



COLOUR ME RED (Clockwise) The Market Church; Kochbrunnen Quelle; Café Maldaner. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR



Waters of Wiesbaden

From Romans to Europe's richest, the magical waters of Wiesbaden have been attracting tourists for their curative powers. **KALPANA SUNDER** soaks in her aches at ancient spas in the sleepy German town.

“You can colour your hair, heal any cuts, improve your digestion and make your skin glow,” says our guide Ulrich W Hies, as he gives us a glass of warm, salty water from the fountain. I am enraptured by this cheap and easy method to good health and lustrous skin. Wiesbaden, the capital of the state of Hesse in Germany, is located at the foot of the forested Taunus Hills, and has been a spa city since the Roman times.

The restorative hot water gave the town its first name — ‘Aquae Mattiacorum’. The entrepreneurial inhabitants of this town used to scrape the reddish mineral deposits from the edge of the basins, shape them into balls and send them to Rome. The Romans used to use this ‘Mattiaca’ balls for colouring and lightening their hair. Today, there are 26 hot springs dotting the city, whose curative waters are touted to cure everything from rheumatism and gout to respiratory problems.

Hot springs

We are at the Kochbrunnen Quelle, which looks like a giant clam with steam emanating from its top. It's the hottest spring in town, with water at a temperature of 67 degree Celsius and spouts 350 litres of curative water per minute. I see locals soak their feet in the waters to ease their aching joints. I smear some of the orange-yellow residue (a cocktail of minerals like iron, sulphur) on my hands.

A few feet away is the Kochbrunnen — the most prolific drinking fountain, where locals fill bottles. Many underground springs meet here, and it gushes from a depth of 6,000 feet. It's much better than any health supplement that you can buy, as it has over 23 minerals.

We visit the Kaiser Friedrich Therme, a public bath dating back to 1913, with hot thermal water at 66 degree Celsius. This Art Nouveau building, embellished with ceramics, green tiles, Islamic arches and huge frescoes, has an Irish-Roman bath,

saunas, steam baths, an oriental rasul and rest zones. It's a bathing paradise where you can feel your tensions dissipate in the waters.

The town became the capital of the new duchy of Nassau in 1806 and soon a destination for the rich and elite. Elegant ladies from nearby Frankfurt made sure, when drawing up their marriage contracts, that they could visit the Wiesbaden spa once a year — without their husbands. When the town was handed over to Prussia, Kaiser Wilhelm I stayed here frequently, and public buildings like the Kurhaus were built.

The Kurhaus, flanked by two wide tree-lined boulevards and a park called the Bowling Green is a magnificent building with a colonnade (said to be the longest in Europe), which houses meeting rooms and the casino. Conventions, meetings, conferences and concerts are all held under its roof.

Casino Royale

Our hotel, the Radisson Blu Schwarzer Bock, is a historic building dating back to 1486, when it started life as a bathhouse. As I explore the interiors, the Ingelheim room, dating back to the 1880s, entrances me with its Italian door with rosette panels, and carvings of noble crests and other symbols. It is now the prized meeting room of the hotel. I follow the trail of intellectuals and artists who have visited this town. Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner found inspiration here.

Brahms spent a summer here in 1883 where he completed his Symphony No.3 — he called this symphony his ‘Wiesbadener’. Goethe spent time here in 1814, and Dostoevsky gambled big time at the casino here in the 1860s when he amassed huge debts. They say that Otto Von Bismarck lost an entire year's salary playing roulette in Wiesbaden's casino. The town used to have more millionaires than any other part of Europe.

With the hot springs and the casino

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ticked off my to-do list, I was ready for a tea break at Café Maldaner, full of old world charm and elegance. Like a classic Viennese café, this is filled with luscious desserts and coffee served by nubile waitresses in white aprons and caps. The famed dessert of the town is Ananas tortchen, a delectable concoction made with chocolate, nougat, pineapple, almonds and wafers. I hear that there are 14 processing steps, and it is made today, like it was 100 years before.

Heritage tour

Elegant mansions and art nouveau houses dot the town. Narrow serpentine streets lined with 18th and 19th century buildings run through Wiesbaden's old quarter. My favourite is the red brick Protestant ‘Marktkirche’ (Market Church), with the highest tower in town and the largest organ in Germany.

I take a ride on the kitschy Neroberg funicular to Wiesbaden's own little mountain. This quaint railway, dating back to 1888, is driven by the power of water ballast. On top of the mountain are white benches, cafés and gazebos and families with kids and pets picnicking on the lawns. There are countless walking trails and friendly hikers pointing us in the right direction. I walk into the atmospheric Russian Orthodox Church with its five gold cupolas, which is nicknamed the ‘Taj Mahal of Wiesbaden’. It was built by the grieving Duke Adolf for his wife Elizabeth and their baby daughter. Elisabeth Romanov was the niece of the Russian Czar. She came to Wiesbaden to marry the ruling Duke Adolf of Nassau in 1844, but tragically died at childbirth the following year, at the age of 19. The church is a lavish construction with Cararra marble, icons and candles.

My tryst with Wiesbaden is over sooner than I like, but much later, as I wing my way home, I wish I had a fountain like Kochbrunnen Quelle where I could soak my aches away.