

Vines and vertigo

Sat, Dec 05, 2009

The arrestingly beautiful Moselle Valley is a land worked by people who are more than happy to share their knowledge. Just don't look down, advises a careful **MAL ROGERS**

Not a leisurely stroll through the leafy vineyards of the Moselle Valley, then. The trail, which connects the villages of Bremm, Ediger-Eller and Neef, skirts along the top of vineyards growing at a gradient that in places reaches almost 70 per cent. And you'll need the help of a via ferrata – a route of steel cables and stemples – to get you there. Lose your grip on the hawsers at the hairier bits of the route and you'll plunge headlong through the Pinot Noir vines into the Moselle Valley, hundreds of metres below.

To be fair, they lose very few people. None, in fact. Ernst Büscher of the German Wine Institute dismissed my worries and instead stressed the importance of good slate to the production of strong wines. Ditto the serendipity of having a steep, south-facing valley wall.

I duly embarked on the perilous hike with all the commitment of a kamikaze pilot flying his 10th mission. As you're now reading this, you'll have correctly surmised that I made it. No need for that little news item: "Journalist in vineyard mishap. Friends say it's how he would have wanted to go."

On the narrow paths of the Bremmer Calmont you'll meet young and old along the way, all oblivious to the gradient. They'll wish you Guten Tag as they nonchalantly squeeze between you and the drop. Their eyes will be fixed not on the path ahead but on bucolic views across the Moselle – the Augustinian convent at the water's edge shrouded in wispy pillars of mist; the vine leaves rustling gently as a light breeze sighs through them. As you hang on like grim death to the steel pitons you may very well feel this is as close to being trapped in a Monet painting as you can get.

Of course, there are gentler ways of experiencing the Moselle Valley. Petra Kessler-Hagenau, a guide in the area, offers you "dreamy views, tantalising insights and spectacular panoramas". The extremely well-informed Kessler-Hagenau will lead you on treks (foot or horseback) that skirt the world's most extensive Riesling plantations – some 6,000 hectares. Her odysseys through woodland and open country include culinary and viticulture stops in old convents or former Roman theatres. (00-49-6542-5747, moselgenusserlebnis.de).

Or you could simply float down the river. Watercraft are available from any number of aquatic sports centres, such as Freizeitanlage Fun Beach. Yes, I know "fun" is one of the most ominous words in the English language. Undaunted, we headed downriver in our canoe – negotiating the odd rapids – and, to be honest, it was rather fun.

If you paddle your canoe far enough you eventually come to the oldest city in Germany. Augusta Treverorum, as the Romans called Trier, was founded by Augustus Caesar. *Veni, vidi, velcro* – I came, I saw, I stuck around – he later explained. And who wouldn't be seduced by this fertile land and its beguiling produce?

Trier was basically the headquarters of the Roman civil service west of the Rhine. This is where they'll have made their decision not to go to Ireland. You can almost hear them: "Hibernia? Er, nah." Having got that out of the way, somebody will have been put in charge of introducing the local population to growing vines.

It's a familiar enough story. The Romans arrived, told the indigenous folk where to get off and established both garrison and grapes. Today you can still sample Roman food accompanied by local wine.

Trier currently has seven Unesco World Heritage sites. The most imposing Roman edifice is the huge

Porta Nigra, the fortified gateway of the city walls. Despite Karl Marx having been born just a stone's throw away, the only graffiti scrawled on the wall today says: "Trier nein danke." One might have expected something a bit more imaginative.

Maybe somebody did scrawl "Arrivederci, Romans" when the centurions eventually called it a day in Germany. "Well done lads, good job," they'll have said as they packed up and departed.

Familiar European history then unfolded. The emperor Charlemagne eventually brought some order to the chaos wrought by various Vandals, Visigoths and Goths. The way was now clear for various religious orders to thrive, foremost being the Cistercians from Burgundy – with their little alcoholic bag of tricks. They quickly set about forgiving the sins of the people of the Moselle Valley, the while reinvigorating the wine industry.

The Catholic church of Trier still owns the most extensive wine estates hereabouts. Pop into the Episcopal Wine Estates of Trier (Bischöfliche Weingüter, Gervasiusstrasse 1, 00-49-6511- 45760, bischoeflicheweingueter.de) for sampling.

Meanwhile, Trier Cathedral is home to the Holy Tunic. The garment, with a recorded history back to the 12th century, claims to be the robe Jesus was wearing when he died. If true, it's impressive enough; judge for yourself at regular intervals throughout the year when the garment is on show.

If you're in the market for this sort of thing, the nearby medieval church of St Matthias Abbey holds the relics of St Matthew. Needless to say this is also disputed – bones of contention, as it were.

Whatever about their holy relics, the church, hand in hand with secular wine merchants, turned the Moselle Valley into one of the world's prime viticulture areas. More than half of the crop is Riesling, ripening very late in the year. The resultant flavour is just as sweet and ripe as in hotter growing areas, but during the long period of maturation the vines have more time to take in minerals from the slaty terrain. This apparently ensures wines with an enormous complexity of flavours and relatively low alcoholic content.

