

# ODE TO COLOGNE

Just an hour from London and dominating the Rhine plain is the spired city of Cologne. **EUGENE COSTELLO** finds it just the ticket for family fun



## THREE DAY ESCAPE COLOGNE

I'D SCENTED COLOGNE in my research for a credit-crunch breaking long weekend that met my (admittedly not very stringent) requirements.

First, it had to be within an hour by plane of London (I was travelling with kids, a special Christmas treat. For them, you understand, not me).

Secondly, it had to have plenty of attractions and activities to tire three children under the age of ten out, leaving me and my companions free to enjoy a meal and a few beers in peace at night.

And thirdly, it needed to be somewhere with plenty of options for said beers. That proved the simplest. Cologne, just over an hour from London, has more breweries than any other city in the world – 24 at last count. The local brew is the light, amber Kölsch, drank in a tall, narrow glass called a *stange*.

But I am getting ahead of myself. We flew out on a Saturday morning, courtesy of Germanwings (see box, opposite). A thoroughly pleasant and efficient journey saw us drop our luggage off at the Marriott in the city centre with time for a constitutional before lunch. The Marriott is next to the gleaming glass

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and steel modern cathedral that is the central station, on the other side of which is the real cathedral, the twin-spired Kölner Dom that – incredibly – survived our blitzing of the city in World War II, along with only six per cent of the city. Don't worry, though – we didn't come across any antipathy towards the British, as our tour guide explained. "That's probably because you lot started it," I quipped. She sensibly ignored me, and told us the greatest hatred was reserved for Cologne's arch-enemy Düsseldorf, 20 miles down the enormous, sweeping Rhine that dominates this great plain.

For a cheap, authentic blow-out, head for Schreckenskammer, ten minutes from the cathedral and beside the romanesque church of St Ursula (Ursulagartenstrasse 11, tel. +49 (0)2 21 13 25 81). A former exams room for a medieval college,



STREET LIFE: The Altstadt, or Old Town, immediately to the south and west of the cathedral is café society at its most relaxed



this brewery tavern is a brown-walled, partitioned and boothed affair, where traditional fare and beer is the order of the day. You can choose from an extensive list of *wurst* – though I had a superb, hearty beef stew that came with mash and vegetables, and a few glasses of Kölsch. The bill? An embarrassingly affordable £12 a head. And as you quaff and eat, kids are given pencils and colouring-in books. Fair enough at McDonald's, but a thoughtful touch at a traditional restaurant.

After lunch, we wandered around the centre, visiting the Dom and the Altstadt, the Old Town, before walking further along the embankment of the mighty Rhine to the chocolate museum, found on a small headland pointing out into the river in a sailing-ship style glass-and-steel structure. Arranged over three floors, the children were engrossed by every aspect of the chocolate-making process – it's all made on site, behind hygienic glass walls – and a mug of (Grand Marnier-infused) hot chocolate at the café is a must.

And in the afternoon, visit Cologne zoo. Whatever your views on zoos, this is a beautifully laid-out urban zoo, enclosed by middle-class townhouses, and everything is manageable for little feet. That evening, it was beer and pizza in the Altstadt – kids were welcome wherever we went, though

there didn't seem to be many others out, before well-earned and very comfy bed.

And if Saturday had been an adventure for the kids, Sunday was full-on – ten-minutes by train from the centre is the suburban station, Brühl. Nine-year-old Conor could barely contain himself with unbridled delight – our commuter train was a double-decker. It's the little things... From Brühl you take the shuttle bus to Phantasialand, an Alton Towers-

style theme park but without the pikeys and glue sniffers. All very middle class and well-behaved – and what, please tell me, is wrong with that?

A full day was, I assure you, about three-quarters of a day too much for me – but not enough for the kids, who still wanted more. Luckily, our African-themed hotel had a playroom full of balls and play mats. And the bedroom was a joy for them – with miners' lamps hanging from the ceiling, bamboo cane-framed beds and mosquito nets (and a separate room for the kids), it was as exciting for them as the Colorado Adventure Mine Train (and that had been so exciting, we'd had to ride it a dozen times).

In fact, the children were so taken with the whole African theme that when they discovered dinner was an indoor-barbecue with delicacies such as zebra, okapi and ostrich, they went for it. At home, you'd struggle to get them to eat fish. Just another few flecks of the magic dust that Cologne had managed to sprinkle over us. ■

*Double room at the Marriott Cologne City Centre, from €129 (children's beds provided free of charge); one family pass at Phantasialand for two adults and two children under seven, incl. admission to park, hotel room at Hotel Matamba, dinner and breakfast, €302 (€368 over seven).*

### GERMANWINGS

Seeing the herds of wretched souls being treated with the customary disdain that infects all Ryanair staff, from toxic CEO Michael Leary down, we had reasons to be cheerful. Allocated seating means no rising hysteria and mass stampede at boarding time. The staff are pleasant and motivated. And most importantly, the airline actually flies you to where they have agreed to – not some remote strip 50 miles from your destination, with no train service... Ryanair has in the past been banned from misnaming such airports in Germany – why is the British consumer not afforded the same protection? Cologne, from €19.99 one-way incl. fees and taxes; [germanwings.com](http://germanwings.com)