

Germany Vacation Travelogue 2006

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Monday, 07 May 2007
Last Updated Friday, 16 January 2009

I hadn't really been to Germany in a decade. In fact, since 1991, I had only gone over for a couple of days here and there for funerals and I had never been with Robyn; this was going to be an entirely new experience. My grandfather had told me earlier in the summer that he and my grandmother were going to go over in September and I thought that I simply had to go too. I don't know how many more trips Opa and Oma are going to take to Germany so if the opportunity was going to present itself, I had to seize it. We had little time to spend in any particular place, constantly rushing from one visit, sight or relative to another with only a few chances to sit down and relax along the way. That said, while hurried, it was exciting, and every day was packed to the bursting point with good times from beginning to end. It all started on September 28th with the flight over…

Germany Travelogue Photo Album
September 28

The flight over was brutal. First leg was 23:30 to 06:30 from Los Angeles to Atlanta, then 12:00 to 15:00 Atlanta to New York, then 19:00 to 09:30 New York to Frankfurt. Once in Frankfurt we had 2 hours to get through passport control and customs to catch the train from Frankfurt to Karlsruhe, where we had 10 minutes to change trains from the ICE to the Regional Bahn into the Black Forest. That outbound leg was very painful, with the only redeeming being the discovery of the "Sound Experience" room in the Delta Business Lounge. It involved three ergonomically reclined chairs in a room with a white noise generator, constantly shifting pastel lights and good air conditioning. There were also large tubes with bubbling water in them that burbled quietly as well and it was the only place where I got any sleep at all before the flight to Frankfurt. All tolled, we left at 11:30PM one night and finally stopped traveling around 3PM two days later. Brutal.

Despite the long flights, horrible layovers we made it to Frankfurt ontime and in (generally) one piece. Even all the pieces of our luggage made the multiple connections to meet us in FRA. We headed from the flight terminal to the Airport trainstation via bus and had our first pretzels of our trip in the grand glass and steel atrium of the Flughafen Bahnhof. Then it was on the ICE to Karlsruhe, a very chic looking train... all gleaming chrome and burnished wood. This contrasted with the utilitarian service found on the Regional Bahn that takes you into the Black Forest. Despite the herky-jerky nature of the Regional Bahn, the landscape is amazing and new vistas open up left and right as you pass through over a dozen tunnels on your way to Sankt Georgen.

Upon arrival in the Black Forest, my Aunt and Uncle informed us that my Grandfather was treating us to a room at the little hotel where we would be having our grand family gathering in two days. The Hotel Il Davide, run by the Boscolo brothers, has a very friendly staff (that seemed to spend a lot of time sitting around, smiling and drinking espressos), meticulously clean rooms and a great little breakfast bar (they had the largest carrots I've ever seen in my life. Seriously, these things were the size of the things they give away on "bat" day at the ballpark!) It was very inviting after all those miles traveled so we checked in and cleaned up a little before heading back to Gabi and David's house where we would then stay until the late hours that night talking, drinking beer and listening to Onkel Albert tell jokes. We slept exceptionally well that night.

September 29

The next morning we ate a quick breakfast with Albert and Tamara at Il Davide and headed over to my Aunt and Uncle's. It was to be a very lazy day, taking a couple of walks through the town and the forest while waiting for my cousin's to arrive that afternoon; nothing too drastic or hectic, just a nice relaxing day with my grandparents.

On our walks, we encountered a gigantic swan that seemed to have been adopted by the townsfolk. This thing was the size of a large dog! The town of Königsfeld is smack in the middle of the Black Forest and as you wander around, you can't help but notice that the forest is so dense in certain areas, that the canopy of the pines casts a very dark shadow even in full daylight. A very "black" forest indeed. It is impressive to see and lovely to walk through, with large paths carved between the groves and large green fields interspersed. After emerging from one section of forest, there was an immense fir tree of some sort standing staunchly alone surrounded by a lush green field and bordered by further thick cordons of forest on all sides. The field was immaculate and you could tell that someone really cared for that tree. It is such a remarkable piece of landscaping that you can even see it clearly in satellite photos .

