



*“The spray fell quickly on us, as standing and looking up, we saw waves and rock and cloud, and the clear heavens through its glittering ever-moving veil.”*

*Mary Shelley on visiting the Rhine Falls*



# Stories

## from the Rhine

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By Kate Orson

### The roar of nature

Statistically, the Rhine Falls are impressive. They are the biggest waterfalls in Europe: 150 metres long, 23 metres high, and with an average flow of 425,000 litres of water per second passing over the rocks. As the white foam comes into view, stretching across the landscape, it is a much more exciting sight than these numbers might suggest. The sheer power of the falls floods the imagination with both danger and adventure; a feeling that intensifies as the torrent pours in curling swirls of icy blue water into the basin below. I descend a tree-lined path, with an irresistible urge to get closer.

It is a wet day in January. The place is empty except for a couple of shop assistants standing outside the souvenir shop, as if passing time until the arrival of spring. In the window, toy Swiss cows and St. Bernard puppies await their owners. I stroll along a wide boulevard that I can imagine packed with tourists.

I am quite glad to have the place to myself; to approach the rushing water without the distraction of hundreds of camera-snapping tourists. But my guide, German-born Heidemarlen Landmark – who has long been interlaced with the history of her adopted home – tells me that when you reach the observation deck and get up close to the spray, the roar of the water is so loud that it blocks out everything else, giving you the impression of being alone with this force of nature even on the busiest of summer days.

Water splashes my face, and I'm not sure if it is from the falls or the rain. For now, I can only imagine the scene in summer, when the water is a deep aquamarine, and the sun shines sparkling on the waves. From April onwards, you can take a leisurely cruise around the Rhine Falls basin. You can stop off at the rock that juts up in the middle and climb up steps for an amazing panoramic view. The jagged edges of the rock look precarious to me: "Doesn't the water cause it to erode?" I ask my guide. She reassures me that the rock is carefully studied for stability, and if necessary, filled in with concrete to prevent it from collapsing.

The Rhine Falls area has many other vantage points from which to enjoy the waterfalls' splendour. Towering above us is Schloss Laufen, originally built around 858. At that time, the falls were known as *grosses Lauffen*. In the 1700s the castle became the home of the Bleuler painting school, and the view from the castle ramparts inspired painters such as William Turner. The castle is now a museum about the school, reachable by a picturesque but steep 30-minute hike or by glass lift.

Down below on the water's edge is the Schlossli Wörth; an old toll house which is now a restaurant. You can enjoy a meal in a



spacious conservatory with a view of the falls. For walkers and cyclists, there are footpaths and cycle tracks along the Rhine, and even an adventure trail that starts at Schloss Laufen. It winds a magical path along the cliffside, to the sound of trickling, and thundering water, and includes a tunnel cut inside the cliff.

As I descend the path away from the falls, we pass by an old mill, and disused water wheel. Turbines now collect the power of the water for electricity, and you can compare your strength against that of the mighty waterfall on the 'test your strength'-machine.

Ms Landmark tells me stories of those who have tried to traverse the falls by canoe – with tragic consequences. Most die and those who survive are heavily fined. I turn and take one last look, wondering for a minute what sort of person would want to take on the challenge of this water – whether it is arrogance, madness, or the irresistible pull of the current that draws people here to experience its power.

### City of oriels

Schaffhausen, the capital of Canton Schaffhausen, is a few miles upstream from the Rhine Falls. The city came into being because

ships travelling from Lake Constance to Basel could not pass over the falls and needed a place to stop to unload their goods.

Travellers required more hotels and restaurants, and so Schaffhausen expanded as a wonderfully hospitable place. I receive a warm, friendly welcome and realise the hospitality exists to this day. My guide is Hans Peter Rohr, who has now retired from his 17-year stint of showing visitors around his city, but is making an exception for me today. After 80 years of living here, Mr Rohr has a special relationship with the history of the city and collects old postcards of Schaffhausen. His collection has been published in a book, *Schaffhausen im Bild Alter Karten*.

As we take a leisurely stroll along the cobblestone streets, almost everyone he passes says hello. This is officially a *Stadt* (city), but it is tiny really. All the locals know each other, and wherever you find yourself, it is only a five-minute walk back to the train station.

Mr Rohr and I walk towards Hotel Kronenhof, along streets full of bay windows. He is a vital spark in this community; his oral history of the place is delivered with such passion. He tells me that before the arrival of television, the street used to be the only



form of entertainment. Side windows allowed the locals to look up and down the street without being seen. Added to that, was a desire to compete with neighbours over the beautiful oriels on the windows. The result is a city known as the *Elkstadt*, the city of oriels, with a total of 171 masterpieces. Along the window frames are stone carved pillars decorated in red and gold. House names are etched in ornate fonts, and complementing them there are symbols for each house's name, such as two angels curved towards each other to make a heart shape, and a majestic golden ox.

