

Bonn on the Rhine

Bonn was for over 50 years defined by the term „politics“. Yet “Bonn is more”, as the publicity slogan of the city went for many years. It intended to draw attention to the city’s “other face”: Rhineland savoir vivre, art and culture, science and research, business, trade and industry, tradition and progress, Carnival and Pützchens Markt funfair, the city of sports and the city of meetings and congresses. Another feature has been added since then: German UN-City, a new quality which replaced the earlier dominance of politics. Almost 20 institutions of the United Nations have their seat in Bonn. And politics continue to play a role on the banks of the Rhine due to the ongoing presence of six ministries and over twenty Federal institutions.

“Castra bonnensia”, a Roman military camp set up between 13 and 9 BC, indicates the beginning of the city’s history. In the 8th century, the core of a settlement grows around the present-day Minster whose origins date as far back as the period around the year 400, and developed into a medieval town which was fortified in 1244. Like the Godesburg Castle, built in 1210, Bonn was part of the territory of the Princes Elector and Archbishops of Cologne and eventually became its capital in 1601.

The heritage of splendour-loving Prince Electors, first and foremost Joseph Clemens and Clemens August, has remained visible until today in Bonn’s cityscape: baroque buildings like the main building of the university and the Poppelsdorf Palace were, and are, the highlights of every sightseeing tour. In fact, they shape the cityscape in a very special way by their characteristic integration into the urban structure. Max Franz of the Hapsburg dynasty, the last Prince Elector, inaugurates eventually the predecessor of today’s university in 1786 and elevates Godesberg to the rank of a spa. Bonn becomes French in 1794, and Prussian in 1815. Bonn owes to the university (Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität), founded in 1818, and to the scenic surroundings its rise to a preferred university and pensioners’ town, and to an intellectual centre, as well as to the presumably wealthiest town of Prussia. Millionaires soon appreciated the merits of this university town as a domicile for retirement and built spacious houses and impressive villas. Some of them, such as Villa Hammerschmidt (today the second official seat of the Federal President) and Palais Schaumburg, (seat of the Federal Chancellor for many years) were useful to Bonn in 1949 to prove that it was suitable as Federal Capital.

Between Poppelsdorf Palace and Museum Mile

University, town hall, Bundestag (Parliament Buildings), opera, theatres of comedy and political satire, ministries, UN-agencies – all these are located close to each other in Bonn. The “city of short distances” is for this reason frequently underestimated although it has by now a population of 317,000.

Like 1500 years ago, the real heart of Bonn is the area around the mighty romanesque and gothic Minster. Not far from it is the Old Town Hall in front of whose rococo façade the greengrocery market takes place on weekdays. It is also, however, the scene of state guests and weddings. A few steps further on, the modest house where Beethoven was born takes visitors back to the era of the Princes Elector, who on their part left Bonn with magnificent buildings. The Town Palace, today the Main Building of the University, with its splendid Hofgarten (“Courtyard Green”) and the elegant

summer residence Clemensruh in Poppelsdorf with its Botanic Garden surround the densely built old city centre.

The Rhine is only a few hundred metres from the Hofgarten. Alexander von Humboldt considered the view from the bastion "Alter Zoll" (Old Customs Station) across the river to the Siebengebirge hills as the "eighth Wonder of the World". Here, south of the Hofgarten, is the beginning of the city's South, that spacious quarter with its splendid, carefully restored well-to-do middle class houses and villas of the economic boom years following the 1870/71 war ("Gründerzeit") and of the Art Nouveau period ("Jugendstil") which testify to the former wealth of the town. The Northern City is the more modest counterpart of the South. It is a favourite residential area for students, and its colourful pub scene is a major attraction to night owls.

Where the extended building of the palace separates the old inner city from the southern part, a special feature of Bonn begins: a number of outstanding museums lined up like pearls on a string. The first is the Stadthistorisches Museum (Historical Museum of the City). Next are the Akademisches Kunstmuseum (Academic Museum of Art) with its extensive collection of original ancient sculptures and of cast copies in the classical building designed by the famous 19th century architect Schinkel, and the Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Haus, which illustrates the way of life of the Biedermeier period.

The splendid Museum Koenig opposite of the Villa Hammerschmidt marks the beginning of the Museum Mile proper. Not only is it a home of natural history, it has also gained a reputation as a zoological research institute. Directly opposite of the "Federal District", the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany (Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland) exhibits its instructive presentation of every-day objects and historical documents of the post-World-War II decades. Like the Federal Museum of Art further south, it is one of most frequented museums in Germany. The Kunstmuseum Bonn (Bonn Museum of Art) and the next-door Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Arts and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany) are spectacular examples of modern architecture. The first boasts an excellent collection of Rhenish expressionists around August Macke and of German Art after 1945. The second presents alternating exhibitions of art, science and architecture of international standard. Even further south follows the Deutsches Museum Bonn (German Museum Bonn) illustrating to its visitors science "live".

With its 30 institutions the Museum scene of Bonn is more extensive anyhow than many people would think: Rheinisches Landesmuseum (Museum of the Rhineland), August-Macke-Haus, the Arts Society, and Europe's first Women's Museum, celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2011 - to mention only a few. The Beethovenhaus is, of course, also very important, the house in which the great composer was born. Bonn's orchestra which bears his name is a most important "ambassador" of Bonn as a city of culture both in Germany and in other countries. It plays an important artistic role in the annual Beethoven Festivals.

Right and Left of the River

The Museum Mile leads directly into the "Federal District" (Bundesviertel) which has influenced - and will continue to influence - the city's image and character in a very special manner. The Chancellor's Office (Bundeskanzleramt) with its big Moore sculpture is now the seat of the Federal Ministry of Economic Co-operation and Development. In 2006, the UN secretariats located in Bonn have moved into the high-rise building ("Tall Eugene", nicknamed after the Speaker of Parliament at the period of its construction, Eugen Gerstenmaier) that used to house the offices of MPs. The former Plenary Hall with its interesting architecture is already now used as a conference venue. Together with a new conference building it is the nucleus of the World Conference Center Bonn. Not far from it are the broadcasting centre of Deutsche Welle and the corporate headquarters of Deutsche Post World Net whose Post Tower has become a symbol of the new Bonn.

The city's largest green extends right next to it, the Rheinaue Park. With its 160 hectares it is not only Bonn's recreation area number one but also the largest location open-air events in the Federal City. Hundreds of thousands crowd each year in the park for "Rhine in Flames". Part of the park extends, by the way, on the right bank of the Rhine, in the district of Beuel. With the "office town" of Telecom (former T-Mobile) and the buildings at the "Bonner Bogen" there, this "sunny side" of Bonn has become a first-rate business address. This part boasts moreover a prime

example of sacral architecture in the Rhineland, the romanesque "Doppelkirche" (a two-floor church) of Schwarz-Rheindorf, whose bright-coloured paintings tell the biblical story in pictures.

Since the period of the Princes Elector, Bonn's southernmost district, Bad Godesberg, has had a special flair of its own of which the "Redoute" Ball House is a reminder. As a health resort it continues to do credit to its epithet "Bad" (Spa). A spacious area of villas from the industrial boom of the 1870ies has made it a favourite residential district. A curiosity in the Bonn mosaic is found here: the wood-framed houses of Muffendorf produce an air of idyllic rural life which is carefully cultivated.

And from here you have an excellent view of the Siebengebirge Hills across the Rhine, Drachenfels (Dragon's Rock) and Petersberg (St. Peter's Mountain) with the hotel on top are very close, and the romantic middle part of the Rhine begins.

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