Fortunately, the grandparents relaxed during the day because they were dancing that night after Alexa and Katie showed up!

After wearing the "old peep" out, we headed to a café in St. Georgen (Café Kippy I think it was called). It was there that I had my first taste of "Holunder Bionade" and it was good! Who'd have thought that Elderberry juice was so tasty! Too bad they don't sell that stuff in the states. Anyway, it was back to Il Davide for the night and the start of sight seeing the next day.

September 30

When we in California think of Old Town, we think of "Old Pasadena" or "Old Sacramento" and maybe some of us think of the missions founded in the 1770s by Junipero Serra. The oldest Anglo Saxon settlement in the United States was Jamestown, founded in 1607. By that year, the German village of Villingen was already nearly 900 years old and that was one of our destinations of the day. Robyn and I got up and made ourselves ready both of us enjoying immensely the strange misting feature of the showerhead at Il Davide. Rather than some pummeling "water" massage, it had a setting where it essentially generated warm mist. I didn't think to write down a make or model number for the shower head but I wish I had.

After breakfast, Katie, Alexa, Robyn and I headed out in Katie's ludicrously sized "A" Class Mercedes to the combined towns of Villingen-Schwenningen to walk around inside the city walls. The medieval city walls surround a collection of structures featuring primarily late gothic architecture with the multicolored spires of the Cathedral of our Beloved Lady (Münster Unserer Lieben Frau) standing 50 meters tall. Along one of the portions of remaining city wall, is the Romäusturm where we took a couple of quick portraits before heading off to lunch at Café Rapp.

Café Rapp is one of my grandparent's favorite restaurants. It has a wonderfully warm interior with excellent food and even better deserts. The only failing is the persistence of the café owners in the use of fly strips tacked to the ceiling. The meal was fantastic with a wonderful glass of wine and the deserts were good enough that we got some to go as well.

The café itself is physically located on the top of a valley wall with verdant green fields stretching from its back door down into the valley below with large groupings of dark fir trees interspersed throughout. It's a very rural area still dedicated to farming and the old buildings in the village still maintains the Black Forest traditional architecture. We walked around a bit, stopping at the 700-800 year old "Nikolaus Kirche" before packing back into Katie's wind up car and heading to Hohenschramberg.

Construction on the castle of Hohenschramberg was started in 1457 but was ruined a mere 230 years later in 1689 when it was put to the torch by the troops of Louis XIV. It sits perched on an outcropping of stone above the town of Schramberg laying in the curving valley floor below. The road to and from the castle winds along a saddle and great views are to be had through the trees for those without an inclination to acrophobia. We clambered around the ruins taking many pictures and trying to stay out of the way of the other tourists.

At one point a lady asked me what I was doing and I tried to explain that I was taking photographs. She said that she was very "neugierig". I thoroughly misunderstood what she was saying, thinking that she had just said something like "I'm very contagious" or "I'm very crazy" when in fact she said "I'm very curious". Well, my German language skills weren't exactly firing on all cylinders yet.

When we were done sight seeing, we headed back for supper with the family; Onkel Stefan had now arrived as well as Evi with her children Maryam and David. Robyn walked back to Il Davide to turn in for the night, and Alexa, Katie and I headed to Café Ostbahnhof Die Bar in Schweningen for a couple of hours to chat over drinks. By the time we were done it was pouring rain so we scampered back to Katie's toy car to head back home for the night.

October 1

This was the day that had been put on the calendar way back in the summer. It had been arranged earlier in the year that on this Sunday, there would be a gathering of the family Korbus (my grandmother's side of the family) in the Black Forest. Well the time had finally come and the Korbus contingent had arrived so it was time for the festivities to start. Albert, Florence, Terri and Bud were there to join all the rest of us for the grand "Korbus Fest" in the Black Forest. This had been one of the motivating factors for Oma and Opa to make the long flight from California to Germany in the first place. We started with champagne at Gabi and David's and chatted for an hour or so before heading to Il Davide for the big meal. The staff at Il Davide were fully prepared for us and the breakfast salon was converted into a dining hall to seat the throng of my family and the Boscolo brothers were both there attending to our every need.

