

For intense enjoyment, **Gary Blake** recommends...

The Rhine & its wine



Intense enjoyment: a vineyard, a campervan and a glass of something fruity

With a smattering of knowledge on German wines from evening classes, where we'd learned that there was a lot more to them than the cheap, low-quality plonk specially blended for the UK market 30 years ago, and that there had been a run of good vintages since 2006, we decided this might be a good time to rediscover German wines.

And what better vehicle to do it in than Volkswagen's latest take on the campervan, the T5-based California? A far cry from my wife, Wendy's T1 Splitty or my T2 Bay Window, this was a twentyfirst century VeeDub with two-litre turbo-diesel engine, hydraulic roof lift, commodious fridge, heated captain's seats, satnav, and no fewer than three batteries to keep everything running.

Sadly, no loo, which proved to be a problem from time to time. Still, its car-like driving compensated and the provision of a Thule roof-box helped soak up our kit. So we set off for a week on the wine trail, taking in the largest wine festival in the world at Bad Dürkheim.

Wendy and I set off on a Friday night, for an easy run to Black Horse Farm Caravan Club Site, Folkestone, so we could rest before our 7:00am Eurotunnel crossing the next day.

Saturday

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 (629km) and a 5.5-hour drive from Calais on the spacious motorways of Europe – but first pulled into the village of Gravelines,

to pick up freshly-baked baguettes for lunch en route.

As we eased onto the German motorway system, Classic FM aptly delivered some Bach and I relaxed into the mood, advancing the cruise control from Belgium's 110kph limit to 130kph, the limit for German roads.

Heading along the E40 (Autobahn 4), 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 on the E31 (A61) at Bingen.

We saw the mighty Rhine at close quarters with medieval towns, and wine-growing villages, as well as the fortresses commanding high ground on the steep-sided gorges.

Swiss, Dutch and German river barges ploughed through the swift currents along their 766-mile journey from the Alps to the North Sea.

It was the time of wine festivals here too, with RVs and motorhomes parked in their hundreds in stellplätze (German camper stops, often free and run by the councils).

But Bad Dürkheim was our destination and the satnav located our campsite in the dark. This superb site had 580 motorhome/caravan pitches, a lake and first-class showers, which the German users made sure were kept clean.

Sunday

We opted for an easy stroll to the wine festival. There was a bus service from the site too, but most of our German motorhoming confederates seemed to be using the cycle paths.



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Later we took an €8 (£6.80) taxi ride back. Bad Dürkheim, located in Rhineland Palatinate, is one of the largest wine-growing regions in the country.

Officially called *Wurstmarkt* (sausage fair), the 600-year-old festival is famous for its celebration of excellent local wines. 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 new world wines.

There's a superb fairground (rides I had never seen the likes of before) and dancing to live bands. However, the main attraction of the festival are 36 little wine tents - called *Schubkärchler* (wheelbarrows,) because vintners rolled wine barrels on wheelbarrows up to Michelsberg hill to quench pilgrims' thirst in the fifteenth century.

Wine connoisseurs and the pubic alike sit together sampling the wines at long narrow tables. English speaking was minimal as a rule and we felt we were English pioneers in this region, but we were welcomed everywhere as were the expected half-million-plus visitors from all over the world. Besides wine and plenty of food, the festival has stalls selling German lace, beautiful dolls and traditional hand made wooden toys.

Monday

The seventeenth-century Thirty Years' War, 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, five kilometers from 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.



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The trip

- Easy drive and easy to plan/arrange, all local tourists boards very helpful and keen for UK visitors
- Wine/food link. They call it the Romantic Trail
- Many delicious quality wines to sample and cheap to buy
- Beautiful cycle paths along the Mosel. Bicycles with large wheels best to cover the ground
- See the Mosel from high aspect on vineyard walks. Take your walking boots
- Total distance travelled: 1,482 miles (average 28mpg)

The wine

Top wine estates almost all use the Riesling grape, which they have perfected. Wines range through trocken (dry) kabinett (medium-dry), spätlese (medium), auslese (sweet), beerenauslese (very sweet) to eiswein (incredibly sweet dessert wine, made from grapes which have been left to freeze on the vine)

Now filled with nourishing and tasty Palatinate delicacy pork, sweet chestnuts, spices and potatoes (and the pig casing) it is complemented by local Palatinate Riesling.

