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WINE AND THE RHINE

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Wine and the Rhine

Gary Blake

(Gary Blake, who lives in England, undertook an RV trip in Germany to see the world's largest wine festival and other sights. Here is his report.)

By Gary Blake

With a smattering of knowledge of German wines from evening classes, where we learned that there was a lot more to them today than the cheap, low-quality plonk blended for the U.K. and U.S. markets 30 years ago, we decided this was the time to rediscover German wines with a visit to the region where they are made.

And what better vehicle to do it in than Volkswagen's take on the camper van, the T5 California? This was the 2010 model with a two-liter turbo-diesel engine, 117 mph maximum speed, hydraulic roof lift, commodious fridge, heated captain seats, navigation system, and no fewer than three batteries to keep everything running. But no loo—which proved to be a problem from time to time. Still, the camper van was easy to drive and the inclusion of a Thule roof-box helped soak up our kit. Thus equipped we set off for a week on the wine trail, taking in the largest wine festival in the world at Bad Dürkheim.

Leaving our home in England on a Friday night, we made an easy run to the Black Horse Farm Caravan Club campground at Folkestone so that we could rest before our 7 a.m. Eurotunnel crossing the next day. Enjoying croissants, coffee and newspapers at our own table, we crossed below the seabed in 35 minutes and set off for the festival, 391 miles and a 5 1/2-hour drive from Calais on the spacious motorways of Europe. But first, we pulled into the French village of Gravelines to pick up freshly baked baguettes for lunch en route. We also noticed a camper stop (Aires de Service), where we could have stayed overnight free.

As we eased onto the German motorway system, classic FM aptly delivered some Bach and I relaxed into the mood, advancing the autocruise up from Belgium's 110-kph limit (about 68 mph) to 130 kph (80.7 mph), the limit for German roads.

With our early start we were well on our way and decided to exit at Koblenz, the apex of the Rhine and Mosel river valleys and

journey along the Rhine, before picking up our route again at Bingen. Swiss, Dutch and German river barges plowed through the stiff currents of the mighty Rhine as we passed by medieval towns, wine-growing villages and fortresses commanding high ground on the steep-sided gorges.

Our GPS guided us to Bad Dürkheim, and a superb campground that had 580 motorhome/caravan campsites, a lake and first-class showers. It was an easy stroll from the campground to the festival here in one of the largest wine-growing regions in Germany.

Officially called Wurstmarkt (Sausage Fair), the 600-year-old festival is held every September. Here you can try over 150 wines from fine Rieslings, to refreshing ice wines, served in beer glasses! German wines are fresher, more elegant and lower in alcohol than most wines produced outside Europe.

The Wurstmarkt had a superb fairground (rides I had never seen the likes of before) and dancing to live bands. However, the main attractions were 36 little wine tents called Schubkärchler (wheelbarrows) because vintners in the 15th century rolled wine barrels on wheelbarrows up to Michelsberg hill to quench pilgrims' thirsts.

People sat together sampling wines at long narrow tables.



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Carnival rides are among the attractions at the world's largest wine festival.



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A Volkswagen T5 California camper van is well-equipped for a wine country tour.

English speaking was minimal and we felt we were English pioneers in this region, but we were welcomed everywhere, along with 600,000 other visitors from all over the world. Besides wine and plenty of food, the festival had stalls selling German lace, beautiful dolls and traditional handmade wooden toys.

Unusual Delicacy

The Thirty Years' War in the 17th century, one of the most destructive conflicts in European history, nevertheless led to the invention of a local delicacy, as we discovered on a visit to the butcher Hambel, at Wachenheim, near Bad Dürkheim. To foil the foraging French armies the locals disguised food by stuffing ingredients into a pig's stomach called a Saumagen, as they knew the French would abhor this idea.

Today it is a delicacy of pork, sweet chestnuts, spices and potatoes (and the pig casing) best served alongside a Palatinate



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A mechanical picker harvests grapes from a vineyard in Germany.

Riesling. Germany's former Chancellor Helmut Kohl, born in this region, presented this, his favorite dish, with pride to the queen. What she made of it, we know not.

We had decided to follow the Palatinate Wine Route to its origins, sampling wines and sightseeing as we wandered south over the next couple of days to the Wine Gate in Schweigen-Rechtenbach on the French border. The imposing ceremonial gate starts the wine route, marked by yellow signs with stylized bunches of grapes, ending at the House of the German Wine Route in Bockenheim, 52 miles north.

Camping was at its finest in Palatinate, the dry, sunny "Tuscany of Germany," sheltered from the prevailing winds by mountain ranges on both sides of the Rhine Valley.

At Weisenweg, seven miles south of Bad Dürkheim, we toured Weingut Lucashof's 8,000-acre estate that is set around a delightful medieval village. Now considering ourselves wine connoisseurs,

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A walk through a vineyard at Cochem offers a splendid view of a hillside and river.

Motorhomes are parked at the Stellpatz overlooking the Mosel River.

Interesting cafes and a 10th Century castle are attractions at Saarburg.

we bought our first three bottles of wine.

Lunch was on the terrace at Burgschanke Rittersberg next to an 11th century castle. Visitors come for the inspiring hilltop views but it's also the spiritual home of modern German democracy. The story can be traced in a well-documented exhibition on the top floor.