The meal involved many courses starting with soup and ending with pannacotta. All throughout we filled the dining room

with talk and laughter. Maryam lobbied every person she could find to take her to America for a trip and David spoke of Jürgen Klinsmann and World Cup Soccer. After the first few courses, little by little people would reshuffle themselves around the table so that one moment the seating arrangements looked completely different than those the previous few minutes. Stefan would always smirk when I started speaking, absolutely enthused by the thick German Mannheimerich dialect I learned to speak as a child. He and I would start talking and as I went on, the corners of his mouth would creep higher and higher until he was sitting there in full grin. My mother always was excited to visit Stefan when she came to Germany and I can see why.

By mid-afternoon, dinner was over and it was time to pack up and head to Mannheim. We made plans to meet with Stefan at Café Onyx by the Wasserturm later that evening and then piled into the "Class and drove north. It takes a while to drive from Königfeld to Mannheim and the Dirty Dancing soundtrack Katie was listening to just seemed to make it that much longer for me! All that aside, it was a remarkably easy drive and by the time we got to Mannheim it was pretty dark. Robyn was developing a pretty staunch head cold by that point so we decided to try to get some decongestant before going to the apartment for the night. In Germany, everything… I mean EVERYTHING, shuts down on a Sunday night, including pharmacies. However, it seems that they work amongst themselves to ensure that one in every neighborhood or so stays open as the "Notdienst-Apotheke" (emergency service pharmacy). We hunted around to find one and got Robyn her nasal spray before dropping Alexa off and finally ending the trip at Katie's. With no elevator and 5 flights of stairs, lugging all the baggage up to her apartment was sheer hell. But we managed and after getting everything reorganized, we headed to the Wasserturm and Café Onyx for a quick bite and a drink. Finally, many pictures later, we headed back to Katie's and a nights rest.

October 2

Robyn and I got very little sleep that night. She was sick and couldn't breathe and my back was killing me on Katie's spartan mattress. So we levered ourselves out of bed that morning with more than the usual aches and pains.

When in Germany, I always enjoy being able to go to the local bakeries and butchers, etc. It's something that we hardly ever see in the States anymore. Luckily, a short walk down the road from Katie's apartment was a shop where we picked up Laugenbrötchen and Zwetchgekuchen. The plum cake tasted very good with Katie's coffee and Robyn and I started to gain a bit of our humanity back in time for the events of the day.

With the weather briefly on our we drove over to pick up Alexa and headed to Schloß Schwetzingen. Official records first mention the palace in 1350 and despite being destroyed several times through several medieval wars, it stands today reconstructed in the late 1600s with Baroque architecture throughout; a German answer to Versailles. The gardens are carefully maintained and the grounds encompass many different landscaped features including a Mosque, Grecian style temples and other features that were either closed or under renovation when we visited. It is a sprawling place that really needs a full day to explore. We only had a couple of hours.

After a quick lunch outside the palace at the Brauhaus Zum Ritter we dropped Alexa off and went to Bauhaus (German version of Home Depot) to buy some wiper blades for Katie's Mercedes. With all the rain that we were getting, her wipers just didn't seem up to the task. The squeeking and scraping now gone, we headed back to relax for the afternoon and watch some German soap opera at Katie's.

Robyn decided to turn in late in the afternoon and nurse her head cold, so my cousins, Matthias and I headed out to a bowling alley for some fun. While the place we went to had normal bowling lanes, they were all full of teenagers, so we retired to the Kegelbahn room for a few hours before going to bed. A Kegelbahn is like a shrunken down version of bowling. The balls are slightly larger than softballs and don't have finger holes. Consequently, it's very easy to grip the ball and impart hellacious spin on it as it heads down the alleyway. The pins are much smaller and rather than being freestanding, are connected via string to a racking mechanism. You knock the pins down and the system pulls the string up, resetting all the pins. While perhaps not rolling accurately, at least Alexa looked good while playing. Katie tried valiantly to correct a flaw in her delivery that saw her trying to drive the ball through the floor with an early release. I faired quite well, relishing the ability to make the smaller weighty orb curve and spin down the alley.

