

City Tour of Mainz: Romans, Fools, and Elector-Princes

Welcome to our “model” guided tour of Mainz featuring some of the City’s most salient points. Whoever wishes to do things on his or her own going about on foot, can make use of this actual guide and immerse themselves in a historical trip through time. This particular route leads you to Mainz places of interest which are all close to the center of town yet are distant from the noisy bustle of the inner city.

Duration: About 2.5 – 3 hours

Starting Point: Schillerplatz

Route:

1. Fastnachtsbrunnen-Osteiner Hof-Bassenheimer Hof
2. Kupferbergterrasse, Haus Kupferberg, Roemertor
3. St. Stephan
4. Citadel – Drususstein
5. Roman Stage Theater
6. Museum for Ancient Sea Travel
7. Rhine Embankment, Fort Malakoff
8. St. Ignaz
9. Augustinerstrasse, Augustinerkirche
10. Oldtown

Destination: Oldtown

1. Fastnachtsbrunnen - Osteiner Hof - Bassenheimer Hof

The tour begins at **Schillerplatz** in front of the Fastnachtsbrunnen. This is a good starting point as this fountain is of existential importance to any real native “Meenzer.” Every year at exactly 11:11 o’clock of the 11th day of the 11th month Mainz’s “Fools” of both sexes assemble in front of the balcony of the Osteiner Hof across the way and listen to the announcement proclaiming the start of the “fifth season of the year” – Carnival! Carnival is the madcap season for fun, joy and reasonably – and unreasonably – foolish behavior.

The Fools’ Season is traditionally begun by giving notice of the 11 laws governing the Fastnacht season. This honorable endeavor is the duty of whichever Carnival Association is celebrating an anniversary that same year.

The Fastnachtsbrunnen or Carnival Fountain was built in 1967 by Blasius Spreng and is an eight-and-half meter/27-foot high Fool’s Tower made of bronze. It is populated by some 200 symbols and fantasy figures of the Mainz Fastnacht, all of whom are also made of bronze. Many of these are somewhat grotesque, with caricature faces peering down at passersby.

If you observe them more closely you can recognize many faces of mythic and allegorical figures such as Gott Jokus, Till Eulenspiegel, Father Rhein, Daughter Mosel, Roman Legionnaires and many others.

The Osteiner Hof was built as a residential palace in the middle of the 18th Century for the Elector-Prince Johann Friedrich Karl von Ostein. With the entrance of the Napoleon's occupation forces and the imposition of military administration, Ostein became known among the populace pejoratively as "the Gouvernement" or as "Monsieur Mouthpiece," so to speak.

Since 1958 the building functions as the German Federal Defense Force's headquarters for the military district of Mainz. Going sideways along the Schillerstrasse one comes to the Bassenheimer Hof. This Widow's Palace was built for the sister of the Elector-Prince, also constructed in 1750. Today, it, too, is a government building housing the Rhineland-Palatine's Ministry of the Interior.

The next point is the Roman City Gate or Stadttor. Moving along the side of the Bassenheimer Hof, bear left entering the Emmerich-Josef-Strasse. At the end of this is the main gate to the former Mainzer Akten-Brewery. Ascending the stairs you can get to the Kupferberg Terrace.

2. Kupferberg Terrace, Haus Kupferberg, The Roman Gate

Looking down from the Kupferberg Terrace you have the wonderful opportunity to relax for a while and enjoy the magnificent view of the city lying below at your feet. From you can see the Dom, the renovated Staatstheater and even make out the Christus Kirche church on the Kaiserstrasse.

At the end of the Terrace is the Kupferberg Sparkling Wine Cellar with its seven-storey caves. A tour of the premises is definitely recommended. Tours are given daily except for Monday. However, it is absolutely necessary to make an appointment.

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For anyone who loves wine, particularly sparkling wines, this is an informative, and tasty treat!

There are several approaches to the inner court of the Wohnforum which lies above the Kupferberg Terrace. There you will find the remains of a late Roman period Gate. The deep excavation is in the immediate area of a round spring-fed well. The Roman Gate dates back to 360 – 370. The gate, together with part of a city wall, were only revealed during the construction of the Wohnforum in 1985. Until now, it is the only Roman gate which has been discovered in Mainz.

Of particular interest is the Via Praetoria, a street running between two walls with towers. In this instance, it concerns the main street of a 1st Century military position. The thoroughfare runs almost diagonally to the axis of the wall and is paved with sandstone plates. The 1.9-meter /6-foot+ wide tracks of the Roman wagon wheels which embedded in the threshold of the gate have provided a stone document of living historical proof in the relatively soft stone pavement.

Returning to the round well and continuing on straight along the Kaestrich-strasse, you will find the Gausstrasse at the end of which, after a hundred meters, you will see St Stephan's Church on the right.

