

Cologne

Overview

Sitting on the shores of the River Rhine is Cologne, Germany's fourth largest city with nearly one million inhabitants. Founded in 38 BC by the Romans it is also one of Germany's oldest cities and takes its name from the Roman settlement of Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium. Cologne is proud to be one of the top economic, cultural and tourism hotspots in the country and is considered to be Germany's "gay capital".

Thanks to the age of the city, Cologne has many and varied historic attractions for its visitors to see, some of which are described in more detail below. With over 30 museums and countless galleries, the city has an abundance of cultural delights on offer. Notable museums include the Kolumba which is built in accordance to the ancient foundations of the shrine of Mary, and the Chocolate Museum for those with a sweet tooth and a sense of humour. Art lovers will definitely not be disappointed with the world class exhibitions to explore; the galleries feature art from medieval times into the modern age. A MuseumsPass valid for two consecutive days can be bought that provides admission into all the municipal venues at discounted rates.

If you fancy a break from sightseeing why not head down to one of Cologne's beautiful city parks? The parks are packed with locals and visitors in the summer who come to relax and sunbathe, play games and feast on barbecues. Even in colder months a stroll through one of the city's outdoor spaces is a treat for the senses with the stunning reds and yellows of the trees in autumn. Many companies offer boat tours on the River Rhine during the milder months, and the sights of Cologne take on a different feel when viewed from the water. Walking tours are also available if you'd rather keep your feet on dry land!

For anyone feeling hungry after all the exploring there are loads of good and inexpensive places to fill up. Traditional Cologne cuisine tends to be quite simple but hearty and very filling and the best places to get an authentic taste experience are the independent breweries in out of the way locations. Full of atmosphere, unlike the larger more well known restaurant chains, the pubs provide good value for money with friendly service. International dishes can also be found in restaurants all over the city and the wide range of eateries (both traditional and international) means there is something available for every budget.

Beer is the drink of choice in Cologne with the local beer Kölsch being the most popular. It is served in small glasses of 0.2L so that it's always fresh but there is no need to keep going to the bar as the majority of pubs employ waiters who will keep you topped up for as long as you wish. Beer lovers should head to one of the traditional breweries in the Altstadt around the Dom for the evening for the huge range of different ales on offer. For a more modern experience Zülpicher Straße or the bohemian quarter of Agnesviertel is where most locals can be found on a busy Saturday night. The bars and pubs often have live music and the atmosphere is always buzzing.

Places to Visit

Kölner Dom

The awe inspiring Cologne Cathedral looms large over the city and has been a constant landmark since its two towers were completed in 1880. An engineering masterpiece the foundation stone for the cathedral was laid in 1248 however it took a further 600 years for building work to be completed. Visitors to the cathedral can climb the 533 stairs up to the viewing platform on the south tower for unparalleled views over Cologne; on the way up see the world's largest free swinging church bell at 24,000kg.

Philharmonic Concert Hall

The magnificent Philharmonic Concert Hall lies underneath the streets of Cologne between the Kölner Dom and the Rhine. The astounding size of this underground concert hall means it can house more than 2000 guests. With plush red velvet seats and intricate woodwork the huge round Philharmonic has some of the best acoustics of any venue in Europe. Playing host to world class performances from classical music to opera and jazz the venue is regularly filled to capacity, creating a great atmosphere for the audience.

Cologne Town Hall

The wonderfully Gothic Cologne Town Hall (Rathaus) was built in the early 14th century, although many of its most notable features have been added on through the years. The imposing tower stands 61 meters high, is decorated with over 130 stone statues and features a grotesque wooden face which sticks out its tongue when the clock strikes the hour! The 16th century loggia is the Town Hall's most famous addition and is a near perfect example of Renaissance era architecture.

Romanesque Churches

Cologne's twelve Romanesque churches all stand within the city's medieval city wall and are an important window back into Cologne's wealthy medieval heritage. With many legends surrounding the churches and their impressive architecture they are a must see during any trip to Cologne. All but one of the churches (St. Maria Lyskirchen) suffered much destruction during World War II but the city is extremely proud of its medieval heritage and they were lovingly restored back to their former glory.

EL-DE House

The well preserved EL-DE House is now one of Colognes most respected museums. During World War II it was used as a residence for the Secret Police and the basement a torture prison for their victims. Visitors to the museum can see inscriptions on the walls of the prison, which is now a memorial to those who were held there. The permanent exhibition entitled "Cologne in the times of National Socialism" is an interesting insight into Germany during the War.

Remagen

The town of Remagen, about an hours drive south of Cologne has such a well known history it is well worth a trip. The Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen was famous for its role in World War II being a key strategic location for both Hitler and the allies. All that remains of the bridge now are the towers which house a museum and a memorial to those that died. Also well worth a look is the magnificent Apollinariskirche offering spectacular views over the countryside.