And Matthias… it's best not to talk about Matthias.

October 3

A wet day. We got up early and picked everyone up for a drive into France. It rained very hard all the way south but Katie's new wiper blades made short work of it, while Katie, Matthias, Robyn, Alexa and I all squeezed into the various passenger locations of the "A" Klasse. We got to Strasbourg a little before noon with rain so hard that the Ill River was already starting to flood the walk way along its banks. The Petite France district, which resembles Venice, also stood a significant threat of flooding. Leaving the parking garage, I slipped on some marble stairs and split my little finger open requiring a visit to the pharmacy to get some antibiotic and some bandaids. Thankfully, Katie speaks French so it didn't become an issue. While the weather didn't cooperate at all during the day, we still managed to get around the city quite a bit and see the sights.

Strasbourg, in the Alsace region of France, has been around for over 2,000 years and contains one of the absolute masterpieces of Gothic architecture, the Cathedral of Our Lady of Strasbourg (Cathédrale Notre Dame de Strasbourg). The Cathedral stands 142 meters tall, that's over 40 stories! Unfortunately, with the weather as awful as it was and a large preservative construction effort covering the majority of the sandstone with scaffolding, no good pictures were to be had of it. Strasbourg has so many other features from Petit France to the medieval alleyways to Le Maisson Kammerzell, that the grey conditions and scaffolding obscuring the Cathedral weren't such a downer. It's a city that is so laden with sights that you can't help walking from one astonishing thing to another. We stuck primarily to the avenues and walked along the banks of the thundering river before stopping for lunch in the Kougelpopf Brasserie at the river's edge.

I can't even describe how good the Quiche Lorraine was in this place. I am certainly no sort of "quiche eater" but this stuff was amazing. Matthias suggested ordering a little jug of Riesling to go with it and I have to say that this was one of the absolute highlights of the trip. I don't remember exactly how many of those little Jambon and Gruyère delights I ate, but I know I finished mine and ½ of Alexa's too. It was fantastic.

It grew late and the rain continued to intercede in our affairs so we finally headed back to Mannheim late that day to say goodbye to the grandparents who were heading back to the States early the following morning. My grandfather regaled us with tales of ordering a meal served in a "schubkarre". He didn't think much of it, until they actually brought out his food in a little wheelbarrow. He was tickled.

Finally we hugged and kissed them goodbye and wished them a Bon Voyage and headed out to a late dinner. Robyn and I had missed Oktoberfest; the timing simply hadn't worked out, so we did the next best thing and went to a Bavarian restaurant in Mannheim for a good Oktoberfest meal. We started off with Obatzter, a mixture of various creamy cheeses, paprika and onion (truly a breath killer) and moved on to the main course. Beer and Schweinshaxe mit Knödel. If you've never experienced Schweinshaxe, a braised then broiled Pig Knuckle, before, it's sufficient to say that it's the sort of meal that makes vegetarians turn white. It's absolutely glorious! The after effects are strong too, so while the ladies pulled themselves together, Matthias and I headed to a bar down the street for a quick glass of Ramazzotti before turning in.

October 4

Robyn had managed to get hold of her friends in Berlin just before we left on the trip and once we got there, we arranged to take a trip up north to visit them. I had never been to Berlin before so I was excited at the chance to see a part of Europe that was entirely new to me (not that there's all that much that's familiar.) It was a 5 hour or so train ride and since we weren't sure if we were going to go until a few days before, our seat reservations wound up being in a smoking car. Around 7 that morning, the train pulled into Frankfurt and announced that they were having a malfunction of some sort or another and that we would need to change trains there before heading onwards to the next stop. We stood in the early morning haze for half an hour or so and waited for the train. Upon boarding, we decided to leave the scented wagon and move permanently into the dining car where we nursed the food and drink on offer for the remaining time on the train.

