

Summary Guide to Castles of the Middle Rhine

Probably the most popular river cruise itinerary in Europe is that of the Middle Rhine or one that takes in this section of river. The Middle Rhine encompasses the river between the towns of Bingen and Koblenz in Germany and flows through the Rhine Gorge, a naturally occurring area of extremely high cliffs coming almost to the water's edge. Between the cliffs and the river are the roadway, rail line, vineyards, and towns wherever the shoreline is wide enough to accommodate them. Towering above the river, towns and vineyards are upwards of forty castles and fortresses of which we will outline the more prominent ones. This region is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

From the top deck of your river cruise ship you will be busy scanning the horizon to spot these castles on high. It is very like being transported into a fairy tale land of your childhood. If you are lucky, your cruise hosts will furnish you with a map of the castles, provide a running commentary, or both as you sail by. If you are taking photographs, make sure you can zoom in on the structures as some will not be close enough for detail. (And some castles on the Rhine are not visible from a ship being in the towns but the scenic ones are on the hills above.) Plus, remember the castles are on both sides of the river so if you stay below the top deck you will only get to see about half.

If you are not on a river cruise but travelling by land, many of the castles are open to the public but all have different times. Most are closed through the winter months. It would best to check ahead or have your travel professional do this for you. Some castles are hotels or have restaurants on the premises so those are options for extra enjoyment as well.

Klopp Castle

The first castle we "visit" going downstream was erected above the town of Bingen am Rhein in the 1100's, but the remnants seen today are probably of the one erected a hundred years or so later. This castle was destroyed many times over the years, partially rebuilt and rebuilt again as ownership changed. Very little is left of the original: parts of the curtain wall and the moat. What you will now

see is mostly modern, ie. about 150 to 200 years old. It houses the local city council.

Boosenburg

This medieval castle is found in the quaint town of Rüdesheim am Rhein, a popular stop on many cruises. Though parts of the structure indicate a much earlier existence, it was re-built in the 11th century for Lord Fuchs of Rüdesheim and what remains, the tower or *bergfried*, is now owned by a winery. It is not open to the public.

Trutzbingen

Trutzbingen in the town of Münster-Sarmsheim is not a “castle” and never has been. It was originally a round tower built by the town to facilitate the protection of a market. All that remains today is part of the wall.

Brömserburg

This is an oldie in a feast of old structures. Located in Rüdesheim, adjacent to the Boosenburg Castle, it was constructed prior to the ninth century and modified in the 12th. It was owned by the Brömser family hence the name (they never lived there) until the 1600's and thereafter fell into ruins until re-built and re-modelled in the 1800's. It was purchased by the town in 1941 and housed a wine museum. It is currently not open to the public except for special events.

Rheinstein Castle

Looking up from the river as you pass this castle presents more of the romantic ideal of a medieval castle. Built in the 14th century it has the towers, drawbridge with portcullis, and defensive walls associated with castles of old. Inside it has an impressive hall with stain glass windows, a chapel with period wood carvings, and a grand garden with a 500-year-old grapevine still producing fruit. It is open to the public March through November. This castle is a truly beautiful place inside and out, with its views high above the river.

Reichenstein or Falkenburg Castle

This castle towers above the town of Trachtinghausen. It is medieval having been built prior to the 13th century. It wasn't long after it was built that it was destroyed by King Rudolph of Hapsburg. A century later it was rebuilt and expanded by the Archbishop of Mainz. It fell into ruins in the 16th century and it wasn't until the mid-1800's before its restoration began again. It is owned privately by a descendant of the Puricelli family who purchased it in 1899 and is now a museum open year-round (except January) dedicated to arms, hunting trophies and period furniture. It also boasts a 3-star hotel and a restaurant.

Ehrenfels Castle

This is another castle nearby Rudesheim. It sits partway up the hill on the eastern side of the river. Built in the early 13th century by the Archbishop of Mainz, its purpose was the control of the river traffic and custom tariffs charged to the same. Now in ruins after the Siege of Mainz by the French in 1689, it is open to the public but by appointment only.

Sailing by you will most likely be engaged with photographing the "Mouse Tower" on an island in the river directly below the ruins. It was part of the same customs scheme to collect monies as ships passed by. Its name was probably a corruption of *mautturm* (toll tower) to *mäuseturm* (mouse tower). A legend exists concerning the karma of a cruel ruler, Hatto II's, actions: the burning alive of his hungry peasants and comparing their screams to a mouse's squeaks. He was subsequently chased by a swarm of mice to his refuge in the top of this tower where he was eaten alive by the rodents.

Schloss Soonek

This was another castle built in the 13th century, destroyed by King Rudolph I, which was re-built by recipients of it as a gift from an Archbishop of Mainz, but eventually destroyed by the French. It then passed into the possession of the nearby town of Neiderheimbach in the late 1700's and was later purchased by the

crown prince of Prussia and his brothers. They re-built the castle and re-purposed it as a hunting lodge. A revolution and two world wars intervened, and today it is owned by the state. Organized tours are available. Be sure to visit the Knight Hall with its spooky picture of a Prussian soldier whose eyes seem to follow you about the room.

Nollig Castle

This is another castle in ruins on the right bank of the Rhine (going downstream) above the town of Lorch. It is privately owned so no visits are permitted.

Pfalzgrafenstein Castle

This is a really picturesque castle which you can see up-close from your ship as the castle sits on the island of Pfalz in the Rhine near Kaub. It is another “toll” structure. The great aspect of this castle is that unlike most of the others you see, it has never been destroyed, just modified and added onto since it was originally built in the early 14th century. The navigation around this structure has changed however; earlier in its life the river passage was carefully controlled by a chain between it and the shore (and Gutenfels Castle). Pay customs or be thrown in the dungeon until you do! It ceased being a customs station as late as 1867. Now, state-owned, it is open to the public via ferry from Kaub and is in its original state.

