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Oct
11 **Cologne, Germany**
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Freelance writer Olivia Greenway explores Cologne and the often misunderstood tourist destination of Germany.

Germany has something of an image problem with British travellers. Whilst France has always been a teacher's pet – a short hop across the Channel and you're there – eating world class gastronomic delights to the strains of ooh la la, poor old Germany is left in the dunce's corner. Even Italy and Spain have more friends. Germany is regarded by many Brits as a tad boring.

If you are of this view, you obviously have not been to Cologne. You'd be hard pressed to find a more attractive and vibrant European city with so much to see and do and all of it on foot. It's begging you to make a weekend break of it.

The spires of the gothic Dom cathedral are Cologne's most significant landmark and my hotel was so close, I felt by leaning out of a window I could touch it. Within a few metres is the main railway station and behind that is the river Rhine. Then there's a maze of pedestrianised cobbled streets waiting to be explored.

Find a bier keller

Kölsch beer is only found in Cologne. It is drunk from small glasses and regularly refilled, the barman keeping a tally of your consumption by writing on your beer mat. When you have had enough, you put your beer mat over the empty glass. I've never seen that happen. I'd like to think it says more about the superb quality of the beer rather than the company I keep.

There are many interesting places in which to enjoy your beer; just wander round and pick one that takes your fancy. If you need a nudge, I liked Peters Brauhaus. Attractively decorated inside, it also serves large plates of home cooked food that would keep even Desperate Dan satisfied.

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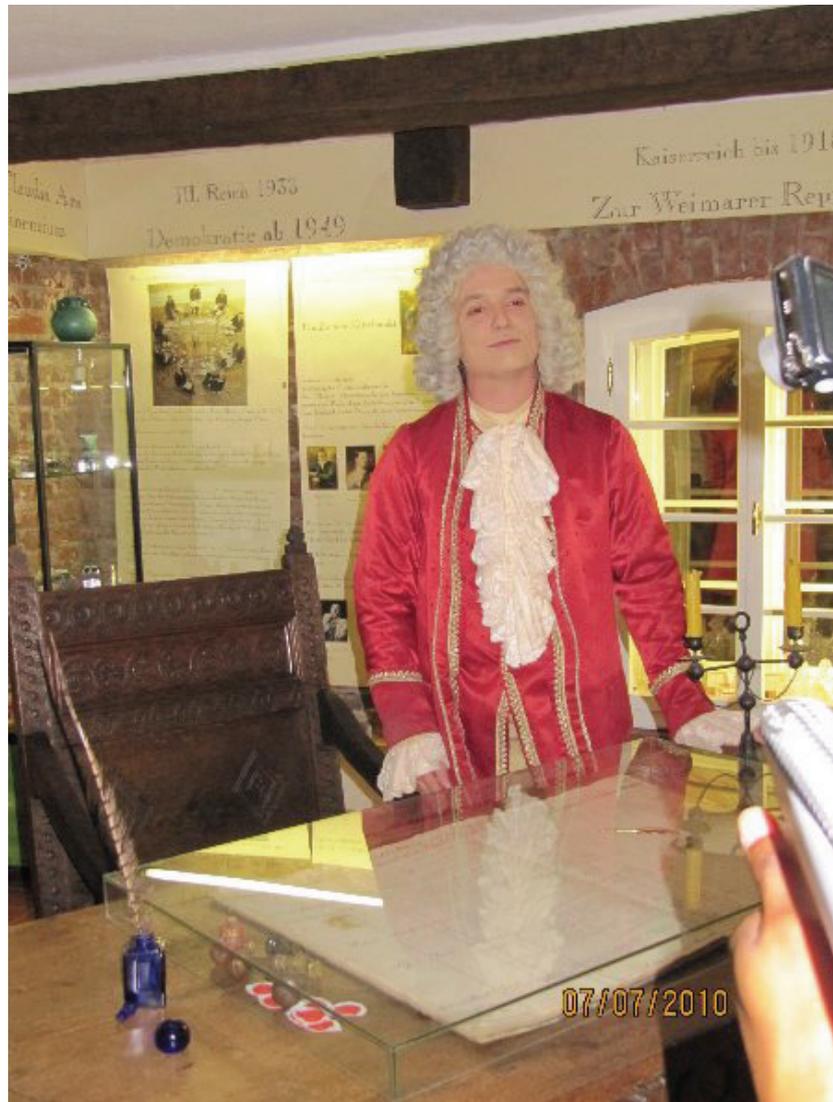
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Above: Grab A Pint Of Kölsch Beer At One Of The Picturesque Pubs or Restaurants In Town

Learn About Cologne Perfume

Cologne was first distilled in the town that bears its name in 1709 by an Italian immigrant named Farina. Previously scents were heavy and restricted to a few varieties but Farina discovered a way of distilling a more refreshing, lighter scent from blending a larger variety of plants and flowers. The cologne was needed by the gentry of the time to cover the stench from the sewer-ridden streets and unwashed bodies and heavy, grubby clothes of the inhabitants. Cologne fragrance became hugely popular; Napoleon got through a bottle a day and Queen Victoria was partial to it as well. The museum has a small guided tour with exhibits and other tidbits of information, plus of course the opportunity to buy the scent that is still made today, 300 year later.



Above: Cologne Is Still Made And Worn Today. Find Out More About It's History @ The Cologne Museum

Cruise along the Rhine

It would be a shame since not to enjoy a short trip along the Rhine. You get a good view of both banks and can look at the interesting architecture that has shaped this city since the Allies almost totally destroyed it in the war. You may also get a glimpse of the hundreds of padlocks strapped along the Hohenzollernbrücke. According to local custom, you buy your padlock, carve both lovers' names on it, fit the padlock onto the side of the bridge and throw the key in the river. The trip, with English commentary, takes an hour.

Get up close to modern art

I can normally take or leave modern art but the Ludwig Museum had me enthralled for several hours; it's a big space, spread over several floors, where the exhibits aren't crowded. The Roy Lichtenstein exhibition was thrilling (until October 2010) but even without it, there are plenty of permanent exhibits to enjoy and an audio tour makes it even more interesting. The attractive restaurant is worth a visit, even if just for coffee and cake.



Above: Al Fresco Dining On The Quaint Streets Of Cologne.

Shopping Cologne style

The High Street has international brands found anywhere but the department stores have home labels such as Gerry Weber, Frank Walder and Barbara Lebek. German clothes are as well made as their cars and for smart casual clothing the selection is very good, at non Harvey Nicks prices.

With a large number of galleries and music venues, Cologne also has an arty, quirky side; a trip to the Belgian quarter will confirm this. Full of funky independent and alternative shops, you'll be delighted with a shop selling just sneakers, another selling individually designed jewellery pieces and one selling Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen style men's shirts. Only a twenty minute walk from the centre, ask your concierge to point it out to you on the map.



Above: The Shopping Centre Of Cologne

I stayed at the Excelsior Hotel Ernst, one of Cologne's smarter hotels. It's independently owned and the manager lives on site. Service is exceptional and the rooms are luxurious. It's not cheap, but if you want a friendly base with superb facilities right in the middle of the city, it's highly recommended.



Above: A Deluxe Room @ The Excelsior Hotel Ernst.

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