Berlin changed the major train station from Berlin Zoo to the newly constructed Berlin Hauptbahnhof earlier in the year to prepare for the throngs of crowds for the World Cup. It's a huge complex with trains arriving and departing on (I think) 5 separate levels at all hours. The interior is a large glass and steel atrium with varying views in between the levels and platforms making for a large open feeling.

The weather in the middle of Germany was fantastic while we were on the train, but it was pure crap on either end of the train ride: cold and grey or rainy. Robyn successfully negotiated the busses when we got to town and we made it to Nina's shortly before dark. We got the grand tour of her very unique flat and then sat up until the wee hours drinking wine, eating bread and cheese and talking about the modern history of Berlin.

October 5

Nina took pity on us, letting us use her bedroom while she slept in the loft, so we were fairly well rested the next morning when we woke. Robyn was still a little groggy from her headcold but was slowly feeling more human as the days progressed. After breakfast, we headed to a local grocery store to pick some stuff up for dinner; we had decided that I would put together a Grecian Pork Tenderloin for dinner. (I'm not 100% positive, but I think this was the first meal I have ever cooked in Germany.) Foreign grocery stores are always a source of interest to me from the Norma in Munich to the "Disco" in Buenos Aires, I am always surprised to find so many things on the shelves that are taken as common by the citizens, but look so foreign to me. One might ascribe that to a sense of America-centricness perhaps, thinking it's all supposed to look like it does back home, but the fascination and sense of displacement REALLY ratchets up when, right next to the Yerba Mate, you find a can of Pringles.

Shortly after we got back from the grocery store, Nina's son (and Robyn's good friend) Moritz showed up. The timing had worked out just so that we were there to celebrate his birthday and we enjoyed cake and coffee with Nina and Moritz in her library. More astounding is the fact that, since Moritz is a sound technician for German Television, he had actually spent the previous week or so just down the street from where we live in Los Angeles. With our small two day window in Berlin it's pure luck that we were able to see him at all. After breakfast, we headed out with Moritz to look at a flat that he was thinking about renting. He seemed to think the place was a standard sort of older flat and figured it was a little run down and maybe more than he wanted to deal with. I am here to tell you that the place was a dump! Only the worst slumlord in the US would ever have the balls to show an apartment that poorly maintained off to a normal everyday guy. Apparently, it's just assumed that when he moved in, he would repaint, refinish the floors, redo the electrical, install a new kitchen, etc. Screw that!

After leaving the empty flat, we headed out to see some of the sights. We started at the baroque Charlottenburg Palace, walking around the grounds and taking pictures under some of the only blue sky we would be able to see. The amount of

gilding used on every feature on the outside of the palace made the thing glow in the sunshine. It radiated a sense of Royalty that I didn't get from Schwezingen. Shortly after walking around Charlottenburg, we hopped into Moritz's car and drove down Straße des 17. Juni towards the Brandenburg Gate and around the Siegessäule (Victory Column) only stopping briefly so that Moritz could make some quick plans with his girlfriend, Kerstin, to meet us for dinner. Dodging in between the clouds, we walked our feet off moving from one historical point to another. Down the main drag past the memorial to the Soviet Soldiers who died assaulting the city in 1945 to the Brandenburger Tor (Brandenburg Gate) with its throngs of tourists, then down the street a bit, past the new American Embassy to see the imposing monoliths of the three year old Holocaust Memorial. The Memorial, only open since around 2003, is a subject of such controversy it's almost ridiculous. From my viewpoint, it is as striking a site to behold as the Vietnam Memorial is, perhaps even more so as you can wander into the memorial itself. It looks like a gently rising slope from the surface but in and amongst the monoliths, peaks and valleys rise and fall making it very easy to get lost. I think that's the whole point.