3. St. Stephan

This Gothic hall church was constructed between 1260 and 1340. Second in size only to the Dom, it is the city's largest church and as such is sometimes referred to as "the second Dom."

The famous Chagall Windows have caused this church to become a major tourist attraction which draw about 200,000 visitors each year from all over the world. Scenes from the Old Testament stand out vividly from the predominantly blue background. The optical effect of the illumination must be seen. It is a singular experience. Marc Chagall was already 98 years old in 1989 when he created these nine windows shortly before his death. These masterpieces were his final work.

During the Second World War St Stephan was almost entirely destroyed in bombing attacks. Its octagonal tower threatened to collapse directly into the gallery cross walk because of a fissure that run from top to bottom. It was saved through the adamant character of the Mainz population which successfully refused to allow the planned demolition.

Before leaving the church be sure to visit the beautiful Late Gothic Kreuzgang, the gallery walk-way, within whose confines time no longer seems to exist. The quiet and stillness which reign here are almost tangibly present and serve as a healing bath to refurbish the spirit.

Now it is time to go on to our next destination the Zitadelle. Leaving the church, take a right turn and proceed along Stephansstrasse crossing over the Eisgrubweg. Follow this to the street across the way, the Am 87er Monument.

4. Citadel and the Drusus Stone

In a few moments you will have reached the Citadel which crowns the Jakobsberg mountain overlooking the Old City from on high. Its predecessor was the Schweikhardtsburg. In order to better defend the city in those still very dangerous times, and particularly after the experiences of the 30-Years War, the Burg or castle was transformed into a citadel or fortress between 1655 and 1661. With the completion of the Commandatura or command headquarters in 1696, the metamorphosis of the entire structure was complete. Today the Citadel houses various municipal offices and schools. Aside from that, the grounds serve as the locale for the annual Open Ear Festivals which are nationally known.

In the southwestern corner of the fortress the Drusus Stone may be viewed. Originally this was a 30-meter/112.5-foot high Roman memorial. It was erected by the Roman army in the year 9 A.D. to commemorate Field Marshal Drusus, who was also the emperor's brother, who, on returning from a campaign against the Germanic tribes, fell from his horse and died of injuries resulting from this non-combat incident.

From the Drusus Stone we turn back, and crossing the Citadel court-yard and exiting via the vaulted-ceiling headquarters gate, we enter the Zitadellenweg. If you turn around and look up at the gable of the gate, you can see the figure of St. Jacob standing guard over the complex.

5. The Roman Stage Theater

Continuing along the Zitadellenweg, you will soon stand before yet another witness to Mainz's Roman history – the ruins of the Roman Theater.

Even though you are confronted with razor-barbed wire preventing your descent in to the ruins and the excavation, don't think that your effort to get here has been for naught. Consider for a moment and be aware that exactly on this spot you are peering back into history and life 2,000 years ago. Just think of it – here once stood the largest stage theater north of the Alps: It held 10,000 spectators and the stage was four times larger than that of the Metropolitan Opera in New York!

It was in the year 1884 during the railroad construction that one came upon the remains of the theater. At that time no one had any idea about what they had stumbled upon. As a result that portion of the grounds became a victim of the "iron horse." Only in 1916 did it become clear just what part of the Mainz-South railway station had been built upon. Another irony of fate was that in the years after WWII, the historical importance of the area not only was forgotten but that the site was filled in with bomb damaged remains of Mainz!

In Spring 1999, the theater site was finally begun to be re-excavated. Since then archeologists aided by many volunteer workers from among the citizenry and even school classes strenuously immersed themselves in the digging in order to bring this precious witness of Mainz history once again to light.

Moving along, your next destination is the Museum of Ancient Sea Travel which is quite nearby. The best way to get there is to return going up the Zitadellenweg, take a right on the Kiesweg leading down into the Albanstrasse. At the end of the Albanstrasse, take another right turn into the Holzhofstrasse.

(A faster alternative would be taking the stairs next to the Roman Theater which lead to the platform of the South Railway station, cross under the tracks, go through the station tunnel, and arrive at the Holzhofstrasse directly at the station.)

6. The Museum of Ancient Sea Travel

At the intersection of Holzhofstrasse and Neutorstrasse you will find the Museum for Ancient Sea Travel whose entrance is immediately to the right on Neutorstrasse. The building is of glass and flooded with light. Once it served an indoor market. Today the parts of six ships from the Roman era are on display which had been found in 1981 and 1982 during construction near the Rhine Embankment. The good condition can be attributed to the high degree of humidity in the layers of earth in which they have been encapsulated almost two thousand years.

Especially interesting is the fact that various kinds of ships were recovered and raised to the surface: a passenger ship, a warship, and two broad heavy-duty cargo ships. Visitors can see exactly how the Roman ships looked in reality can be ascertained from the replica models on display at the museum.

Open daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. except Mondays, the Museum is free of admission charge.