To end the day we moved on to the delightful Gothic medieval village of St. Martin nestled on the foothill slopes. The village offers a beautiful Stellpatz (a German camper stop) with free parking but alas no loo. So rather than miss this beautiful spot we checked into a hotel with its own wine tavern in the cellar. A walk around the village was followed by dinner at one of its 28 restaurants

Drinkable Vinegar

A visit to the Vinegar Winery at nearby Doktorenhof on Tuesday surprised us with the revelation that vinegar can be made into a liqueur-like drink, using the winery's 150-year-old bottle of yeast. A "wine walk with art" took us around neat vineyards with themed steel sculptures. Occasional seating areas around the art allowed sampling of wine and invited thoughtful discussions. I started to ponder the German psyche. I think "intense enjoyment" sums it up—so much cycling, hiking and intellectualizing of pursuits.

Next stop was Bad Berdzaden on the grounds of the ultramodern Weingut Hitziger estate, where we enjoyed another wine tasting and slipped a case of rosé into the VW boot. The prefix "Bad" to a name in Germany means spa, from Roman times. We visited the marvelous Bad Berdzaden's Sudez-Therme that evening—its three mineral pools with water at over 86 degrees and saunas seemed the perfect relaxer for a driving holiday.

Our trip reached the halfway point on Wednesday, and we turned north to our second wine trail, along the Mosel River. The Mosel Rieslings grown on the steep slopes, at 90 degrees to the sun, are considered the finest in the world thanks to their *terroir*, a French word referring to the impact of geography, geology and climate. The soils in this region consist of slate and sandstone beds,

giving the wine its delicate, subtle taste.

We entered the Mosel's steep-sided valleys and gorges near Koblenz for another wine drive, following the river to the gentle slopes at the French border. Castle Burg Eltz, one of the most beautiful and best-preserved fairytale castles in Germany, lies hidden in a valley, a romantic setting surrounded by an unspoiled landscape. Ramblers and cyclists best experience its magnificence by entering its ravine from the river. However it is equally impressive when viewed by walking down the 45-degree road from the car park.

Before tourism, viticulture formed the basis of the Mosel economy and the renowned *terroir* is now producing some of the greatest Rieslings and other local wines. Germany's reputation has begun to recover from the low-quality wines produced for foreign consumption decades ago, and there reportedly has been a run of particularly good vintages since 2006

Splendid View

On Thursday, we arranged to meet a guide at Brevia Wine and Walk in Cochem to take us on a two-mile walk through the vineyards on the steep hillsides above a U-shaped bend in the river. With wine, a picnic and great vistas—the castle of Cochem and river traffic below—it doesn't come much better... unless you count another wine-tasting only 50 steps from our campsite on a wine-growing estate at Ferienweingut Oster Franzen.

Friday brought wet weather, but that didn't thwart our plans to rent bicycles at Tarben-Trarbach, for an easy two-hour ride along the Mosel River to Bernkastel-Klues, returning by ferry with bikes on board. The 700-year-old town has a baroque marketplace and a Vinoteck with some 130 regional wines to taste. Boats travel the river like buses, picking up passengers and cyclists from jetties at campsites and town piers.

On Saturday, a three-mile hike from our campsite at Piesport took us to a typical all-day street festival of wine and music in Neumagen-Dhrom. Germany boasts hundreds of wine harvest cel-

ebrations, from August to November, ranging from small-scale parties in delightful medieval villages to full-blown open-air festivals in cities. The "Weinfeste" are as diverse as the wines they celebrate and some date back hundreds of years.

Neumagen-Dhrom is Germany's oldest wine town. To accompany the serious matter of wine tasting and enjoying classic German sausages, pretzels, cheeses, meats and local specialties, lively troubadour bands wandered the lanes, encouraging dancing in the streets.

On Sunday, we visited Trier, the oldest German city, known for its well-preserved Roman and medieval buildings from the first century B.C., and Saarburg, an attractive old town with a 10th century castle and cafes overlooking a spectacular waterfall. And on Monday we headed back home through Luxembourg, where we filled up with diesel that was 20 percent cheaper than in Germany and 35 percent less than in the U.K.

The trip ended with a flat tire six-tenths of a mile from home. The tire-seal in a can didn't work, there wasn't a spare, and we had to call for assistance.

The lack of a toilet was a drawback, and it took a lot of strength to fold the seat into a bed, but our Volkswagen camper van had its advantages, including a large refrigerator, comfortable beds, excellent storage and an excellent heating/air conditioning system. We covered 1,482 miles on three tanks of gas, averaging 28 miles per gallon. The T5 California was maneuverable in traffic and had a fast, responsive pickup on motorways.

Surprisingly during our trip, we needed no hangover remedies. Out taste buds experienced so many good German wines, very reasonably priced, that we are already considering our next excursion to top off our supplies. Above all it was a delightful driving holiday with a variety of discoveries, inspiring walks and cycle rides to medieval villages, good wine and food. Intense enjoyment! ■



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A trip from England to Germany begins with a Eurotunnel crossing.



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The Brevia Wine Trail follows a bend in the Mosel River.

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