

Vacation Guide

Savoir faire meets gemütlichkeit in Alsace

Alsace might just be France's version of the land of milk and honey. The Alsatians could not be blamed if they were to think that they have it all.

Their vineyards, producing mainly dry white wines, are world famous. The bounty of the high mountain pastures and broad lush fields of the Rhine plain fills the shops and tables: Münster cheese, foie gras, mirabelle plums, superb pine-smoked ham, fat sausages and fresh pork, rich tarts and kugelhof, all of this topped off by extraordinary fine eau-de-vie.

Even in the cities of Strasbourg, Colmar and Mulhouse, there's awareness and celebration of each season, the crops and the wine.

Moments to enjoy

Flowers are planted to brighten every corner, and restoration continues in the quarters of the cities and villages that date from the Middle Ages and Renaissance, making every detail of traditional Alsatian architecture come alive.

But this was not always true. Alsatians describe their corner of northeastern France as lying *entre deux portes*, between two gates—France and Germany.

This elongated swath of fertile valley, vineyard-covered foothills and tall Vosges Mountains has been a coveted prize since the Romans made it part of their empire.

Mulhouse (pronounced *muh-loose*) is Alsace's second largest city. At a shallow part of the Rhine and on the main route between the Jura and Vosges Mountains, this ancient city was almost completely destroyed in the two World Wars.

For a glimpse of its history, stop into the Musée de l'Impression, which tells the story of fabric printing through the ages.

Just beyond the city limits, the flat Rhine plain reaches west to the foothills of the Vosges Mountains. As far as the eye can see, there are fields of wheat, barley, tobacco and trellised hops.

Scattered among the fields and orchards are small farming villages, where houses and low sheds for machinery line the main streets.

One of these villages is different. Betschdorf, which is just north of the Haguenau Forest, is home to potters who welcome visitors to their studios and galleries. Their distinctive blue and

gray stoneware comes in every shape, size and form.

The first grape vines were brought to the protected eastern foothills of the Vosges in the third century.

Ever since, the dry white riesling, sylvaner, gewurztraminer, pinot blanc and Tokay wines have been Alsace's glory and wealth.

Along the Wine Road (*Route du Vin*), which stretches almost 90 miles from Marlenheim south to Thann, the vineyards encircle small towns that are centuries old.

With determination and no stopping, the entire winding route can be driven in a day, but it's a better idea to leisurely explore a few of the prettiest villages, leaving time to sample the wines and browse in shops. Within just a few miles of Colmar, there are several worth discovering.

Less than five miles to the south, tiny Eguisheim nestles among its vineyards. Much of the 16th-century town is unchanged, as you'll discover walking up its narrow side streets of half-timbered houses and low curved doorways.

Caveau d'Eguisheim (dated 1603) is an ideal stop for lunch in the sunny second-floor dining room, or for sampling the wine among the huge casks on the ground floor. And just across the square at Au Folklore Alsacien, you'll find an unusual selection of pottery.

On leaving Eguisheim take the road that climbs up and around the three medieval towers that guarded the town until the 15th century. The road turns north past more ruins before winding into Turckheim and then on to Niedermorschwihr, with its oddly-twisted church spire.

Another few miles north is Kaysersberg, the birthplace of Albert Schweitzer. The town was founded by the Romans to command one of the mountains, and later it continued as a strategic favorite of various emperors and Kaisers.

Today it is a handsome, busy wine town with neat, half-timbered houses edging the cascading Weiss River and many 12 to 15th-century landmark buildings that recount the past.

Connoisseur's village

Clinging to a vineyard-covered hillside north of Kaysersberg, Riquewihr is undoubtedly the most picture-perfect of all the wine towns.

Instead of one or two houses that deserve admiration, at every turn there are elegant carved facades, finely wrought shopkeepers' signs and quiet courtyards and squares, each with its old fountain or well.

The Vosges Mountains Throughout the centuries, the Vosges have been either religious sanctuaries or the last line of defense.

Their heights are dotted with the ruins of fortified feudal castles and with convents and churches dedicated to one saint or another.

In the far north, the road from Niederrhein-les-Bains winds past numerous castle ruins before reaching Chateau de Fleckenstein.

A favorite weekend jaunt, the chateau is carved into its rocky perch, high above the border with Germany.

Closer to Strasbourg, another mountain road will take you up through magnificent stands of pine and fir in the Saverne Forest to Rocher de Dabo.

On top of this narrow pinnacle a small chapel is dedicated to Alsace's 11th-century Pope Leon IX. The chapel may be uninteresting, but the view of forested mountains is worth the trip.

The most dramatic of various circuits into the Vosges is the Route des Crêtes, which runs across the crests of the mountains from Ulzheim near Mulhouse to Col du Bonhomme on the western slope.

Alsace has a rich history, firmly rooted traditions, excellent wines, 29 Michelin-starred restaurants and beautiful, varied countryside dotted with warm, comfortable inns.

And, Alsatians are well versed in proudly sharing it all with strangers.

Alsace's two major cities, Mulhouse to the south and Strasbourg to the north, are about one hour from Paris on Air Inter, or four hours via TEE express train.

A car is necessary outside the cities, and major rental companies have offices at the airports and near the train stations.

Essentials to take along: a red Guide Michelin for hotel and restaurant listings and its detailed maps of cities; the green Guide Michelin to the Vosges, routes, sites and towns (in French only); and the brochure (in English) simply entitled *Alsace*, available from the French Government Tourist Office, 610 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10020.

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