Regular Events

January - KunstSalon music festival

The unusual KunstSalon music festival sees those dedicate to culture opening up their homes and private spaces for concerts and performances. This unique event focuses on supporting up and coming artists by providing a more intimate atmosphere in which they can be heard.

February - The Cologne Carnival

Carnival season is officially opened at 11:11 on the 11th of November but it is not until February and March that the excitement really begins. The biggest street party of the year, the Cologne Carnival is a massive celebration and sees the majority of residents taking part in singing and dancing and nearly all wearing fancy dress. The grand finale is two days before Ash Wednesday when a grand procession of floats and dancers winds its way through the city.

April - Verzaubert Film Festival

Cologne is one of four German cities' that plays host to the Verzaubert Film Festival. The weekend festival aims to bring gay and lesbian cinema to a wider audience with film screenings and lectures open to the public.

May - Museums in Cologne

Once a year in May the museums of Cologne open their doors late into the night and provide free transport between the institutions. With special events scheduled in order to attract new visitors, it is a great way to experience the wealth of culture on offer in the city.

June - The Cologne Bierbörse

The Cologne Bierbörse is one of the premier German beer festivals and the only place to be for beer enthusiasts in June. There are over 650 different beers on offer and loads of free samples to get you in the spirit, sit under one of the shady trees in the biggest beer garden in town.

July - Cologne Lights

Cologne Lights is a magical night where the city's buildings along the River Rhine are beautifully lit up and onlookers watch a procession of ships with candles in their hands. The atmosphere builds with excitement before the grand finale of a huge fireworks display set to music.

August - Summer Cologne

A celebration of performing arts hits the streets of Cologne in August with Summer Cologne. The many and varied open air performances take place around the city and are all free. Catch some street theatre or watch in suspense as acrobats fly past.

September - The Cologne-Weidenpesch Racecourse

September is a great month for horse racing at the Cologne-Weidenpesch Racecourse, with the group I Europe Prize and the Group II Grand European Mile, racing fans will not be disappointed at the equine quality on offer.

October - Cologne Comedy Festival

Throughout October at various establishments around the city the International Cologne Comedy Festival takes place. Providing laughs to over 20,000 spectators the event mainly attracts German speaking performers. From traditional stand up to the more bizarre "SMS Call In" comedy there's giggles for everyone.

November - Art Fair 21

Art Fair 21, Cologne's premier art expo, has a different theme each year with the most recent being China (2009). Featuring pieces for sale from the generation of today, the event attracts artists and galleries from across the world.

December - Cologne's Night of the Proms

Cologne's Night of the Proms occurs every December at the city's Lanxess Arena. A mixture of classical and contemporary music performances, the event draws big crowds and tickets sell out fast so if you want to go, plan ahead.

Getting Around

Airport Transfers

The Cologne/ Bonn Airport, Konrad Adenauer Airport, is located 15 km south of the city centre, approximately half way between the cities of Cologne and Bonn. If you are arranging your own transport away from the airport the S-Bahn is the most convenient way to travel. With services leaving from the airport directly into Köln Hauptbahnhof up to three times every hour at a cost of only €2.30 for a one way ticket, the 15 minute journey is the most direct. If you want to travel by bus route the journey is a bit more complex. Route 161 will take you as far as Porzmarkt on the outskirts of the city centre and from there you will have to take route 7 on the S-Bahn to get into the heart of the city. Car hire is available from the airport or a taxi ride will set you back between €25 and €30 and takes approximately 20 minutes depending on traffic.

Bike

Cologne is very cycle friendly and hiring a bike couldn't be easier than with the city's Call a Bike service. After registering online or by phone pick up a bike at one of the many bike racks and get cycling! Hire is charged either by the minute, day or week and is far cheaper than renting a car.

Bus

A comprehensive bus service runs throughout the city centre and into the suburbs of Cologne. The company KVB run the public transport services in Cologne and all tickets are integrated (see below).

S-Bahn

The S-Bahn service is an over-ground train network connecting Cologne to national and international destinations. The main station of Köln Hauptbahnhof in the city centre has high speed links to Frankfurt and there is the likelihood of a high speed link connecting Cologne to London.

Taxi

There are over 1000 taxis in Cologne so hailing one down on the street is usually fairly easy, if not there are a number of designated taxi ranks throughout the city. All taxis charge a standard pick up fee of €2, the cost per mile during the day is reasonable but prices do increase if travelling at night so check before you get in the cab.

Tickets

Because the public transport system is integrated a ticket bought on the bus is valid for the S- and U-Bahn

services and vice versa. Cologne is split into regions for ticketing purposes with the city centre being zone 1b. Depending on how many trips you plan to make there are various tickets available; short hop trips (4 stops) are best for very infrequent use but if staying longer tickets valid from 1 day to 1 month can be purchased from ticket machines or ticket vendors in stations.

U-Bahn

The most well used form of public transport; the U-Bahn is a subway system that converts to a tram network when the trains come above ground. Clean and efficient the U-Bahn system connects most of the city, and those areas out of the network can usually then be reached by bus.