

The Mad King and His Castles

By Susan McGee-Webb

If majestic castles, an eccentric king, and a royal murder mystery spark your imagination, explore the life and times of Germany's favored king, Mad King Ludwig II, on your next European getaway.

High on a rocky ledge above the dark Bavarian forest, Neuschwanstein Castle pierces the misty fog like a sharpened lance. Massive towers climb hundreds of feet into the air, guarding stony white flanks from enemy attack. An impenetrable wall rises from the jagged precipice, encircling the courtyard in a hardened grip. Cool alpine air swirls through swaying evergreens as the imposing castle, the last stand of King Ludwig II, guards a raging gorge. Weathered and foot worn, the lowered drawbridge juts out from the red brick gateway, the perfect image of a lion in his lair. Enter this castle and step back in time to the forgotten world of a doomed king.

Rumored to have been mad, arrested, and possibly murdered, King Ludwig II lives on in the hearts of his countryman as the favorite king who left a legacy of magnificent castles. Scattered throughout the Germany countryside, these historic landmarks beckon thousands of travelers each year and are the central attraction of the "*King Ludwig II's Castles and the Bavarian Lakes*" tour offered by native guide Astrid Baur. This nine-day adventure displays the gilded splendor of six castles, **Neuschwanstein**, **Hohenschwangau**, **Linderhof**, **Herrenchiemsee**, **Nymphenburg**, and **Mainau**, offering an intimate glimpse into the life of a creative genius and masterful madman.

On day one of the tour, a short hike up a winding forest path leads to **Hohenschwangau Castle**. Resting on a peak across the village from its more famous younger sibling, Neuschwanstein, Hohenschwangau housed the young Ludwig, who spent his childhood inside its mustard yellow walls and carved turrets drawing plans for the castles he would later create. The former home of the knights of Schwangau, this medieval castle is decorated with scenes from 12th-century legends and poetry. A small royal blue bedroom displays scenes of alluring nudes and impish nymphs who surely tantalized Ludwig's early idylls. More rooms follow with gilded furnishings, crystal chandeliers, and stunning vistas of lakes and town.

In the afternoon, a shuttle ride up the neighboring mountain approaches **Neuschwanstein Castle**. Described as "a fantasy realized in stone," Neuschwanstein was created as a Grail castle honoring the allegorical swan knight Lohengrin. Built in the late 1800's and never fully completed, the young king once wrote this castle was "holy and unapproachable, a worthy temple." Unfortunately, it proved all too approachable when he was arrested here in 1886. On the walls of the cavernous Throne Room (modeled after the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul), resplendent masterpieces showcase canonized kings and munificent saints. Rows of arched windows offer spectacular views of lush countryside and sparkling lakes. Gothic-inspired rooms encase ornate tapestries, wood beamed ceilings, and gleaming chandeliers molded into immense crowns.

Fantasy turns surreal as the tour passes through a darkened passageway into a small artificial cave. Jagged rock walls, dangling stalactites, swirling mist, and a hidden waterfall imbue this secret indoor grotto with a mystical air. According to lore, Ludwig would sit here for hours sipping wine and talking with imaginary guests. Later in the evening, on snowy moonlit nights, he would ride his sleigh through dark forests. More in keeping with the times, this tour ends with a horse-drawn carriage ride back down to the village of Schwangau.

Day two of the tour heads across the border into Austria for a breathtaking trip by cable car to the top of the **Zugspitze**, the German and Austrian Alps, at almost 10,000 feet. Utilizing technology undiscovered during the king's reign, the tram glides up the jagged edge of this rocky, snow-strewn glacier while lush green meadows disappear below swirling clouds. Once at the top, step outside the heated comfort of the metal and glass station into a world of blasting winds, penetrating fog, and ancient glaciers. Approach the metal railing and feel the exhilaration of peering down through shifting clouds, catching glimpses of pinprick-size towns and miniature lakes. Dizzying heights display the vast kingdom of this reclusive king. Be sure to leave some time at the observation deck to explore the indoor museum displaying incredible photography, mountaineering relics, and a 3D movie.

The next stop is **Linderhof Castle** deep in the Bavarian woods. The main residence of the adult king, Linderhof was built as a tribute to Louis XIV of France, the glorious "Sun King." An opulent Hall of Mirrors offers infinite reflections of sumptuous surroundings, while connecting Rococo rooms display portraits of French monarchs and their celebrated mistresses. More along the lines of a stately mansion, this castle offers an intimate view into the daily rituals of a king on the verge of madness.