Germany's former Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, born in this region, presented this, his favourite 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, wandering south over the next couple of days sampling wines and sight-seeing to the Wine Gate in Schweigen-Rechtenbach on the French border adjacent to Wissembourg in France, which marks the start or end of the route.

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, 85km 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.

To avoid drinking and driving we intended staying in vineyard campsites, as here we could sample wines with, hopefully, the ability to walk home.

Our southern route started at Wiesenweg, 12km south of Bad Dürkheim at the Weingut Lucashof estate with a tour of the 80-hectare estate set around a delightful medieval village.

Now wine connoisseurs, we bought our first three bottles of wine.

At lunchtime the satnav first lost us on a high hill road in a thickly leaved forest, then skirted us around the plateau to Hambacher Schloss, and lunch finally on the terrace at Burgschänke Rittersberg



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just next to the eleventh 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 stellplatz (free parking, right in the centre but no loo). Rather than miss this beautiful spot we checked into Consulat des Weines - a wine hotel with its own weinstube (wine tavern) in the cellar.

We enjoyed a tasting of red wines at Alfons Ziegler before a walk around the village, noticing wine artisan features carved over doors and learning about their patron saint, followed by dinner at one of the 28 restaurants, the Weinhausel.



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1 Looking through the vineyards to the Mosel

2 A typical all-day street festival of wine and music in Neumagen-Dhron

3 The medieval village of St Martin offers a beautiful free stellplatz

4 This cheese stall in Neumagen-Dhron was enough to make anyone's mouth water

5 Wine 'jam'

6 Wine and oysters in Trier

Tuesday

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

Next stop, Bad Bergzabern and the ultra modern Weingut Hitziger estate where we enjoyed another wine tasting and a case of rose was slipped into the VW boot, then a drive to the Wine Gate for a dinner at Deutsches Weintor's restaurant for excellent modern German cuisine.

The prefix Bad to a name in Germany means Spa, from Roman times. We visited Bad Bergzabern's Sudpfalz Therme that evening - its three mineral pools with water at over 30 degrees and saunas seemed the perfect relaxer for a driving holiday.

Wednesday

Halfway now and turning north, driving fast to our second wine trail, along the Mosel. 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 word we heard every day now. The soils here consist of slate and sandstone beds, giving the wine a delicate, subtle taste.

But it wasn't all driving. We couldn't resist the sign at a snail farm at Schneckenfarm Pfalzschnecke in the village of Grünstadt-Asselheim offering snail tasting.

Intense enjoyment again, I smiled to myself at Mr Chaliere's speech to us on the savoury destinies for each of the snails. He seemed to



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love each one of his 60,000 snails as much I loved eating them.

We found that some stellplätze weren't suitable for our campervan with its minimal facilities, but there are plenty of regular campsites to choose from (although September/October is high season and pre-booking is recommended).

Slowing down after a dash up the A271 and A61, 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.

Our first discovery, Castle Burg Eltz is one of the most beautiful and best preserved fairytale castles in Germany. The castle lies hidden in a valley, in a romantic setting surrounded by an unspoilt landscape. Ramblers and cyclists can best experience its magnificence by entering its ravine from the river. However, it is equally impressive 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, finding appreciative foreign markets.

Winegrower Albrecht Gietzen, who doubles as mayor of Hatzenport (population 660), and his wife, Maria, run the Winzerhof Gietzen guesthouse. A robust, hearty menu is matched with their own wines from the hill at the back of the house.