A small excursion across the street to the Rhine Embankment comes next. Cross Rheinstrasse at the Holzhof-Rheinstrasse intersection and enter the Dagobertstrasse between DB-Cargo and Fort Malakoff Park.

7. The Rhine Embankment and Fort Malakoff

For those who in the meantime are feeling hunger pangs or thirst, the area near the Rhine Embankment offers opportunities to satisfy those needs. In addition to food and drink, you can also feast your eyes on the wonderfully beautiful view of the Rhine while discovering more of Mainz history.

Fort Malakoff was built of red sandstone blocks as part of the Rhine shore fortifications in 1873. The Templer Gate a few meters along also belonged to the so-called "Rhinekehl" defensive system. Behind it lies the Fort Malakoff Park. In addition to the gastronomic activity here including bars, bistros, restaurants and stands, are a number of other activities including a gallery of stores, the Hyatt Regency Hotel, the Mainz Chamber Players Theater and several office complexes.

Exiting the Fort Malakoff grounds via the shopping passage using the revolving door brings you back to the Rheinstrasse. On the other side of the street is the historic Old Town, which is reached via the Templergrasse alley.

8. St. Ignaz

After only a few meters you enter the Kapuzinerstrasse standing directly in front of the St. Ignaz Church.

It was built in the years 1763 and 1774-1775. And encompasses the transitional period bridging the Rococo and Classical architectural periods. Because the congregation never was very well-off, the construction of this parish church required great sacrifice -- and the financial support of no fewer than three Elector-Princes to make this a reality. Above the portal the figure of the church's patron St Ignasius stands guard. He died in Rome in 107 suffering a martyr's death.

The absolute quiet which greets you and into which you are received inside the church is beneficial. It invites you to rest and imbibe the peacefulness. You quickly forget the loud nature and comings and goings of the outside world.

Immediately next to the church on the left at Little-Ignaz-Place you will see, partially under cover, a statuary group Crucifixion scene from 1518. It was a gift of the most important sculptor of the Late Gothic period on the Middle Rhine, Hans Backofen and his wife.

Prior to continuing on your way, cast your eyes on the group of houses from the 16th – 18th Century which are rather picturesque. The street takes its name by the way from the Capuchin Monastery which was built here in 1618 and was dissolved in 1802.

Continue along to the right and go further on to the Grabenstrasse, passing the ice cream shops on both sides of the street and proceed to the Augustinerstrasse, (unless, of course, you would like an ice cream!)

9. The Augustinerstrasse and the Augustinerkirche

The Augustinerstrasse is the vibrant core thoroughfare of the Altstadt or Old Town. Up until the 17th Century this was the main commercial street of the city. Today the Augustinerstrasse offer a large variety of all that delights a Mainzer's heart, and even more so those things that visitors to Mainz seek and revel in – small shops and boutiques, cafés, pubs, wine establishments, restaurants, snack bars and kebob-stands extending the entire length of the busy, active street.

In the middle of all this busy-ness and non-stop activity, sandwiched in between the houses and storefronts is the magnificent Baroque façade of the Augustinerkirche soaring above, built in the years of 1768 – 1776 as a pendant to the adjacent former Augustinian Hermitage. It now serves as a seminar church for continuing education and training of priests.

Its interior is of impressive beauty. The ceiling paintings provide a view into the life of St Augustine and the history of this mendicant or begging-order which has been present in the Augustinerstrasse since the 13th Century. In contrast to many other Mainz churches, the Augustinerkirche was able to survive the war undamaged.

Now let's go quickly to the Kirschgarten around the corner and then your city tour will soon be over.

10. Old Town

Go along the Augustinerstrasse a few meters further and look to the left at the Kirschgarten with its romantic half-timbered houses and the Marienbrunnen or Mary's Fountain. Both the square and the garden share the name "Kirsch-garten" although only the stump of a single cherry tree attests to its antecedents. It may be found at the "Zum Beymberg" bakery at #19.

Now's the time to take a quick dash through the Altstadtgaesschen: cut through the Kirschgarten Strasse, bearing left into the Schoenbornstrasse and take another quick left into the Badergasse. Has something become apparent to you in regard to the street signs? Some are blue, others are red. The red ones lead to the Rhine and the blue ones run parallel to the river. It's said that this polychromatic routing helped soldiers garrisoned here get back to their barracks more easily.

As Mainz has been occupied countless times by military personnel over the millennia, comparatively few of whom spoke German much less Meenzer dialect, there may well be truth in this legend!

The Badergasse brings you directly back to the Augustinerstrasse where you surely you like to conclude your tour with a well-earned glass of wine for your efforts. Left or right, which ever way you turn, there's an abundance of hospitable wine-bars, wine restaurants and other types of places in which to find refreshment. The decision is entirely yours. It is almost impossible to make a bad choice when it comes to food, wine and good times in Mainz!

Prost! Zum Wohl! Cheers!