

A stroll around Heidelberg

By MANNY GONZALEZ
Plantation Bay Resort & Spa



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Editor: ANTONIO R. PAÑO

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As I have sometimes been known to claim, you can tell a lot about a city by the shops or facilities that are over-represented in its downtown area. For example, in Lyons, there are a lot of lingerie shops, from which I concluded that wives there are eager to please. (True!) In Jackson, Wyoming, I saw lots of art galleries but few restaurants, suggesting that the townspeople are rich and thin. (True!) In Hong Kong, there is one jewelry store every 10 meters, proving that the husbands there are (—oh, yes, just remembered that this one led to death threats, so let's move on, but what I said was also True!).

Anyway, please have a look at the map of Heidelberg.

No, it is not just your imagination. This town has a public toilet almost every 50 meters, sometimes every 10 meters.

My conclusion is not that they drink a lot of beer. No, that would be too banal, since this is after all Germany. (In Munich, every beerhouse has at least a dozen beerhalls, not the two or three of an English pub, or the one of an Italian bar.)

No, there is a more subtle conclusion to be drawn, and that is that *this town makes its living off geriatric tourists*.

Education and Tourism. True! When you walk around Heidelberg, what you see is one busload after another of rather mature-looking visitors, three and a half million of them a year (though most stay only a few hours). English, Spanish, French, Chinese, Japanese — they all have one characteristic in common, and that is that they are not on the sunny side of 50. And when you are no longer on the sunny side of 50,

In the course of various wars that need not concern us, the town was destroyed and rebuilt several times, and the last time was in the 19th century, which led to the "Old Town" that we see today, which is truly picturesque. (Unlike Munich, Frankfurt, and many other cities in Germany, Heidelberg didn't get bombed during the Second World War.)

Architecture Lesson. Town-sponsored literature is somewhat insistent that the architectural style of the Old Town is "baroque" (a heavily ornamented style that emerged in the 16th century, and is, for example, what most Spanish-era Philippine churches are), but as you see it really isn't, thank goodness, and it is actually much more soothing to the eyes than most heavily-baroque structures.

Das Schloss. The big tourist draw is the Schloss Heidelberg, which sits on a hill overlooking everything. It really doesn't matter who built this castle, or why, because no one is really sure anyway, and to compound the "anyway" it has been a ruin for a couple of centuries. What you need to know is it Sits On a Hill, and used to be accessed by an almost straight, rather narrow cart-path that involved a vertical rise of about 80 meters (equal to about 24 stories) from near the riverbank.

Eighty is a lot of meters for a geriatric tourist to climb. So Heidelberg (always on the ball when it comes to geriatric tourists) built a funicular way back in 1890. Once you get to the top, there is quite a bit to see, but almost everyone lingers at this ornamental archway,



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Postcard of Heidelberg, showing the Schloss (castle) up the hill, and the Old Town below.

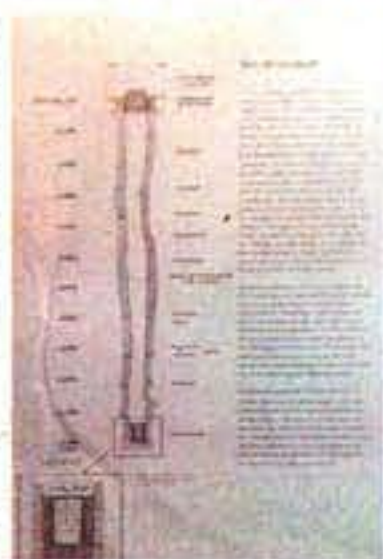
your daily recommended allowance of toilet time rises. (So I have heard...)

The other reason it has a lot of toilets is that it has lots of students, who are less inhibited about where to pee at 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning, unless there is a public toilet very conveniently situated on every corner. In fact, there are over 30,000 students at the University of Heidelberg, while the native population is only 150,000.

And now, for a little history. (But not too much; relax.) There has been human occupation in this area since Neolithic times ("recent Stone Ages" to you). The fast-flowing river (called the Neckar) and the comparatively warm weather ("warmest place in Germany," say the tourist blurbs, "only a little below 0 most winter nights") were apparently big draws. The university was founded in the 1300s by an Elector (a kind of prince) of the Holy Roman Empire ("Germany" from 900 AD until Napoleon broke it up), and added to its cachet,

called Elisabeth's Gate, because of the romantic story attached to it. A certain Elector Friedrich married the eponymous Elisabeth, daughter of King James I, and had the arch built overnight as a surprise. There is more to the story, but it is not especially happy, so I will leave it to you to learn the rest when you visit. These Germans are good at spinning tragic tales. Bring Kleenex.

The Main Drag. Considering its small population, there is a lot going on in Heidelberg, thanks to the castle, the university, and the picturesque Old Town at its foot. The Hauptstrasse (HOWPT-shtrah-suh), running High or Main Street, runs clear through the Old Town, and is really a very charming area. There are restaurants of some variety, from Hard Rock Café (amazingly inexpensive breakfast!) to Indian and Japanese cuisine, to a multitude of German taverns with truly unpronounceable names (I draw the line at Hauptstrasse), mostly all serving sausage and sauerkraut and crispy pig



Heidenloch or 'heather hole'

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Too bad I forgot its unpronounceable name. Nonetheless, if you like traditional German pretzels (nothing like the bagged pretzels sold in supermarkets: chewy, dense, savory, flecked with salt crys-



Tourist map of the Old Town of Heidelberg, showing a preponderance of —



Postcard of Elisabeth's Gate at Schloss Heidelberg.