Surrounding the castle is a 198-acre park. Meander up the numerous forest paths to a Moroccan kiosk and relax on the veranda overlooking a meadow of grazing deer. Deeper into the forest, explore the hidden **Venus Grotto** Ludwig blasted deep inside the mountain. Enjoy this magical underworld complete with a lake, rowboats, opera stage, waterfalls, and light show. Ludwig spent many nights alone in this cave listening to Wagner operas as a fantastical display of lights and sounds exploded on the walls around him.

On day three, enjoy a leisurely drive through the countryside before arriving at Lake Chiemsee and boarding a ferry to **Herrenchiemsee Castle**, located on an island in the lake. On docking, climb aboard waiting horse-drawn carriages for a short ride through the woods to the castle grounds. Massive fountains of Greek gods, cupids, serpents, and nymphs explode dozens of feet into the air, fronting the long rectangular palace.]Ludwig's largest creation, Herrenchiemsee was commissioned after his trip to Versailles. Just as elaborate as its muse, it is hard to fathom that no one ever visited this palace during Ludwig's reign. Even stranger is the fact Ludwig only spent seven days of his life inside these opulent walls.

The highlight of this day's tour is a one-of-a-kind glimpse through the unfinished section of the castle, a cavern of wood and brick framework, belying what lies behind a polished palace. In the kitchen, view the floor-to-ceiling pulley system engineered to bring the king's food from the kitchen to the upstairs dining room. Ludwig commissioned engineers to create a trap door in the

floor of his dining room (as he did in many of his castles) to facilitate the lowering of his table to the kitchen and back up again, loaded with steaming food. This system suited his increasing desire for privacy and solitude.

On day four, explore the heart of Ludwig's kingdom - Munich. Just outside the city, enjoy a guided tour of **Nymphenburg Palace**, the summer residence where Ludwig was born. Encompassing several city blocks, the palace displays oil masterpieces of royal family and favorites, as well as acres of landscaped grounds, lakes, gazebos, and out buildings. Not to be missed is the **Carriage Museum** to the left of the palace. This museum holds a spectacular display of coronation carriages and sleighs used by Ludwig during regal parades and madcap midnight rides.

Continue into the center of Munich for an afternoon of independent exploration. Consider exploring the **Marienplatz** (town square), climbing **Old St. Peter's Tower** for a bird's eye view of the city (not for the faint of heart or claustrophobic), or touring Ludwig's **Royal Residence**, the center of his vast kingdom. Ludwig hated to spend time in the city conducting royal business, much preferring the solitude of building fantasy castles and relaxing in his beloved countryside.

On the agenda for day five is an interesting mixture of history and tragedy. Travel to **Wieskirche** (Meadow Church), a Unesco World Heritage Site, to view this lovely country church, a holy site on a historical pilgrimage route. Next, travel to **Lake Starnberg**, the site of King Ludwig's tragic end in several feet of placid water. An exceptional swimmer, most Germans find it hard to imagine the king drowned in this shallow spot. More likely is the belief that his uncle had him murdered in order to attain the throne and put an end to Ludwig's incessant, and expensive, castle building. Spend an hour strolling the grounds of the memorial **Votive Chapel**, similar to a small mosque, in the woods or snapping pictures of the wooden cross in the lake. Drive on to the gilded **Benedictine Monastery** in Andechs to invigorate your spirits on this holy mountain and sip refreshing beverages brewed by local monks.

Spend the last day of the tour viewing the natural wonders of the king's beautiful Bavarian kingdom. Enjoy a leisurely morning drive to sparkling **Lake Constance**, the largest lake in the northern region, bordered by Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. Visit the lakeside village of **Lindau** before boarding a ferry for the short trip to **Mainau Island**. Spend the afternoon strolling acres of parkland viewing **Mainau Palace**, the charming baroque church, and the live butterfly sanctuary.

Before departing Bavaria for your trip home, rise early for a leisurely stroll along the shores of **Lake Hopfen**. Finally, climb a small hill for a last glimpse of Neuschwanstein Castle nestled among the mountains. Take a moment to inhale the cool mountain air, enjoy the view, and whisper goodbye to this forlorn king and his fantasy castles.

"King Ludwig II's Castles and the Bavarian Lakes" tour is offered June through September for approximately [\$1,830] per person (airfare not included), catering to small groups. Lodging for the length of the tour is at The Landhaus Kossel, an apartment-style chalet in Hopfen Am See next to Lake Hopfen. Located just 10

minutes from the Austrian border, Hopfen Am See is located in "Castle County" along the **Romantic Road**. Transportation, tours, transfers, lodging, breakfasts, and most dinners are included in this comprehensive package. For more information on this exciting tour, go to [www.castlesoftheworld.de]and select the "**Bavaria**" link, or contact Astrid Baur via email at [astrid@castlesoftheworld.de].

* * * *