

EPIC HIKES: ALONG THE PALATINATE WINE ROUTE

START: BAD DÜRKHEIM

FINISH: TRIFELS CASTLE, ANNWEILER

90 KM

Amongst the top hikes in Germany, the Palatinate does not always feature prominently. This accolade is usually reserved for the *Rheinsteig* (a 320 km long distance trail along the valley of the river Rhine; see: www.rheinsteig.de/en), or the *Rennsteig* (a mere 170km trek through the Thuringian forest; see: www.germany.travel/en/nature-outdoor-activities/rennsteig.html). The glorious Palatinate region, however, often gets overlooked. This is surprising, as you will hike through sun-soaked vineyards and dense forests. The trail is a combination of two popular long distance hikes: the *Weinsteig* (literally wine trek) which meanders for 170 km in and out of the thick Palatinate forest. If you like trees (and lots of them), this is your place. At times, the scenery might just get a little too gloomy and claustrophobic, which is where the *Mandelpfad* (literally Almond path) comes in handy as a trail that gently makes its way for some 100 km along rolling vineyards and through pretty villages. Both trails have their own dedicated websites, designed by the regional tourist authority, and are clearly signposted: the *Weinsteig* as a red and white logo depicting a grape, and the *Mandelpfad* with a big almond on it. Please note that the Mandelpfad is mainly on paved roads linking individual vineyards, and thus is also highly suitable for riding a bike.

<https://www.tourenplaner-rheinland-pfalz.de/en/tour/long-distance-hiking/pfaelzer-weinsteig-complete-trail/11219679/>

<https://www.tourenplaner-rheinland-pfalz.de/en/list/der-pfaelzer-mandelpfad/116051351/>



Forst

The Palatinate (or *Pfalz* in German) sits in the south-western corner of Germany on the border with Alsace in France. In an unfortunate and vainglorious attempt, tourist officials started to refer to the area as the 'Tuscany of Germany'. Okay, there are vineyards, the climate is surprisingly mild, even hot in the summer, and castles dot the hilly landscape. But the area is quintessentially German with medieval ruins, a heavy (yet very scrumptious) cuisine whose inhabitants often display a rather sturdy complexion; testimony to a diet that relies maybe that little bit too much on pork products and

potatoes. I was born and raised there. I love it. Getting there is straight forward. Nearly international airports include the big German hub in Frankfurt as well as the small regional airport in Karlsruhe Baden. National train links arrive in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse (they like their names long in this part of the world), from where local buses can take you to the different points along the trail.

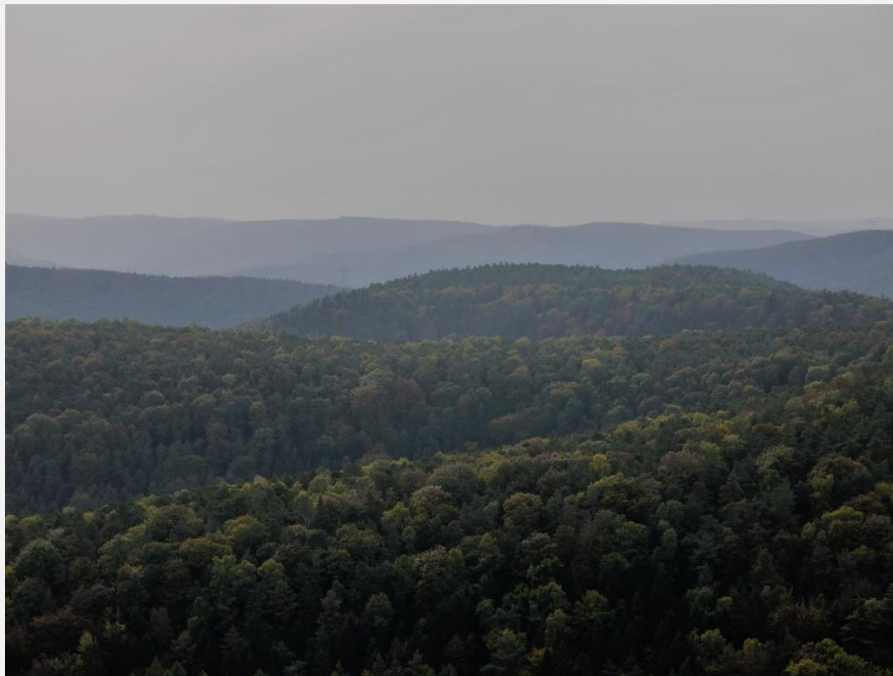


Wachtenburg

By the 1980s, the *Pfalz's* wine industry achieved a rather notorious reputation: cheap and sugary stuff that went straight to your head and tended to dominate the cheaper end of Aldi's alcohol range. But a new generation of winemakers took over, went upmarket and formed the cornerstone of the regions' impressive revival. Add to it another vainglorious official attribute, that of the 'vegetable garden of Germany', and you now have a gourmet destination, whereas some wines that bring about nostalgic, fuzzy images of my student days are now thankfully being almost impossible to find (Gewürztraminer anyone?)



