# Cathedrals, Kölsch and beyond: The spirit of Cologne

A guide to the city's iconic landmarks, rich culture and hidden treasures.

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■ In many ways, contemporary Cologne can be said to be living out the multiculturalism of its ancient origins. Formed over 2,000 years ago out of an unlikely and not entirely figurative marriage between the Roman army and a tiny Germanic village, today Cologne is a dynamic and diverse cosmopolitan city wrapped around a lively core of unique local cultural traditions. This article explores a number of these to help you make the most of your time in Cologne and sample some of the sights, sounds and flavours that make this place famous.

## Art and architecture

The focal point of the city—historical, cultural and photographic—is without question the imposing Cologne Cathedral, located at the heart of the old town. The church took a staggering 632 years to build and, despite its archaic exterior, was only completed in 1880, a relative newcomer as far as Gothic churches are concerned. This sacred building is replete with treasures and precious artworks, the most important being the shrine of the Magi, which is believed to hold the remains of the three wise men of the Bible. The cathedral is by no means the only famous church in the city, however; across various parts of the old town stand 12 Romanesque churches, the majority of which are well over 1,000 years old. All are stunningly beautiful in their own right, and one of them, the basilica of St. Ursula, even has a chamber with walls of bones!

Within the centre of the city is a wealth of other architectural jewels worth visiting. At the top of the list is the Cologne city hall (Kölner Rathaus), founded in the twelfth century and the oldest in Germany. Its exterior is adorned by the famous Platzjabbeck, a man's head carved from wood with his tongue mockingly sticking out. In 1913, the figure received a technological upgrade to make the tongue retract and extend every hour on the hour! From the medieval to the modern, across the river stands the iconic KölnTriangle. The skyscraper's observation deck, which costs a paltry €5 to access, affords panoramic views of Cologne, and from this lofty vista can be seen a couple of landmarks worth exploring on the ground.

First is the well-known Hohenzollern Bridge. While this bridge is the most heavily used railway bridge in Germany, it is not transport but romance that is foremost in the minds of those who visit it. The amorous character of the bridge is defined most poetically by the love locks that adorn the walkway, around 200,000 according to some estimates and with a collective weight of 4.5 tonnes! Besides being a beacon of love, the bridge usefully connects the two sides of the city centre and yields splendid views of the river itself.

From there, it is just a five-minute walk to the Museum Ludwig, a renowned centre of art appreciation that boasts an extensive collection, including the surrealism of Dalí, the pop art reproductions of Warhol and the cubist distortions of Picasso. Museums are certainly a forte of Cologne, there being no shortage of novelty and niche institutions covering all manner of themes. Visitors to IDS might be especially interested in the famous Chocolate Museum, situated on the banks of the Rhine. Here, visitors can not only learn about the history and production of the delicious confectionary but also sample it—many times over! If the quotidian is your desire, then the Museum of Applied Arts explores the creation and use of everyday objects, ranging all the way from the Middle Ages to the present. For the more cerebrally inclined, the Kolumba museum presents itself as a museum of contemplation, where visitors and not glossy presentations create the exhibit's meaning. You are not told what you are looking at; rather to comprehend an exhibit, you need to analyse it and reflect on it.

## The high life: Food, drink and music

Any discussion of either the nightlife or culinary sphere of Cologne necessarily begins with its eponymous style of beer, Kölsch. Served in unique, slim glasses, Kölsch is not simply a beer but a symbol of the city itself. To drink it is not only to enjoy a delicious beverage but to participate, as the locals do, in a cultural tradition at the heart of the city's identity. There is a plethora of great

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Kölsch pubs spread across the centre of the city, but for those seeking an authentic, purist experience, the following haunts should satisfy. Lommerzheim (known locally as "Lommi") is a legendary pub in the Deutz neighbourhood; the FRÜH am Dom, located near Cologne Cathedral, is one of the city's most famous breweries; and Päffgen is one of the few remaining traditional brewhouses, delighting with its old-world charm.

Cologne also possesses its own delicious local cuisine. Himmel un Ääd (heaven and earth) is a mouthwatering combination of black pudding, fried onions, mashed potatoes and apple sauce. Derived from a German national dish, the Rheinischer Sauerbraten (sour roast) is similarly succulent and made of marinated beef that is slow-cooked until tender and often served with potato dumplings and red cabbage. Another option to try is the Halver Hahn. While the name might suggest a meal involving chicken, this treat is actually a rye bread roll with a thick slice of Dutch cheese and pickles or onion. This is perfect as a quick snack when going about the city.

The city's cuisine has rich Middle Eastern and North African ethnic influences too, and its falafel and kebab culture is highly regarded. Cologne's food scene blends traditional and modern interpretations of these dishes, making them some of the most popular street foods in the city. The Ehrenfeld neighbourhood is a hot spot for authentic Middle Eastern food, including some of the best falafel and doner kebab options, whereas Mülheim and Kalk are both areas with strong Turkish and Lebanese influences, as well as exquisite regional cuisine.

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As far as music is concerned, Cologne will surely not disappoint even the most discerning of listeners. One of the most trendy parts of Cologne, and which naturally houses a wide range of great bars and cafes, is the Belgian Quarter, situated nearby the central part of the city. Here, you should certainly try Little Link, a well-liked and sophisticated cocktail bar also offering small bites. Within the old town, there is no shortage of great bars and clubs, and Papa Joe's Jazzlokal is a must not only for jazz lovers, providing smooth music and mellow ambience in a cosy, intimate setting. For those whose appetite for dancing can only be quenched by something more energetic, the famous Gewölbe club, on the outskirts of the Belgian Quarter, keeps punters happy until the small hours.

## A dose of fresh air: The nature side of Cologne

If it is fresh air and natural beauty that you are craving after the heady atmosphere of IDS, then Cologne has a number of options. How about a trip to Cologne Zoo? Easily accessible from the city centre, this stimulating space has more than 10,000 animals and boasts an aquarium and an elephant park, where the herd is a family group and lives without direct contact with caretakers. The zoo is open to visitors all year.

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If you are more interested in plants, then the Flora and Botanical Garden is a sensory paradise. The botanical garden is home to approximately 12,000 plant species from all over the world and is nestled on around 5.5 hectares of green space. It features many themed gardens, including English landscape, Italian Renaissance and French Baroque. Visitors can also take a look at the alpine plantings, the iris garden or the lily garden and then visit the greenhouses.

Any account of Cologne would be remiss were it not to make at least some mention of its defining geographic feature, namely the mighty Rhine. Probably the best way to experience the river is a boat cruise. There are many types of cruises available, from short forays around the city to longer excursions down the river. Cruises can be booked from the Köln-tourist ticket office, situated on the waterfront directly in front of the main train station in the old town.

*Editorial note: All details were current at the time of writing in late February.*

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