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36 Hours in Düsseldorf, Germany

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Don't pity Düsseldorf. Yes, it probably has a much lower profile than it should, far lower than bigger cities like Berlin and Munich — even arguably lower than that of its nearby archrival, Cologne. Yes, its soccer team, Fortuna Düsseldorf, was recently relegated from the top division to the second Bundesliga. And no, the capital of the North-Rhine Westphalia state is not regularly considered one of Europe's top tourist destinations. But let this be your advantage. The artsy, cultivated hometown of both the great Romantic poet Heinrich Heine and the German punk-rock legend Die Toten Hosen, Düsseldorf has more than enough attractions for a rich cultural weekend — or even longer. Although the city is celebrating the 725th anniversary of its founding this year, Düsseldorf's real draws are to be found in its dozens of new developments: stylish contemporary architecture, impressive modern art, cool new restaurants and even new takes on altbier, the local brew that ranks among Germany's best beer styles.

FRIDAY

4 p.m. 1. Before Nightfall

Called the “the longest bar in the world” by locals, the Altstadt — or Old Town — turns into a boisterous, noisy scene come nightfall, when big crowds turn out for the local specialty, altbier. Friday afternoon, however, is an ideal time to sample this moderately bitter, deep amber brew before things get too busy. Start with one of the historic breweries like Zum Schlüssel, or the dark, wood-paneled Uerige, then see how the two traditional favorites compare with the Altstadt newcomer, Brauerei Kürzer, which began producing altbier at its airy and modern brewpub in 2010.

5 p.m. 2. Street Cred

You'll find plenty of well-known international brands in the Altstadt, but for indie shopping, head south to the Lorettostrasse in the up-and-coming neighborhood of Unterbilk, where cool boutiques started opening about five years ago. Check out the unusual children's toys and wooden puzzles at Saba's, then shop for vintage-inspired men's clothing at the five-year-old Uwe van Afferden, where heritage American brands share space with rare German ones like Merz b. Schwanen and the shop's own sailor-style linen jackets (340 euros, or about \$450 at \$1.33 to the euro), available with matching high-water pants.

7:30 p.m. 3. Gehry Constructions

Ten minutes from Lorettostrasse, Düsseldorf's formerly run-down harbor is now known as the MedienHafen, or Media Harbor, the home of several broadcasting companies and some of the city's best modern architecture, including three small but stunningly fluid buildings by Frank Gehry, as well as new hotels and recently converted industrial spaces. Watch the sun set behind the colorful constructions, then head for Gehry's, a restaurant named after the architect, which serves oversize steaks, chops and chateaubriands of Argentine and American beef inside one of Mr. Gehry's own buildings. Dinner for two without wine: about 90 euros.

10 p.m. 4. Bar None

Though newer arrivals like Ellington's have stolen some of the spotlight, locals swear by the well-mixed cocktails and the intimate, speakeasy atmosphere at Bar Alexander, not far from Lorettostrasse in Unterbilk, and the related Bar Alexandra, about 10 minutes south in the Bilk district. Grab a house specialty like Bar Alexandra's bittersweet Bilk Perfect (rye, bitters, Italian and French vermouth, gum syrup), put away your German-English dictionary, and jump into one of the flowing, friendly (and sometimes English) conversations nearby (cocktails, about 8 euros).

11:30 p.m. 5. High Lights

Though the gigantic Rheinturm telecommunications tower has overlooked Düsseldorf and its environs since 1981, just this spring the tower's observation platform saw the opening of M 168, a club and lounge named after its height in meters, offering grand views of the twinkling skyline until 2 a.m. Over a final nightcap at 550 feet above the ground, you should have no trouble figuring out just exactly where your hotel is.

SATURDAY

11 a.m. 6. Sauerbraten or Sushi?

Yes, this is Germany, but the country's largest Japanese community has its home base on Immermannstrasse, just off the Oststrasse U-Bahn station. Explore the weird crackers and crazy Japanese candies at quirky shops like Shochiku, then stop for a pick-me-up at

Toykio, an ultramodern toy shop, art gallery and cafe. For a cheap lunch, grab the 7-euro bento box at the Maruyasu deli. Or splurge at the exquisite, Michelin-starred Nagaya, where the cuisine alternates gracefully from Japanese to Continental and back again, pairing sous-vide French beef with wasabi butter and tender roast veal with asparagus and miso sauce. At lunch, a multicourse tasting menu is about 65 euros, without sake.