The most famous wines of the Moselle Valley are the Rieslings, but significant quantities of Pinot Noir, Pinot Gris, Silvaner and "southern" varieties such as Chardonnay, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon are also grown. Any number of vineyards along the Riesling Route offer overnight accommodation – and, of course, a glass or two of wine accompanied by a lesson in wine-growing. The Moselle is a place that rewards those not in a hurry.

You can also choose to cruise. From Easter until the end of October an armada of boats caters for every taste (and tipple): short cruises up the river, romantic evening trips, music and dance trips, wine-sampling cruises – viticulture voyages of every description.

A good starting point is the town of Traben-Trarbach, straddling the Moselle. A prim place, with cobbled streets and well-tended window boxes, it does, however, feature some very fanciful art-nouveau villas. But the Jugendstil buildings boast little worthwhile graffiti, either – no "Dada wouldn't buy me a Bauhaus" type of thing.

The town's prosperity came from – need I say – wine. In the 19th century a trade alliance was forged between Prussians and local Protestants. It just sounds like the sort of joint enterprise destined to succeed, and so it was. Traben-Trarbach flourished. The town is a good place to sample the region's other alcoholic specialities, peach liqueurs and grape schnapps. I'm not quite sure how these fit in with the wine production; seated on a veranda overlooking the river, I was more concerned with the spirit of the thing.

Traben-Trarbach is also notable in one other respect, and here I can justifiably employ that travel writer's excellent standby: it truly is a land of contrasts. But only as far as hotels are concerned. Within the town you'll find hostleries and Gasthäuser serving everything from the lightest Riesling Kabinett to the finest Weissburgunder Pinot Blanc with pride and panache.

But just outside Traben- Trarbach stands a hotel that serves no alcohol at all. Isn't that the strangest thing? To the best of my knowledge (I didn't visit) it is also vegetarian, and practises Ayurvedic medicine. Not sure what time the karaoke kicks off at, mind.

A wineless hotel is certainly a phenomenon here. But don't get the wrong idea: if you tend to use food merely for sobering up, the Moselle Valley may come as something of a revelation. The light wines of the area are ideal accompaniments for a wide variety of dishes, and that's how they're used. Whether in a traditional restaurant serving Teutonic fare or in any of the Michelin-starred establishments that adorn the area, you'll be served exactly the correct wine. You may have heard that the German sense of humour is no laughing matter; this could equally be applied to the country's wine culture. It is taken very seriously indeed.

But the Moselle is an area of arresting beauty, a land worked by people passionate about their trade, and more than happy to share that knowledge with visitors – tourists and tipplers have long been welcome here. We were indulged to the very limit, but eventually managed to get the hang of all that epicurean hospitality.

It'll be the non-alcoholic hotel next time, though. Promise.

Go there

Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) flies from Dublin to Frankfurt. Trains and buses connect to Trier, 220km away. Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies from Dublin and Kerry to Frankfurt -Hahn, 60km from Trier.

Where to stay and where to eat

Where to stay

Jugendstilhotel Bellevue. An der Mosel 11, Traben- Trarbach, 00-49-6541-7030 bellevue-hotel.de. A traditional Teutonic hotel housed in an art-nouveau building overlooking the river. The slate-covered turret shaped like a champagne bottle is particularly fitting. Double rooms from €135.

Park Plaza Trier. Nikolaus- Koch-Platz 1, Trier, 00-49- 6519-9930, parkplaza-trier.de. On the edge of the town centre, the Park Plaza is much more idiosyncratic than its name might suggest. You always get the feeling in Park Plasas that if you asked room service to send up grapes, whipped cream and a trapeze, they'd oblige. Double rooms from €97.

Hotel Nicolay zur Post. Uferallee 7, Zeltingen-Rachtig, 00-49-6532-93910, hotel-nicolay.de. In the heart of the Moselle, this hotel is the perfect place to sleep it off – sauna, pool, jacuzzi. Offering five nights' BB with four three-course meals for €269pps.

Where to eat

Altes Gasthaus Moseltor. 1 Moselstrasse, Traben- Trarbach, 00-49-6541-6551. Serving nouvelle cuisine, such as lobster and cauliflower mousse, or duck liver parfait in prune sauce, this is one of the finest restaurants in Germany.

Weingut Reverchon. Saartalstrasse 3, Konz-Filzen, Saar, 00-49-6501-923500, weingut-reverchon.de. Reverchon's main reputation lies with its extensive vineyards. Lunch and dinner feature soups, salads and venison, all served with the "delicate slate-stressed white wines" the winery is renowned for.

Becker's Restaurant and Wine Estate. Olewiger Strasse 206, Trier, 00-49-6519-38080, beckers-trier.de. One of the top tables of the Moselle region, with two Michelin stars. Seafood and Riesling are the big numbers here.

Mal Rogers was a guest of the German Wine Institute

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