

World Heritage Town of Cologne Gathering from 15-21 June 2011



The Cologne Gathering encompassed 24 participants, 11 were local and the rest visitors, with four ladies from Japan, two Australians, one Canadian, two English, one Swiss and three Germans (from Munich and Hamburg). The 5W visitors were welcomed on the first evening by the Cologne members armed with bottles of bubbly and a tempting array of hors d'oeuvres. The location was the panoramic observation platform of the Cologne Triangle Tower which afforded us fabulous views over Cologne intermingled with the darkening sky of an approaching thunder storm. Fortunately the storm bypassed us and we were able to have our photos taken and walk across the Hohenzollern bridge to our next location, the Consilium restaurant, without getting drenched.

On Friday afternoon we met again as a group at Cologne Cathedral for a guided tour. With our official guide we were privileged to be able to enter locked areas of the cathedral not open to the general public and I was particularly interested to see some of the dedicated restorers at work repairing the gold paintings. Cologne Cathedral, dedicated to St Peter and the Virgin Mary, is one of the best known architectural monuments in Germany. Commenced in 1248, it took 800 years to complete and is constantly under renovation as evidenced by the scaffolding adorning one of the spires. My very first vision of the Cathedral was six years ago from a train as I travelled over the Rhine on the line between Frankfurt and Dortmund on my way to catch a plane to Prague. I was so overwhelmed by the architecture that I vowed I would come back one day for a proper visit so it was wonderful to finally be back and have the opportunity to see inside.

Our next stop was the Coffeehouse Jansen where we enjoyed sumptuous cakes, tea and coffee while we waited for Gabi and the rest of our 5W hostesses to arrive after work. Gabi is an absolute whiz on the history of Cologne and its buildings and led us on a magical walking tour through the old city. During our walk we were introduced to the legendary Cologne puppets, Tuennes and Schael, the statues of martyrs on the old city hall and the fountain depicting the elves and the shoemaker and his wife, as told by the Brothers Grimm.

Dinner that evening was in the brewery restaurant "Gaffel Haus" where we were inducted into the German beer culture. Although the venue was very noisy and not what some of us were used to, the food was very good and the servings enormous. Marie Welch's pork knuckle was so huge we just had to take a photo of it as we were sure no one at home would believe us. Unfortunately, our Japanese friends had to leave us after dinner to continue their travels elsewhere so it was with sadness that we bid them farewell and wished them a safe journey.

Saturday morning our hostesses escorted us dockside to enjoy a river cruise on the Rhine. Our cruise on the Rhine took in all the sights of Cologne as well as cruise vessels and river barges. The afternoon offered a choice of museums and I opted for the Museum of German History in Bonn with the very knowledgeable Sandra Clauss and Maria Moenius as our leaders. I was particularly interested in the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall and spent my time exploring the third floor where the history of the Wall was explained. Afterwards we had a choice between visiting Bonn's parliamentary buildings or the old city and we opted for the latter. Just as we arrived at Bonn market square the heavens opened up so we made a quick dash into Bonn cathedral. Next, our umbrellas raised, we headed for a quick look at Beethoven's house but an unexpectedly prolonged shower imposed a much longer visit and we spent nearly an hour there, only leaving upon eviction at closing time.

Sunday again offered a choice of activities, including a morning church service in Cologne Cathedral and afternoon visits to various museums. I opted for the 40km drive into the country with eight other women to the open-air-museum in Lindlar where they were demonstrating turn-of-the-century occupations such as rope-making and sawmilling. Gabi cultivates a small sponsored garden there, growing Meize Schindler, a type of strawberry grown in the traditional manner and not available in supermarkets, and as we walked, talked and admired her plots, Gabi invited us to help ourselves to a feast of delicious strawberries, which we did.

In the evening, everyone met at "Alte Liebe" a floating restaurant on the Rhine. Here we were regaled with stories from the other 5Ws who had spent their afternoon visiting the Museum of Ethnology, the Cologne Chocolate Museum (this was tempting), and a train trip to the country. The latter returnees were exceedingly enthusiastic having unexpectedly joined in a procession of wine festivities where they were handed a seemingly bottomless wine glass which was freely topped up by people passing in the parade. A lot of giggling ensued.

Our final day in Cologne provided another day of pleasant surprises when we were taken on a tour of the art museum of Kolumba. This building is breathtakingly spectacular for its simplicity, fabulous architecture and its aesthetic protection of the Roman ruins and Church of St Columba which had previously stood there.

Afterwards, Sandra led some of us on a different tour of Cologne city. This time it was to the original 4711 shop and then the Globetrotter store where we were fascinated by canoeists trying out canoes on the inside pool by the elevator and blasted by a Swiss blizzard in an ice-room. Despite Sandra's urging, we declined to try out the rain shower but we did walk across the digital-frog pool.

On Monday afternoon a tour of the Romanic churches of St Kunibert and St Ursula. The legend of St Ursula featured in many stories throughout our tour of Cologne. According to the legend, c.383, St Ursula was destined to marry in Cologne and was accompanied on her trip by 11,000 virgins. On the way the virgins were beheaded by the Huns and St Ursula shot. The Basilica of St Ursula now contains a wall decorated with what has been described as a "veritable tsunami of ribs, shoulder blades, and femurs...arranged in zigzags and swirls and even in the shapes of Latin words" that were found on the site and were purportedly those of St Ursula's maidens.

Our farewell dinner in the restaurant, Alte Feuerwache, a former fire station with an all you can eat buffet, was a fabulous finale to what was a wonderful week with our newfound friends. Too soon dinner was over and hugs, thanks and goodbyes were exchanged with those who had to leave early because of work the next day. Those who were left meandered over to a nearby beerhouse where more beer and schnapps were imbibed. A few partners/husbands joined us and after another couple of hours of camaraderie we drifted out of the bar and home to bed to ruminate over the fabulous days we had just spent with our newfound international friends and wonderful hostesses.

On behalf of all attendees I would like to say a very big thank you to Annette and the Cologne ladies for organising such a wonderful visit to your beautiful city. We were made to feel very welcome and the tours you organized for us were extremely interesting and informative. **Auf Wiedersehen!**

