

Neuschwanstein Castle -- Dream King's Splendid Swan Song

Few of Germany's historical figures have cast a longer shadow over the country's culture than King Ludwig II. Often called the "Mad King," and equally as often, the "Dream King," Ludwig II was born in 1845 to King Maximilian II and Queen Maria of Prussia.

That he grew up to spend his days fantasizing about his importance to history is not surprising, given that his childhood years passed at [Hohenschwangau Castle](#), far from the realities of royal politics.

The castle was the capital of a part of [Bavaria](#) then known as "Swan Country" (*Schwangau*). Maximilian's court artists had a field day working swans into the palace's decor.

Little Ludwig grew up immersed in the heroic tales of Lohengrin, a Knight of the Holy Grail. Lohengrin was sent in a boat drawn by swans to save the Duchy of Brabant for Elsa, the only surviving child of the deceased Duke. His legend became the subject of Richard Wagner's immortal opera.

Wagner, in turn, became the object of the teen-aged Ludwig's obsession. Ludwig invited him often to Hohenschwangau, joining him in piano duets, and later financing his musical career.

All of this sets the stage for the greatest production of Ludwig's life, which began upon Maximilian's death in 1863. Tall, good-looking, rich, and eighteen years old, Ludwig was ready to show the world how royalty should be done.

The result was Neuschwanstein Castle (translating as "The New Swan Castle"). Located on a crag above Hohenschwangau, its very location reveals much about Ludwig's desire to remain above the tiresome business which spoils all the fun of being King!

There are two ways to reach Neuschwanstein: by climbing a challenging half mile or 0.8km trail from the Hohenschwangau parking area, or by getting a bus from the *Schlosshotel* near the parking area to the *Marienbrücke*.

Cross the bridge over a 300-foot/93m gorge and you're still facing a climb up 170 stairs before reaching the castle's entrance. When Ludwig II had his head in the clouds, he **REALLY** had his head in the clouds!

Ludwig, from below at Hohenschwangau, used a telescope to supervise the construction of the Swan Castle beginning in 1869. He never lived to see it finished, however, dying under the murkiest of circumstances in 1886.

Neuschwanstein Castle served as a royal residence for only 170 days between 1884 and the time

of Ludwig's death, but its operatic glory remains. That's not hyperbole: Munich's Bavarian State Opera's chief set designer played a major role in drafting the castle's architectural plans! How could anything take seventeen years to construct and still be unfinished?

Consider that the woodwork in Ludwig's bedchamber alone required 4 1/2 years to carve. One of its carved wall murals is devoted to the doomed romance of *Tristan and Isolde*.

In the Singer's Hall (*Sängerhalle*), the life of Parsifal is rendered in marble frescoes nearly covering the castle's fourth floor. Here, Ludwig would be delighted to know, Wagnerian concerts are held each September.

The most poignant feature of the Swan Castle, however, is one that's missing. Ludwig's Throne Room, situated behind a door opposite the castle's entrance vestibule, is a stunning display with cathedral-like red porphyry columns. A white marble stairway leads to the throne itself. It would, that is, if the throne had ever been installed.

The Throne Room is only one of Neuschwanstein's 63 unfinished rooms. Ludwig's fantastical project drove Bavaria to the brink of bankruptcy, and in 1886 his uncle had him declared insane.

Ludwig and the physician who certified him insane were imprisoned at Schlossburg on [Lake Starnberg](#) south of [Munich](#), and four days later their bodies were found. They had apparently drowned in less than three feet of water.

We can only hope that Lohengrin came with his swan-powered boat to carry their spirits home!

Neuschwanstein Castle Web site: <http://www.neuschwanstein.de>