We crisscrossed the city seeing as much as we could in our limited time that day. The city of Berlin is immense and has as much flair, culture and taste as Manhattan but is coupled with the rich history of a city that used to lie deeply inside the Iron Curtain. The two combine and you get an enhanced vibe that I feel is unique to this city. I admit, I probably wouldn't want to live there, but man is it a helluva place to visit.

Finally, arriving back around 6 that night, we got to work on dinner. Kerstin arrived in time and we ate and drank and talked until the small hours again.

October 6

Another rapid fire day of sight seeing. Moritz and I started in the Europa Center while Robyn went over to KaDeWe. The view from the top of the Europa Center is pretty dramatic, with 360 views of the city laid out under you; probably not as astounding as the views that might be had at the top of the Fernsehturm but still interesting none-the-less. After viewing the anticlimactic "Wasseruhr" (water clock) inside the Center, we met Robyn over at KaDeWe. Ka De We stands for "Kaufhof des Westens"... the "Department Store of the West". It has floor after floor of high fashion and fine food with the top two floors dedicated to nothing but food, food, food (and drink). KaDeWe was the spear of capitalism driven into the ground at the gates of communism and apparently, on their infrequent trips west, the communists loved to shop there! It is absolutely immense and trying to hunt down Robyn between two floors of food stalls the size of a soccer pitch each was quite a trying experience; and the place was packed to boot! We eventually found here somewhere over

by the cheeses and then headed across the street to the ruins of the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtnis Kirche.

The Gedächtnis Kirche (Memorial Church) was built in the 1890s as a memorial to Wilhelm the First by his grandson. Wilhelm was the first German Emperor and, along with Otto Von Bismarck, oversaw the unification of Germany. (Otto Von Bismarck, for all his accomplishments, is most likely best known for wearing a funny hat.) The church was destroyed during RAF bombing raids in WWII and the ruins were left to stand next to the modern church constructed next to it as a remind of the effects of war. An interesting note on post war reconciliation from Wikipedia ...

After the war, from 1951 to 1961, a new church was built right next to the site of the old one according to the plans of Egon Eiermann. It features a cross made of nails from the old Coventry Cathedral, destroyed by German Luftwaffe bomb attacks in Britain, in what was called the Coventry Blitz. It was consecrated on May 25, 1962, the same day as the new Coventry Cathedral, which like the Gedächtniskirche, was built alongside the ruins of the old building

After wandering around the church, we took a break just long enough for a fast lunch at Robyn's favorite Falafel restaurant in Berlin. Then it was back on the march, starting at the columns in front of the Museum of German Art. Sight after sight: The Berlin Cathedral, the Fernsehturm, the East Side Gallery, the Ampelmännchen shop in Die Hackeschen Höfe, Unter Den Linden, Staatsoper Platz. It all passed by too fast to really enjoy fully and we didn't have any time to actually go into any of these places but the speed tour was better than not going at all. We ended the day with dinner again at Nina's and with very weary feet, packed up for our early train ride back to Mannheim.

Of the things I saw that day, two stood out, one for it's magnificent aesthetic and cute counter culturalism, the other as a sobering view and reminder of the affects of intellectual repression.

The Ampelmännchen are the "Walk / Don't Walk" signs that are seen the world over. The east German ones featured a man with his arms outstretched in red for "Don't Walk" and then the same man with a jaunty stride and a hat for "Walk". These signs were so beloved by the Berliners, that when the city planners decided that they were going to replace all the signs with the androgenous / generic west German standard, petitions were signed and rallies held in defense of the eastern Ampelmännchen. A good thing too, because I chuckle to this day when I see those signs. The protests were so successful in fact, that they not only saved the eastern Ampelmännchen, but that design has spread now to other cities in Germany as well.