By far the best time to visit is either in the spring or during the autumn. By about March, the almond trees should be in full bloom and in mid-October the vines are starting to show some rather impressive colours. The scenery on both occasions is just lovely. You will share this delight with fellow tourists: mostly locals, a few from other parts of Germany but the area is practically off the international tourist map; at least for now. Still, booking your accommodation in advance is a must (www.booking.com should do the trick). There are plenty of smaller guest houses and boutique hotels, but places do fill up. At the upmarket end of the scale is the Hotel Alte Rebschule (www.alte-rebschule.de), which sits prominently amongst vineyards in the picturesque town of Rhodt unter Rietburg. You can spend each night in a different locations along the way, but it is also feasible base yourself in one spot and to make your way to and from the trail with easy and short train or bus journeys (see www.rome2rio.com). Your hikes might be accompanied by the odd fighter jet doing its stuff up in the sky. This is courtesy of the U.S. air force which occupies a massive base in the nearby town of Ramstein. Just try and ignore them; at least you can rest in the safe assurance that you are protected.



Stage 1:

Bad Dürkheim to Neustadt an der Weinstrasse

18 km, 4 ½ hours

Mandelpfad Leg 3

<https://www.tourenplaner-rheinland-pfalz.de/en/tour/thematic-trail/pfaelzer-mandelpfad-etappe-03-bad-duerkheim-bis-neustadt/19632465/>

The route follows the *Mandelpfad* all the way. You might want to check out the gigantic barrel in Bad Dürkheim (just a novelty gag really), but make sure to rest in the grounds of the Wachtenburg ruin above the village of Wachenheim. There is a small restaurant with great views across the Rhine valley. The path also meanders through the pretty villages of Forst and Deidesheim; the latter the scene of the infamous visit of UK prime minister Margret Thatcher, who was hosted by Chancellor Helmut Kohl in the restaurant *Deidesheimer Hof*. He tucked in with gusto; she apparently was busy hiding her slap of *Saumagen* (the Palatinate version of Haggis) under a salad leaf. Bless.

Stage 2:

Neustadt an der Weinstrasse to Sankt Martin

20 km, 6 ½ hours

Weinsteig Leg 5

<https://www.tourenplaner-rheinland-pfalz.de/en/tour/long-distance-hiking/pfaelzer-weinsteig-stage-5-neustadt-an-der-weinstrasse-st.-martin/1544885/>

Today is a tougher hike, leading you into the Palatinate Forest following the *Weinsteig*, and onto its highest peak (the *Kalmit* at 673 metres). Make sure to stop over at the *Hambacher Schloss*, a symbol of German democracy when locals marched on to the castle in 1832 to protest against repressive measures imposed by the ruling Bavarian administration. From the castle, a narrow path leads you to another enticing lunch stop: The *Klausentalhütte*, once again with far-reaching views.

Stage 3: Sankt Martin to Burrweiler

17 km, 5 ½ hours

Weinsteig Leg 6

<https://www.tourenplaner-rheinland-pfalz.de/en/tour/long-distance-hiking/pfaelzer-weinsteig-stage-6-st.-martin-burrweiler/1513953/#dm=1>

Drifting in and out of the forest, make sure to check out Rhodt unter Rietburg with the charming *Theresienstrasse* which should get your Instagram account buzzing. Worth a visit is also *Villa Ludwigshöhe*, an Italianate mansion built for King Ludwig I of Bavaria (and grandfather of eccentric Ludwig #2, who topped his relative by commissioning *Schloss Neuschwanstein*; a copycat of which graces Disneyland). You will also come across a ski lift (though no ski slopes) which – if you must - carries you from Rhodt to yet another castle, the *Rietburg* with fine and far reaching views. Along the way another *Hütte*/small restaurant the briskly named *Waldgasthaus zur Siegfriedschmiede* should satisfy your culinary cravings.

Stage 4: Burrweiler to Dernbach

17 km, 5 ½ hours

Weinsteig Leg 7

<https://www.tourenplaner-rheinland-pfalz.de/en/tour/long-distance-hiking/pfaelzer-weinsteig-stage-7-burrweiler-dernbach/1481451/>

And back into the forest. Today is hut day. One of the charming quirks of this trail are the preponderance of *Hütten* (huts) which offer local gastronomic delights at reasonable prices. Make sure to wash the food down (at least once) with a *Schoppen* (a pint of dry white wine, usually Riesling, watered down ever so slightly). And today you will be passing four of them: *St. Anna Hütte*, *Trifelsblick Hütte*, *Ramberger Waldhaus*, and *Landauer Hütte*. In between you will come across a massive castle ruin called Neuscharfeneck, destroyed, like a lot of stuff in this area, during the Thirty-Year war. Easy on the *Schoppen*, please: one ruin is enough for the day.

Stage 5: Dernbach to Annweiler

15 km, 5 hours

Weinsteig Leg 8

<https://www.tourenplaner-rheinland-pfalz.de/en/tour/long-distance-hiking/pfaelzer-weinsteig-stage-8-dernbach-annweiler-am-trifels/1558710/>

Still in the forest, interspersed by the odd meadow and another tall hill in the shape of the *Grosser Adelberg*. But the real target for today is the majestic castle *Trifels*, which you will get a glimpse of at the end of this tour. The *Trifels* is a medieval giant, restored in the 18th and 19th century, which was used as a glorified prison for people who did not meet the approval of several German emperors, including amongst others Richard the Lionheart. Built in the local red sandstone and positioned rather impressively on top of a cliff, it offers an eerily-apt backdrop for your average WWII movie. If you still have the energy, make the 1-hour hike up the cliff from Annweiler. If not, the castle will still be there in the morning.



Trifels

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