

The Eifel—Where fox and hare bade each other good night

by Gail L. Winfree

The Germans say the Eifel is a place where “fox and hare bade each other good night,” meaning the area is wild, remote, and sparsely inhabited. It’s that wildness, remoteness, and geographical beauty that makes the Eifel region of Germany a popular vacation and resort spot for Dutch and German tourists.

However, few Americans are familiar with the rural charm, wild beauty, and recreational bonanza this unique region offers.

It’s difficult to define the Eifel area, primarily because of its geography. Politically, it belongs to the German state of Rheinland-Pfalz. Geographically, its boundaries extend into Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. The 435,000-acre North Eifel Nature Park, the sixth largest in Germany, forms part of the German-Belgium Nature Park, while the smaller 107,500-acre South Eifel Nature Park belongs to the German-Luxembourg Nature Park and the area known as Eifel Ardennen which extends into northern France. Though large, together these parks make up only a small portion of the entire Eifel region.

If you take a map of Germany and put your finger on the German-Dutch border town of Aachen in the German state of Nordrhein-Westfalen, you’re at the northern post of the Eifel. Now slide over to Köln (Cologne) and follow the Rhein River down through Bonn to Koblenz. Here, pick up the Mosel River and continue southwest to Trier. You’ve just taken a quick tour around the Eifel.

But a tour of the Eifel should not be quick. It should be leisurely paced. To help you get started, here’s a description of some of the Eifel’s unique attractions.

Burg Satzvey and the Knights’ Games. Count and Countess Beissel von Gymnich are graceful hosts. They hold parties for as many as a thousand people. And they do it in style--medieval style, that is. The Count and Countess are the owners and occupants of Burg Satzvey, a fairy tale castle located in the Eifel countryside of Mechernich-Satzvey near Euskirchen, in an area known as the county of castles.

Burg Satzvey is one of the best preserved castles in Germany. It’s also the location of one of the biggest jousting festivals and medieval events in the area. The annual festival brings the castle, with its turrets, moat, courtyard, and park, to life. It includes a charming medieval market where visitors are met by colorful booths, costumed vendors, wandering minstrels, jesters, acrobats, magicians, and artists.

The castle park hosts splendid groups of knights, Huns, Vikings, and samurai, all with their entourage living in replicas of ancient camps. The daily parade, sword fights, and jousting, and a medieval knight’s tent keep the park grounds busy.

To give an authentic view of medieval lifestyle, all costumes, booths, tournaments, and campsites are created from paintings, manuscripts, and traditions from the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries. “Our castle dates back to 1406,” says the Count. “We combine entertainment for modern people with the traditions of those times. We live here and therefore plan all festivities as if we were entertaining our own group of friends.”

The castle can also be reserved for private medieval parties for groups of 40 to 700 people. These parties include candlelight dinner with renaissance music, theater, jesters, dancers, and many other highlights.

The Count's private vineyards in Bullay, on the slopes of the Mosel River, and near Bad Kreuznach produces some fine wines. He can arrange wine probes at Satzvey Castle or in Bad Kreuznach for groups of 20 or more.

Rheinisches Freilichtmuseum. The Rhein Open Air and Folklore Museum, located in Kommern, shows how rural life was in the Rheinland during the pre-industrial age (late 15th to late 18th century). Some 80 buildings from this period are arranged into four villages. These four villages—Eifel, Westerwald, Lower Rhein, and Bergisches Land—include everything from windmills to wayside chapels.

The buildings are not copies. Each one is original and was brought from different regions of the Rheinland and reconstructed on the museum grounds. You can walk through farmhouses, stables, barns, village communal buildings, workshops, mills, bee sheds, schoolhouses, and a graveyard. On certain days, you can watch honey being made or bread being bake and given an opportunity to taste these traditional treats.

The museum has a permanent bee keeping exhibit and its adjoining exhibition halls contain a permanent Rhein pottery exhibit and a permanent collection of more than 120 doll houses and 600 dolls.

You're sure to work up an appetite after visting the museum. The Haus Kahlenbusch museum restaurant and cafe will take care of that, though. An ample menu of Eifel specialties, a rustic atmosphere, and plenty of Eifel wine and beer will have you rolling home.

Wildgehege Hellenthal. This 163-acre wildlife park is located in the North Eifel Nature Park town of Hellenthal. More than 750 animals, including deer, wolves, foxes, wild bore, and wild cats, roam the area in their natural habitat. Walking trails, a playground and small zoo for children to pet animals, a souvenir shop, and a rustic restaurant are at the park.

The wildlife park is well known; owned by a wealthy Arab, Salem Ebrahim Al-Saman; and managed by a world famous wildlife photographer, Horst Niesters. Niesters is a wildlife expert who specializes in breeding bald eagles. One of his proudest moments occurred when he presented two "presidential" bald eagles—Captain and Carol—to President and Mrs. Reagan during their 1982 trip to Germany. Niesters has bred 27 eagles, supplying them to major zoos. He says there are between 20 and 25 bald eagles in Europe and six of them are at Hellenthal. The park is a haven for all kinds of birds, with falcon shows held daily.

