

Away from Germany's prime tourist centers lies an oasis of luxury, comfort and culture. Neelam Mathews explores Wiesbaden's history, hot-spring spas, award-winning hotels, cherries and wine. Photographs by Sonia.

Germany is a tourist destination and the step-cousin to its more advertised and charismatic neighbours Denmark, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands. Visitors from India comprise business folk attending conferences and exhibitions, or those who meet friends and relatives.

But for those on the lookout for well-appointed and less familiar destinations, this can prove to be a blessing in disguise. Germany, once experienced, is not easily forgotten.



Take Wiesbaden. Who would have thought that a city of hot springs located in the midst of the Rhine region could be equidistant from Frankfurt International Airport as Frankfurt, the commercial capital? Its neighbouring region of Rheingau, famous for its castles and monasteries

and also one of the most beautiful and traditional wine-growing regions of Germany, Wiesbaden, is the gateway to wineries and is inseparably connected to Bachhus.

A fifteen-minute drive from the city center takes one to Neroberg, the local mountain of Wiesbaden, where Riesling and Pinot Noir are favourites. En route, one stops at the cherry orchards. For some odd reason, I am reminded of Anton Chekhov who wrote his last play, *The Cherry Orchard*, and died in a German spa town. It seems almost appropriate that a man who gave the world so many words should end his days with a glass of champagne and silence.

Cherries will never taste the same again. Picking the large, firm, plump deep dark red fruit with a nice smooth surface and shine off the trees is an experience city folks have missed out on. The red cherries are sweeter during the summer, rather than the lighter ones that sprout during the spring, we are told. The fact that the cherries can get a spirited edge to them is something I discover at the wine restaurant Sinz where a gigantic bowl awaits us. Here we dip the cherries in sparkling wine and life is on another dimension.

The short walk to Weinhaus Sinz past Goethe's monument along a narrow walkway edged in the hill is certainly worth the worked-out calories. Sinz is a small restaurant tucked in a village with traditional German cuisine. This is Riesling country where Germans



do not forget their wines easily. The onion and Riesling soup is a winner. It is made with a wonderful crisp Riesling, although quite different from traditional onion soup. The Riesling adds green vegetable notes, butter and citrus tones, which complements the stewed onions and leeks as they sweeten with cooking. Also, the truffle tortellini with white wine truffle cream is sinfully amazing.

Back at the Hotel Nassauer Hof, a luxury product of Leading Hotels of the World where every room has its own personality, we find ourselves set right in the heart of Wiesbaden opposite the magnificent Wiesbaden Kurhaus built for emperor Wilhelm around 1900. It now serves as wellness and leisure centre. It also has an attractive garden where one can walk around and relax.

Hotel Nassauer has been host to many celebrities and heads of states including the Saudi prince and his family. Brahms, who composed the Wiesbaden symphony, stayed here, though he lost at the casino and was unable to pay his bill. We are also told that a "famous violinist" stayed here for treatment of his shoulder. Physiotherapists, masseurs at the Estee Lauder salon and the 1,500 square meter spa with a world-size pool featuring thermal water would have done their healing job on the maestro, one suspects.



A walk to the casino from the hotel brings its own set of stories. Here, Fyodor Dostoevsky toyed with the roulette wheel. Time and time again, while playing at the Wiesbaden casino, he would win vast sums but would them gamble them away. Perhaps it was here that he came to

believe that suffering is the essence of life.

It is fascinating how everything is within walking distance in Wiesbaden. The helpful concierge suggested we check out the linen products the city is most famous for. "Don't buy clocks. They are not from here. Only the Americans buy them!" he cautions.

The Nerobergbahn, a technical monument protected by the state, is a water ballast funicular railway that links the city with the Neroberg hill to its north, giving a panoramic view of the city. Opened in 1888, the line is one of the few funiculars with water propulsion. At the upper station, tanks on the down bound car are filled with up to 7,000 liters of water to ensure that it is heavier than the upbound car. The down bound car then pulls the upbound car uphill with a steel cable. When the downbound carriage reaches its station, the water is discharged and pumped uphill.

Following a great lunch with a fabulous view of the city on top of the hill is the Russian Orthodox church that is worth the trip to the top by itself. Known as "Griechische Kapelle" (Greek chapel), it was built for Elisabetha Michailovna, the Russian wife of the grand Duke Adolf of Nassau. As one enters the gate, this is Russian territory as all Russian churches in Germany are built on Russian soil. And I didn't even bring my passport!

The first gate is closed and commoners cannot enter as it was meant only for the tsar. After the fall of the last tsar, Nicholas II in 1917, the entrance was sealed forever. Besides the Russian church with its ornate golden interiors, there is a cemetery, which is the largest in Europe. Walking around the graves is an ethereal experience as one silently probes into the lives of people lost to the world.

One soon discovers that life in the state capital of Hesse, Wiesbaden, is vibrant, varied and lively. And this liveliness expresses itself in a range of offers including theatre, art, literature, music and spas. One of the highlights of Wiesbaden is a trip to the local market church



to listen to the 66-year-old organist and composer Hans Uwe Hielscher, who has created a series of free weekly recitals called *Orgelmusik zur Marktzeit* on Saturdays at 11:30 a.m., in which he and guest organists perform seasonal music. Hielscher, who has played more than 2,500 organ concerts worldwide, says he would love to come to India to play, but hasn't heard of any church that has an organ. "If there is, let me know," he adds.

One does not need to have any religious affiliations to enjoy his music as there seem to be none. As Hielscher playfully plays his own rendition of *The Flight of the Bumble Bee* on the organ with intensity, it brings tears to one's eyes.

It would not do Wiesbaden justice without talking about its hot springs since the city's name literally means "meadow baths." Even the ancient Romans were aware of the healing and beneficial impact of the 26 hot springs of Wiesbaden. Today, one can enjoy the thermal water in both the Art Nouveau style Kaiser-Friedrich-Therme and the modern Thermalbad Aukammtal. Both spas provide various types of sauna and spa packages.

The culture of bathing was an upper-class indulgence until 1913, when the Kaiser-Friedrich-Bad opened its doors as the municipal bathhouse and wellness and therapy centre. As I lounge around, the artistry of the decorations, paintings, statues, reliefs and ornaments throughout the building take me back to age-old luxury traditions. A wellness oasis, indeed.