

Rheingau -- A Land As Intoxicating As Its Wines

Legend has it that in 1775, when most of Europe was intently watching the rising tide of hostilities between Great Britain and the American colonies, a messenger for the Bishop of Fulda was sent on his way to the Rheingau. He carried with him the Bishop's permission to start the Johannisburg harvest of Riesling grapes. For reasons lost to history, the messenger was delayed for two weeks.

The Riesling grapes, however, continued to ripen, and eventually to over-ripen. When the winegrowers of Johannisburg finally received permission to harvest them, they had little faith that the wine from their now pungent grapes would be drinkable. Little did they know...

Thanks to that tardy messenger in 1775, Germany's Rheingau became the birthplace of Spätlese (wine from grapes affected with rot). Some of the earliest Spätlese made its way to America in 1778, where Thomas Jefferson pronounced it so outstanding that he contacted some European acquaintances, asking them to head to the Rheingau and buy a case of it!

A small and sunny place, the Rheingau holds a large and sunny place in the hearts of wine lovers everywhere, but wine is only one of the reasons it does. An idyllic valley nestled between the Taunus hills to the west and the Rhine to the east, this region is a perfect hiking and biking country.

The Rheingau spills over with movie-setting Bavarian villages, each with its ancient hilltop abbey or castle to add the perfect romantic touch.

At [Wiesbaden](#), a.k.a. "The Gateway of the Rheingau," the Rheinsteig hiking trail begins. Visit the riverside Biebrich Palace, where an annual summer international show jumping competition attracts the world's best equestrians. Less than 18 km or 11 miles further on, after passing by the Gothic town of Kiedrich and the church with Germany's oldest working organ, you'll come to Eberbach Abbey.

Here, in 1136, the Rheingau's wine growing history began when a group of Cistercian monks established what soon became the busiest wine enterprise of its age. The abbey continued to make wine for the next eight centuries. Remember the monastery where the F. Murray Abraham film *The Name of the Rose* was shot? When we talk about the Rheingau's movie-quality scenery, we aren't kidding!

Eberbach Abbey is just a stone's throw from another ancient winery, Vollrads Castle, where top Rieslings have been produced for eight centuries. Then it's downhill toward Johannisburg Castle, along the same path followed by Goethe himself! You'll have to leave the Rheinsteig to see the castle, but it's more than worth the effort if only for the view from the castle's terrace!

Hiking further along the river to Bingen, you can cross into the town of [Rüdesheim am Rhein](#), "Gateway to the Upper Middle Rhine" and the home of one of the Rhine Valley's most famous

landmarks, Ehrenfels Castle. If you haven't learned all about wine by now, the Rheingau Wine Museum is here to fill in the gaps!

Re-cross the river, entering the Upper Middle Rhine Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage site. As you continue to the village of Assmannshausen about 21 km / 13 miles ahead, you will see the best the Rhine River has to offer. Assmannshausen, producer of some legendary Pinot Noir wines, also offers a chance to relax in its mineral baths.

After struggling to ascend the trail beyond Assmannshausen (and you will!) applaud yourself for arriving at one of the most astonishing panoramas in Germany, and for having almost reached Lorch and the end of your journey! Lorch marks the western edge of the Rheingau, but is as steeped in romance as any other part of it.

Here at the ruins of Nollig Castle, see where a Knight of Lorch rescued his abducted lady from imprisonment by riding up the cliff face! The River Wisper (how's that for a romantic name?) enters the Rhine at Lorch.

Finally, it's time for you to rest and think about replacing your hiking boots with a bicycle. If you do, you can follow the lovely Wisper Valley Cycling Route back to Wiesbaden, where your journey through the Rheingau began.