Gutenfels Castle

As outlined in the description of the prior castle, this one was also part of the customs system that existed on the Rhine. It was built in 1220 and continued in this role until 1867 when the toll was abolished. The original owners were the family Falkenstein but the castle was re-named in 1504. It is privately owned and now operates as a hotel. As a guest you will enjoy its many period features.

Heimburg Castle

This is a castle in the village of Niederheimbach and sits looking down on the river. It was rebuilt by an industrialist in the 19th century and is a private property.

Fürstenberg Castle

This castle sits high above the river near Rheindiebach village. Its prominent feature is the bergfried reaching to the sky. Built in the 1200's, it was destroyed during the Palatine Succession wars. It is privately owned.

Katz Castle

Katz Castle near the Lorelei was built as a military base to protect the nearby Rheinfels Castle in the 14th century. It was key to the collection of tolls and protection of the salmon fishing rights of the river. Over the years it was destroyed many times and rebuilt again, often extending its footprint. Napoleon blew it up during his invasion in 1806 but again it was reconstructed, this time as close as possible to its design pre-demolishment. Used thereafter as a school, it has now another life as a hotel and private residence.

Stahleck Castle

Stahleck Castle was constructed in the 11th or 12th century going through a succession of owners from the diocese of Köln to various nobles and Bavarian rulers until the French blew it up in 1689. During the last century post the two world wars, the castle was again rebuilt and now partially serves as a youth hostel.

Schönburg Castle

Schönburg Castle was built in the late 12th century by Herman von Stahleck but passed to the Schönburgs later. Like Stahleck Castle and many others in the Rhine Valley, it was destroyed by the French in 1689. Since rebuilt in 1885, it has become a luxury hotel.

Rheinfels Fortress

This imposing edifice began existence in the mid 1200's as a castle but by the 1500's it had become enlarged and heavily fortified. It stood against the French in the 1600's when nearby castles were levelled, but then fell and was destroyed by

that nation's troops in 1794. It is now owned by the city of St. Goar. You can visit the fortress, its museums and cellars.

Castle Maus (or Thurnberg)

This castle was built in the late 1300's by the Archbishop Balduin and was the residence for the electors of Trier. It got its nickname from locals as there was another castle, the Neu-Katzeneinbogen (Castle Katz), built on a nearby hill and the two castles looked like they were playing cat-and-mouse. Maus Castle is open to the public.

Elector's Castle, Boppard

This is another castle built by the Archbishop Balduin but earlier in the 14th century than Castle Maus when he conquered Boppard and surrounding areas. The original part of the castle is the tower; the remainder was added on several hundred years later. As a museum of local history, it is open to the public except in the winter months.

Castle Liebenstein & Castle Sterrenberg

Castle Liebenstein and the one nearby and separated by a wall, Sterrenberg Castle, were both built in the early 14th century by different people. Locally they are referred to as the "Hostile Brothers" but there is no actual basis for this name as no hostilities existed between the two families – though there could have been mild disputes. Liebenstein is the older of the two and is the highest castle on the Middle Rhine. Both castles have towers that today accommodate restaurants, and both also boast luxury hotels.

Castle Marksburg

Take a guided tour of this magnificent hilltop castle above the town of Braubach. (Tours in English are available at specified times each day.) It is in its original state never having been destroyed as so many of the other castles were along this stretch of Rhine. Built primarily in the 14th century, you can see various rooms such as the kitchen, turret, armory, wine cellars and more.

Castle Martinsburg

This castle is a conglomeration of buildings and add-ons in the town of Oberlahstein. Originally it served the purpose of a toll house as did so many of the castles. The east wall and northwest tower were built in the 1300's but the remainder was built in the 17th century, and its roof dates later than that.

Lahneck Castle

This defensive castle was built in the mid-1200's by the Archbishop of Mainz to protect the surrounding area. It was destroyed in the Thirty Years war but partly restored in the 1850's by a private owner. Today it is still privately owned but open to the public and gives a wonderful representation of medieval castle life with collections of fine furniture and artifacts.

Stolzenfels Palace

This structure began as a fortress, then later a toll station and was built by the Archbishop of Trier in the mid-1200's. Destroyed in 1689, it was not until the city of Koblenz gifted the ruins to the Prussian king in the 1800's that the castle/toll house was made over into the magnificent palace it is today. The palace and gardens are open to the public.

Ehrenbreitstein Fortress

This structure, high on a hill overlooking the river, is known as the *Guard at the Rhine*. It was built as a castle for the Electorate of Trier in the 11th century on ancient ruins but updated to a mighty fortress in the early 17th and 18th centuries. Its only defeat came after a one-year siege by the French afterwards which it was re-built by Prussia. The fortress is open to the public with guided tours. It encompasses a museum and two restaurants and boasts a gorgeous view of the surrounding countryside.

Elector's Palace

This impressive building was built for an elector of Trier in the late 1700's and also used as a residence for Prussian royalty a century later. It was destroyed in the second World War but rebuilt again in the 1950's. It is not open to the public.

Prince Elector's Castle, Koblenz

This simple castle now holds the town archives and library. It was built in the late 12th century by a wealthy gentleman and subsequently owned by an archbishop of Trier as a residence. As with many old buildings it has undergone numerous transformations over the years.

Note

Having been built originally almost 10 centuries ago, most of these castles have enjoyed many owners, endured much destruction, and experienced many re-constructions! Time marches on and consistent with change, the current usage of the castles may have evolved since the time of this publication. If you are planning a visit to any one of these, please check ahead.

This summary guide is courtesy of Real Travel Experts (realtravelexperts.com).