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ing to my feet) and you will run into this cafeteria-style restaurant eventually, on the north side of the street.

(A digression. You may

have heard the expression "on the sunny side of the street," but may not know what it signifies. It signifies the north side, which faces south and is the side that gets sunshine in far-northerly climes, while the south side faces north and are bathed in shadow. You need to work your brain cells a bit to visualize this, but you will get there.)

Hauptstrasse is no slouch on the retail angle, either, with many boutiques and a couple of major department stores. Several specialty shops sell Cuckoo clocks, the quintessential northern German handicraft (and still genuinely made in Germany, or so the shop owners swear).

The Hole. On the other side of the river are mainly residential buildings and homes of the rich, but one of the town's top attractions is there — a hiking trail up a hill that supposedly many famous poets and philosophers enjoyed walking on. However, having already proven my masculinity with the 80-meter climb to the castle, I decided to give this one a pass. If I ever go back, maybe I will take the Segway tour.

Somewhere on this hill is something called the Heidenloch, which is a 55-meter deep, three to four meter wide square shaft that goes straight down and whose purpose no one has yet figured out.

I didn't go here, either, being chicken; obviously this hole is some kind of telegraph to God. Or aliens. Interestingly, the name Heidenloch means "heather hole," which sounds vaguely pornographic to my hyperactive imagination.

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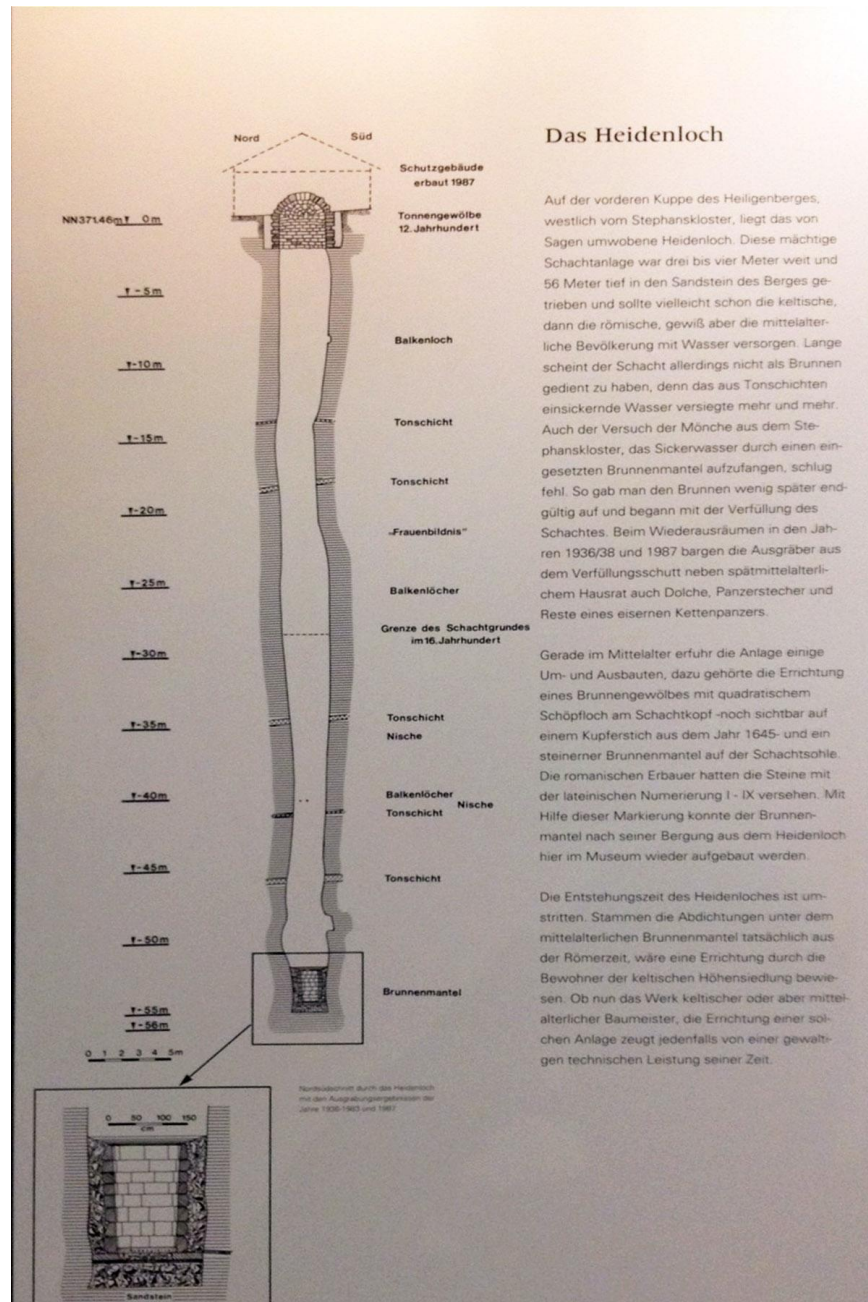
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