gorge. And just a few miles downriver, the Museum am Strom in Bingen has a section on how 19th-century artists created the image of the Rhine that still persists, an intriguing pastiche of the Romantic Era.