2 p.m. 7. Grand Houses

Though most of Düsseldorf was destroyed during World War II, a few neighborhoods still show off the city's beautiful old architecture. To get a glimpse of what most of the city once looked like, take a quick U-Bahn ride out to Belsenplatz in the Oberkassel district and wander among the grand Art Nouveau buildings on quiet streets like Barmerstrasse, Glücksbergerstrasse and Steffenstrasse. Though historic, Oberkassel is also home to the city's newest altbier, brewed since 2011 at the atmospheric Brauhaus Alter Bahnhof, a brewpub inside the neighborhood's former train station.

3:30 p.m. 8. Local Beuys

With so many great museums to choose from, it can be hard to figure out where to begin. Start at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen's main museum building — known as K20 — which was updated with a shiny extension in 2010. The extensive modern collections include significant works by Klee, Picasso, Braque, Mondrian and Magritte, as well as installations by its hometown hero Joseph Beuys and wild sculptures by the British-born Tony Cragg, director of the Art Academy.

5 p.m. 9. Into the Garden

Get some downtime with a quiet walk through the Hofgarten, one of Germany's oldest public parks, a refreshing mixture of English and French gardens, 200-year-old trees and a small branch of the Düssel, the Rhine tributary that gave the city its name. Then, once you've recharged, head to the park's western end, just north of which you'll find the massive Kunstpalast, a collection of art from antiquity to the present day, including a two-floor gallery dedicated to Rubens.

9 p.m. 10. Have a Fling

Once a working-class industrial neighborhood northwest of the main train station, the Flingern district has been converting its charismatic old factories into lofts, clubs and trendy restaurants. In a former soap factory, the 18-month-old Dr. Thompson's offers live jazz and such creative pizzas as honey-mustard salmon with crème fraîche alongside meal-size salads and Spanish-style snacks. Don't worry about going anywhere else tonight: once the dining's done, D.J.'s will spin house and funk on the dance floor until the morning. (Dinner for two without wine: about 80 euros.)

SUNDAY

10 a.m. 11. Into the Tunnel

Take in the fresh air during a final walk along the broad Rhine, following the embankment from the Altstadt toward the Rheinturm. Once you reach the KIT Café, you'll see why the air is so nice: the bulk of Düsseldorf's crosstown traffic is running below-ground through the enormous Rheinufer Tunnel, underneath the embankment. Enjoy a second breakfast of eggs, sausages, cheese and bread on the terrace of the ground-floor cafe (8 euros), then head down into KIT, or Kunst im Tunnel, a walled-in underground exhibition space that opened inside the tunnel in 2007. That slight bump you heard? The muffled sound of thousands of cars and trucks running on either side and directly below the artworks.

THE DETAILS

- 1. Zum Schlüssel**, Bolkerstrasse 43; www.zumschluessel.de. **Uerige**, Berger Strasse 1; uerige.de. **Brauerei Kürzer**, Kurze Strasse 18-20; brauerei-kuerzer.de.
- 2. Saba's**, Lorettostrasse 36; sabas-shop.de. **Uwe van Afferden**, Lorettostrasse 35; van-afferden.com.
- 3. MedienHafen. Gehry's**, Neuer Zollhof 3; gehrys.de.
- 4. Ellington's**, Scheurenstrasse 5. **Bar Alexander**, Düsseldorfstrasse 71; bar-alexander.com. **Bar Alexandra**, Merowingerstrasse 18; bar-alexandra.com.
- 5. M 168**, Stromstrasse 20; guennewig.de/drheintu.
- 6. Shochiku**, Immermannstrasse 15; shochiku.eu. **Toykio**, Immermannstrasse 18; toykio.de. **Maruyasu deli**, Immermannstrasse 23; www.maruyasu.de. **Nagaya**, Klosterstrasse 42; nagaya.de.
- 7. Belsenplatz. Brauhaus Alter Bahnhof**, Belsenstrasse 2; brauhaus-alterbahnhof.de.
- 8. K20**, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen's main museum building, Grabbeplatz 5; kunstsammlung.de.
- 9. Hofgarten. Kunstpalast**, Ehrenhof 4-5; smkp.de.
- 10. Dr. Thompson's**, Erkrather Strasse 232; drthompsons.info.
- 11. Kunst im Tunnel**, Mannesmannufer 1b; kunst-im-tunnel.de