Phantasialand. This is Germany's largest amusement park. Located southwest of Cologne on B51 in Brühl, Phantasialand is billed as "the land with unlimited opportunities." It features rides that range from thrilling to relaxing; shows from all over the world; fun towns; and enough activities to keep the heartiest fest-types going all day. A new attraction is the huge Space Center, a ride that is claimed to be one the biggest indoor track in the world. New shows this year include a high diving team from America; a Michael Jackson impersonator from New York; and Siegfried and Roy, a wild cat show from Las Vegas. The admission ticket includes 25 different attractions at no extra cost.

Römerkanal-Wanderweg. With more than 3,600 marked walking trails and 74 regional circular trails, the Eifel is a hiker's paradise. The Römerkanal-Wanderweg Volksmarch, planned for June

26, is a good way to see the Eifel. The 30-kilometer walk starts in Nettersheim and follows ancient Roman canals north to Mechernich. Early Roman influence can be seen throughout the Eifel. The 95.4 kilometers of canals were built around 300 A.D. and are still intact. The canals have been declared as an archaeological walking trail.

Nürburgring. If you're a racing buff, you know the Nürburgring is one of the most famous tracks in the world. If you're a concert goer, you've probably heard of the two-day Rock on Ring open air concert held here. The concert features some of the world's best-known groups and fills the 120,000 capacity Ring.

The Ring is one of Formula 1's most hallowed grounds, rich in racing history. In past years, it was also one of the most dangerous, with a long list of fatalities. After mounting driver protest, the Ring was closed a few years ago and underwent a complete renovation. When it re-opened in 1984, it was hailed as the most modern and safest race facilities in the world. On certain days, visitors can drive around the 2.820-mile track for a small fee. Nürburgring is located about 70 kilometers south of Cologne.

Daun and the Vulkaneifel. The Vulkaneifel, or volcanic Eifel, is one of the most unique area in Germany. The region possesses the only crater lakes, called Maare, north of the Alps. About 10,000 years ago when the fiery cores of the area volcanoes extinguished, the deep funnels filled with water, creating the lakes that remain today. These lakes are untouched by urban sprawl. The forests virtually kiss the edges of the lakes all the way around, except near the recreational areas.

The holiday resort town of Daun, with its mineral springs, lies smack in the middle of the Vulkaneifel, an area known as the "eyes of the volcanic Eifel." Daun and the nine Maare in this area offer unlimited water sports.

The largest of these water-filled craters is the Pulvermaar near Gillenfeld. This 89-acre lake sinks at its lowest point to a depth of 240 feet. Surprisingly though, in summer the water temperature climbs to a very comfortable level.

Other lakes in the area are the Gemündener Maar, Holzmaar, Immerrather Maar, Schalkenmehrener Maar, Weinfelder Maar, Meerfelder Maar, Ulmener Maar, and the Windsbornkrater, a mountain crater lake.

Eifelpark. Adventure and nature come together in this park located on the edge of the Vulkaneifel in Gondorf near Bitburg. The park is in a natural wooded setting in the Kyll valley and is home for a lots of animals; a forestry museum; and plenty of rides, including slides, sailboats, and a water raft ride. Eifelpark boasts having the largest bear gorge in Europe.

Tourist Routes. The Eifel has three scenic tourist routes. The Deutsche Wildstrasse (German Wild Game Road) is a 253-kilometer loop that connects the towns of Bitburg, Gondorf, Grosslittgen, Manderschied, Gillenfeld, Schalkenmehren, Daun, Gerolstein, Prüm, Sch|necken, and Wiersdorf.

The Grüne Strasse Eifel-Ardennen (Eifel-Ardennen Green Road) runs north to south from Sinzig-Bad Bodendorf, through Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler, Altenahr, Schuld, Adenau, Nürburgring, Kelberg, Daun, Manderscheid, Kyllburg, Bitburg, Vianden (Luxembourg), to Dasburg.

The Ahr-Rotweinstrasse (Ahr Red Wine Road), another north-south route, starts at Sinzig and runs through Sinzing-Bad Bodendorf, Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler, Walporzheim, Dernau, Rech, Mayschoss, Altenahr, to Kreuzberg.

There's much more to see and do in the Eifel. The border towns of Aachen, Charlemagne's city; Cologne, the corner of Germany where the Rhine and the Mosel meet; Bonn, Germany's former capital; and Trier, Germany's oldest city, offer cultural activities associated with big city life. Many of the castles, monasteries, Roman villas, and old towns are untouched by past wars. The villages and health resorts in the Gemünd spa region rid the body and soul of most ailments. Maria Laach and its abbey church; the medieval town of Münstereifel, with its city walls, towers, and gates; the wine-producing valleys of the Rhein, Mosel, and Ahr rivers; the vigorous Eifel mountains; the purity of the air, the briskness of the climate, the clearness of the streams and lakes; and the abundance of recreation are alluring.

But be warned. Don't try to take a quick tour of the Eifel. Pace yourself leisurely and enjoy it.