Until recently, houses did not have numbers in Schaffhausen, only names. In a town where everyone knows each other, a quantitative method of mapping out the houses was not necessary. Instead houses were differentiated by colour and symbol, such as *rote rose* (red rose), and *weisse rose* (white rose). The city grew and society changed so the town finally conceded to having numbers in 1987.

We pass by *Haus zum Ritter* (House of the Knights). It has an elaborate fresco painted on the wall that dates from 1570. In the many panels of red and gold there are scenes of battle, a knight

on a white horse about to charge, as if to leap out of the fresco, and in the centre, a naked woman, her hands reaching up into the leaves of a tree. Hans has a gift for translating the pictures into stories, of how when Odysseus was in the land of the lotus-eaters, he was tempted by a woman, but managed to resist. Above this scene, a Roman knight sacrifices his life for his country.

Back at the hotel, we drink coffee sitting in a window seat, and gaze out at the Munot fort, which sits on a hill on the edge of the town. It was built by the residents under forced labour from 1564 - 89, though the rich could afford to send peasants in their place. It is now used for more peaceful purposes such as balls, open-air music and film screenings. At 9 p.m., a man who lives in the tower on the castle wall just beyond, will ring the bell; it is a bell that once tolled the shutting of the city walls for the night. Waiters, dressed smartly in contemporary suits, glide past me in the lounge, and I have a sense of the past merging with modern society.

### Painted History

My final destination is another place that owes its existence to the Rhine. Stein am Rhein (stone on the Rhine) is a village situated at the point where Lake Constance joins the river.

### Information box

Schaffhauserland Tourismus  
Herrenacker 15  
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052 632 40 20  
[www.schaffhauserland.ch](http://www.schaffhauserland.ch)

Rhine Falls  
[www.rheinfall.ch](http://www.rheinfall.ch)

Schaffhausen  
[www.schaffhausen.ch](http://www.schaffhausen.ch)

Stein am Rhein  
[www.steinamrhein.ch](http://www.steinamrhein.ch)



Above the archway into the old village, there is a clock with a deep blue face. It marks the point where I leave the modern world behind. I enter perfectly preserved medieval surroundings, where slender alleyways trickle into the town square. The buildings are decorated with renaissance frescoes, so that the house facades look like pictures in a gallery.

Each fresco depicts a moral story, or a mythical legend. The *Rathaus* (town hall) is a stunning building that shows scenes from the history of the village. At the house of the *Weisse Adler* (white eagle), the fresco shows the *Bocca Della Verità*, a mouth that bites off the hands of those who tell lies. At the *Hotel Sonne* (hotel sun), a fresco shows the encounter between Diogenes and Alexander the Great, in which the arrogant young upstart Diogenes asked the great Philosopher Alexander to 'stand a little out of my sun.' I imagine the stories told in the frescoes being woven into the childhoods of the villagers by their elders, to teach the children how to behave.

I leave the town square through another alleyway, and emerge beside the Rhine. I have to stoop through the archway that

leads to the Kloster St. Georgen. Previously, this monastery had been at nearby Singen, but, in 1007, Emperor Henry the 11<sup>th</sup> decided to move it here to strengthen this strategic point where major roads and rivers intersected. The abbots were given rights over the trade in the village, and so it quickly prospered.

Stein am Rhein is deceptively small. You can cover the whole of the village on foot in half an hour but as you delve deep into the layers of history painted on the walls, or in the Museum Lindwurm, a reconstructed 19<sup>th</sup> century house, you can travel much further. You may find yourself heading to the *Rote Ochsen* (Red Ox) tavern to listen to drinkers tell tales of what is depicted on the wall, or spend the night nestled behind painted stories at the *Weisse Adler* or *Hotel Sonne*.

On my way home, I cannot resist a detour to the Rhine Falls. I was told that in the evening, when all the tourists are gone, the locals take a walk along the promenade. As I drive past, I understand why. The sun has dipped behind the horizon; lamps dotted around the rocks twinkle like crystal stars; and beams of light illuminate the ever-tumbling water in an ethereal glow.

#### Getting there

Schaffhausen and the surrounding area is situated in North East Switzerland, 36 km from Zurich. Trains run to Schaffhausen, and Neuhausen, (for the Rhine Falls), and Stein am Rhein. There is also a train station at Schloss Laufen.