At the Opernplatz (Opera House Plaza), across the street from the German National Museum, is a strange and haunting memorial. An empty plaza, paved with cobblestones. In the middle of the plaza is a sheet of glass, laid into the paving. When you look inside, you see row upon row of empty bookshelves large enough to hold the 20,000 books that were burned in this square on May 10, 1933. On the four borders of the plaza plaques are laid into the ground. The plaques translate as follows:

On the right: On May 10, 1933, in the middle of this square, National Socialist students burned the works of hundreds of free writers, journalists, philosophers and scientists

On the left: That was a prelude; that where man burns books, man will eventually burn other men -Heinriche Heine

October 7

Five hours again on the reverse leg of the train ride, sharing half of that with Nina who was heading out to visit relatives. We walked from the train station in Mannheim back to Katie's and decided to forgo rest and showers to head right back into town to go get gifts and chocolates for those back home. We had limited time since we had to meet Onkel Michael that afternoon for a hike through the Pfalz and dinner. It was on this quick walk into the city that I had one of my greatest gustatorial disappointments. As we walked down the street, Robyn grew excited at the sight of a Heiße Maroni cart. She bought a bag and I had my first, and last, roasted chestnut. I bit into it expecting a crunchy nutty flavor with some sort of spicy hint of Christmas. What I got was a greasy, soft and chewy something or other that tasted more like peas or beans or Garbanzo's than a nut; very shocking and wholly disappointing. I bought a pretzel as soon as I could to get the taste out.

Onkel Michael picked us up around 3 with his lady friend Angelika, and we headed into the Pfalz. Michael had originally wanted to take us to a Neu Wine Fest, but wasn't able to arrange it in time, so we were going to go to a favorite restaurant of his in a little town called Höningen. We stopped at a little roadside stand to pick up a jug of freshly fermented Müller-Thurgau (or some such local brew) and take pictures in front of the largest wine cask in the world before heading up into the picturesque hills for a hike. The eastern part of the Rheinland-Pfalz (Rhineland Palatinate) is a world renowned wine region and the second largest wine producing area of Germany. It is covered in forested, gently rolling hills with vineyards draping the slopes of the valley walls. The landscape doesn't disappoint at all. This part of the country has something called the Weinstraße (wine route), that I suspect is a way to drive tourists from vintner to vintner, somewhat like Highway 29 in Napa.

We walked down into the valley a few ridges beyond the city of Bad Dürkheim and made our way to the Gasthaus Zum Jagdschloß for dinner. As you may be able to guess, this was followed with glasses of wine and much talking of times past and times to come. After dinner, Angelika insisted that rather than walk back up the valley wall in the dark, a proper gentleman would go and get the car and drive back down to pick up the ladies; particularly a gentleman who had spent a portion of the night trying to convince us that he had the tracking abilities of a Native American and would be able to find the car at night just by following the stars and recognizing certain trees. Onkel Michael did, although he almost lost his way half way back to the car and considered using his cell phone to call a taxi!

We drove back to Mannheim and said our goodbyes to Michael and Angelika. Then, slowly, mounted the 50 steps up to Katie's apartment with legs still burning and feet still aching from the previous days excursions through Berlin. It was a very long day.

October 8

Our last full day… and I was going to make a pig of myself. There wasn't going to be a single piece of food that I was going to pass up on this day. I figured, it's gonna be a while before I go back and I want to savor as much as I can on that last day! Robyn and I packed early that morning so we wouldn't have to deal with it later. We started off with a breakfast of bread, sausage and cheese at Katie's before the five of us headed out to Heidelberg to see the castle.

Now if Villingen has old history, Heidelberg has positively ancient history. Neanderthal like people (*Homo heidelbergensis*) lived in the area as far back as 400 - 500,000 years ago. The remains of a Celtic wall predating the birth of Christ are in the area as well. The Romans would build a fort here around 30-40AD under whose protection a village would slowly take form and grow. Fast forward nearly 2,000 years, let me say that again, 2,000 years!!!! and you have the gorgeous tourist ridden city that exists today. The tourists are there for very good reason though because Heidelberg really is such a beautiful city that it's no surprise that the allies avoided bombing it during WWII so that they could build their post war command center there. The castle itself is an immense and imposing red stone structure. Rather than describe it myself, I'll turn to the words of Mark Twain from *A Tramp Abroad*…

