

The Neckar River -- Germany's Wet, Wonderful, Wild Fellow

Before the 367km or 228 mile length of the Neckar River becomes lost in the Rhine at [Mannheim](#), it more than does justice to its name.

Neckar, in Germany, translates roughly as “a wild fellow.” The Neckar River plunges from its source 706m or 2100 feet above sea level near the [Black Forest](#) town of [Villingen-Schwenningen](#), through the [Odenwald hills](#).

Beginning at the town of [Heilbronn](#), the Neckar carves a valley (the *Neckartal*) through the Odenwald. Here, in the Middle Ages, something very much like a protection racket went on. Royalty would build their castles on crags above the valley floor, for the alleged purpose of protecting the merchants who shipped their goods on the river from pirates.

The merchants were required to pay tolls for the use of the river, with the assurance that they would indeed be protected. Whether or not pirates actually existed is a question left to history!

Today, you can explore the Neckar Valley by train, bus, bicycle (the [Castle Road a.k.a. Burgenstraße](#) passes through it) or ferry.

Just to the south of Heilbronn, on a land once cultivated by both the Celts and Romans, is the town of [Bad Wimpfen](#). Nearly wiped out in the [Thirty Years' War](#), Bad Wimpfen today has saltwater springs flowing as freely as they ever did, making it a great spa weekend getaway.

Take in the pair of Luther Bibles at the *Kirchenhistorisches Museum* and the world's only Pig Museum (in Germany, pigs bring good luck! ;-). If you won't turn blue from the effort, climb the *Blauer Turm's* (Blue Tower) 167 steps for a dizzying view of the *Neckertal*!

Entering the town of [Tübingen](#), you may encounter sculls powered by enthusiastic students, as they have been for five centuries. The “wild fellows” of the university, however, faced imprisonment in *Universitätskarzer* (University Prison) until it was closed in 1845! A touch of the wild returns to Tübingen on the weekends during dance parties at the local clubs.

Just 5 miles/14km upstream from [Heidelberg](#), the Neckar runs through Neckarsteinach, a small village made important by its four castles! Two of them are only ruins, but two, on the western side of the town, have been restored to their royal glory.

Tip: A footpath, the *Burgenweg*, leads up to all four.

Unfortunately the interiors of both restored castles are closed to the public, but at the third, the Hinterburg, you'll get a spectacular look at the valley below.

The most famous of all the Neckar River's castles, of course, is the Schloss at Heidelberg. Plenty of wild fellows, including Goethe, Friedrich Hölderlin, Victor Hugo, and even Mark Twain were suitably impressed by the crumbling edifice.

The perfect symbol for Heidelberg, though, may be the Schloss' *Großes Fass*. The world's largest wine barrel (big enough to have a dance floor on its top), it holds almost 220,000 liters (58000 gallons) of wine. That's more than enough to supply the biggest party Heidelberg's Marktplatz has ever seen! ;-)

Again, the Neckar surrenders its wildness at [Mannheim](#), a planned community, the streets of which are named only with letters and numbers for the sake of efficiency. The port at Mannheim is one of Europe's busiest, and the town is the Neckar Valley's commercial center. Witness a bit of that commerce at one of the thrice-weekly markets in the Marktplatz, or head for the wonderful Art Nouveau Friedrichsplatz and the 200-foot (60m) Wasserturm.

Crowned by a figure of Poseidon's (the god of the sea) wife Amphitrite, it's the most over-the-top water tower in a land famous for its over-the-top water towers.

Could there be any better way to bid farewell to the wild and wonderful Neckar? I sure do enjoy my time whenever I'm here. :-)