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Thursday

We arranged to meet Lisa, of Brevia Wine and Walk, in Cochem for a 3.5km walk through the vineyards on the steep sided hills on a U-bend of the river nearby.

With wine, and a picnic provided halfway, it doesn't come much better... plus another wine tasting only 50 steps from our campsite on a wine-growing estate at Ferienweingut Oster Franzen.

Friday

We opened the top box for our wet weather gear and toured from Bremm to Zell and following signs Marburg, stopping at the lookout point at Prinzenkopf. Beautiful views could only be imagined, as it was far from a fine day.

The weather didn't thwart our plans to pick up hire bicycles at Tarben-Trarbach, to ride alongside the river, easily in two hours, to Bernkastel-Klues, returning by ferry with bikes on board.

The 700-year-old town has a baroque market place and a Vinothek with some 130 regional wines to taste. Boats travel the rivers like buses, picking up passengers and cyclists from jetties at campsites and town piers.

Saturday

We took a 5km riverside hike from our pre-booked pitch to a typical all-day street festival of wine and music in Neumagen-Dhron.

Germany boasts hundreds of wine harvest celebrations, 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-Dhron is Germany's oldest wine town. The Romans left their mark here: there is a replica Roman wine ship and a stone version adorns a wine dealer's third-century grave. To accompany the serious matter of wine tasting and enjoying classic German sausages, pretzels, cheeses and meats and local specialities, lively troubadour bands wandered the lanes encouraging dancing in the streets.

Sunday

Inclement weather had set in now, so we set off to Trier for lunch, after which we set off to Saarburg on the Mosel's tributary, the Saar – an attractive old town with a tenth-century castle and cafés overlooking a spectacular waterfall. Another wine-tasting and dinner at the jolly Weingut Apel hotel - we avoided drink-driving by staying at Weingut Hellershof Zilliken, as our 'last night treat', 25 wobbly steps away from dinner, and with a wonderful breakfast to remember.

Monday

After a dawn start to reach Luxembourg's capital, we walked around the sixteenth-century fortified town built over a ravine, filled up with inexpensive diesel, and set the satnav for Coquelles, Pas-de-Calais 436km (271.4 miles).

Afterword

Surprisingly, for a somewhat boozy trip, we needed no hangover remedies. Our taste buds experienced so many good German wines, at very reasonable prices, that we are already considering our next excursion to top up supplies. Boxes of six bottles for around €20 (about £18) make very acceptable Christmas presents.

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 indeed. ■

7 Modern German wines are fresh and elegant

8 Colourful Saar

9 Wine tasting at the Consulat des Weines in St Martin

10 On our tour of the Weingut Lucashof estate

11 The campsite at Bad Dürkheim

12 Just one of the riverside stellplätze bordering the Mosel

Where to Stay

Recommended campsites in the area

▲ Campingpark Bad Dürkheim

In den Almen 3 67098 Bad Dürkheim
Tel: +49-(0)632-261356 E-mail: badduerkheim@knauscamp.de

▲ Weingut Hitziger

Liebfrauenbergweg 3, D-76887 Bad Bergzabern
Tel: +49-(0)634-31710 E-mail: info@weingut-hitziger.de;
www.weingut-hitziger.de
Wine campsite for motorhomes

▲ Ferienweingut, Oster-Franzen

Calmontstraße 96 56814 Bremm ad Mosel
Tel: +49-(0)2675-1018 E-mail: oster-franzen@rz-online.de

▲ Campingsite Rissbach

Familie van Dongen, Rissbacherstraße 155 56841 Traben-Trarbach
Web: www.moselcampings.de

▲ Camping Piesporter Goldtröpfchen

Moselstraße, 54498 Piesport
Tel: +49-(0)650-72027

▲ Reisemobilpark Saarburg

Am Saarufer 18 Saarburg
Tel: +49-(0)151-5802080 Web: www.reisemobilpark-saarburg.de



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