A ruin must be rightly situated, to be effective. This one could not have been better placed. It stands upon a commanding elevation, it is buried in green woods, there is no level ground about it, but, on the contrary, there are wooded terraces upon terraces, and one looks down through shining leaves into profound chasms and abysses where twilight reigns and the sun cannot intrude. Nature knows how to garnish a ruin to get the best effect. One of these old towers is split down the middle, and one half has tumbled aside. It tumbled in such a way as to establish itself in a picturesque attitude. Then all it lacked was a fitting drapery, and Nature has furnished that; she has robed the rugged mass in flowers and verdure, and made it a charm to the eye. The standing half exposes its arched and cavernous rooms to you, like open, toothless mouths; there, too, the vines and flowers have done their work of grace. The rear portion of the tower has not been neglected, either, but is clothed with a clinging garment of polished ivy which hides the wounds and stains of time. Even the top is not left bare, but is crowned with a flourishing group of trees and shrubs. Misfortune has done for this old tower what it has done for the human character sometimes--improved it.

We mounted the 303 steps up the slopes of the Königstuhl, to finally walk through the gates of the ruins. There I promptly arranged a mid-morning snack of a Bratwurst with mustard on a Kaiser Roll. What better way to see such a traditional German landmark!

The castle was built well before the 1200s, with the first recorded information regarding the castle coming in 1214. It passed through many hands over the years in the tug of war of regents until finally the destruction of the castle occurred during the siege of (who else) Louis XIV's armies on the city of Heidelberg in 1689. One last attempt at full restoration was made by Kurfürst Karl Theodor in 1764 but the day prior to moving into the restored castle, the structure was struck, twice, by lightning and burned. Convinced it was a sign, he decided to move his court elsewhere and, other than simple maintenance, the ruins have stood as they are ever since.

After exploring the ruins a little, again we were at a total lack of time, we headed back into town for coffee and hit upon a little pub where Alexa, Katie and Robyn all had tea or coffee and a variety of baked treats. I opted for a Leek soup with Bierwurst, bread and a Weizenbier before moving on to the coffee and cake. The café was in the shadow of the Church of the Holy Spirit and we walked around its base to happened upon a Crêperie. It was time for another quick bite of a Ham and Gruyere Crêpe before heading off across the old bridge for views of the Neckar River and the castle on the side of the hill. It was late afternoon by the time we were done with the bridge so we got in the car and headed back to Mannheim, picked up Matthias when he got off of work and went to dinner at Da Pino Zwei Hasen.

Much pizza, rouladen, Gnocchi, Flamkuchen, Campari and Bier were consumed (although they screwed our order up several times) and a good time was had by all. Alexa, Matthias and I dropped Katie and Robyn off at the apartment and headed back out for a nightcap to end the evening. I walked back to Katie's at midnight and turned in; prepared to leave the next day but not wanting to go at all.

October 9

Our train left for Frankfurt Airport at 7AM so we had to get up early. Since I hadn't gotten to bed that night until nearly 1AM, the 5:30AM alarm was pretty rough. We got our stuff ready and lugged the suitcases down the damn 5 flights of stairs again and hoofed it over to the train station, barely making our train. 30 minutes later, we were back in Frankfurt and ready for the flight back. There were no real lines at check-in or security, but the three or four passport control and baggage search areas were frustrating for those with a lack of sleep and it was with real relief that we finally planted ourselves in the chairs for the long flight back to JFK and then to LAX.

In total, the trip was just over 10 days long, including travel. We had booked the tickets using miles and AMEX points so only had to pay tax and transfer fees of about \$200 for that. The 5 day Eurail pass we had was about as much (and we still had one day left) and we wound up staying exclusively at relatives houses with the exception of Il Davide with was a gift from my grandfather. Everywhere we went, people were shoving food into us in their homes so we really didn't have too much in food expenses. Overall it was a remarkably cheap trip to Europe. 10 days for slightly less than \$1000 for two people. That's fantastic!