

# Germany's Cat and Mouse Castles Offer Fairytale Romance

Two of the many intriguing castles on Germany's Rhine River are Burg Katz and Burg Maus, the former looming over the small town of St. Goarshausen and the latter overlooking nearby Wellmich. The names and stories of these castles reflect the history of the Rhineland, in which powerful lords competed for a share of the wealth from the river's lucrative shipping trade, and armies battered each other for mastery.

During the Middle Ages, noblemen holding lands along the Rhine had the right to collect tolls from passing ships for use of the towpaths along the banks, where the river's currents were especially treacherous. (Sailors would tether the ships to oxen or mules along these towpaths, and the animals would then guide them safely past the danger zone.)

The river near St. Goarshausen was indeed treacherous. Here, jutting into a sharp bend in the river rises the Loreley, a sheer cliff of slate rock, where legend says a beautiful water nymph sang so enchantingly that she lured sailors too close to the rock and wrecked their ships. Nymph or no nymph, the Loreley presented a serious danger to ships.

In 1245, Count Diether V of Katzenelnbogen (meaning "cat's elbow") built the toll castle Burg Rheinfels on the opposite side of the river from the Loreley, as a base to exact fees from ships sailing in both directions. In 1255, when he increased the fee, the League of Rhenish Cities, which felt the fee amounted to extortion, sent an army to besiege Rheinfels. For over a year they attacked the castle, but its thick walls

held and the League eventually gave up, leaving the Katzenelnbogens free to charge whatever they wished.

A hundred years later in 1355, Archbishop Boemund of Trier, who held a narrow strip of land on the Loreley side of the river less than two miles to the north, began constructing a toll castle of his own. This new castle, originally called St. Peterseck (then Deuernburg or Thurnberg), was ideally located to intercept ships traveling upriver before they reached the Katzenelnbogen towpath. Although Boemund died before the castle was finished, his successor Archbishop Kuno von Falkenstein completed the castle about 30 years later.

But the Counts of Katzenelnbogen did not share Kuno's love of the new castle. As they could no longer charge tolls from ships sailing in both directions, it slashed their toll income in half. Furthermore, though it was considerably smaller than Rheinfels, it represented a military threat. But legend has it that the Count's wife scoffed at the new castle, calling it a mouse that need not trouble the Katzenelnbogens.

## Mouse Castle

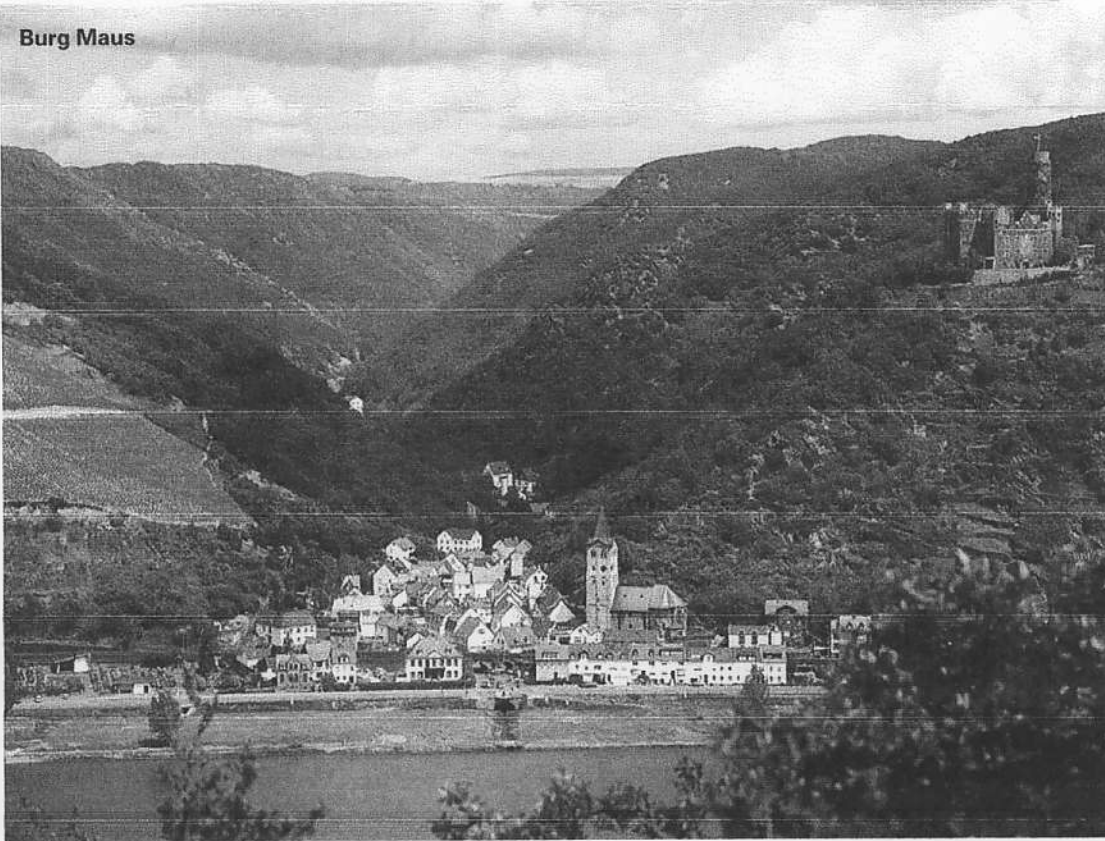
By 1371, Count Diether's grandson Wilhelm II began construction of a new castle by the Loreley on the cliffs above St. Goarshausen. Because there was already a family castle at Katzenelnbogen, he called this new castle Neukatzenelnbogen (meaning "New Katzenelnbogen"). Soon, the family could again intercept ships sailing in both directions and charge them the infamous St. Goar double-toll.

After Wilhelm died sonless, lordship of the castle passed to Count Johann III, Wilhelm's second cousin twice removed and husband of his niece Anna. Johann completed the castle around 1393. A high tower rising above the keep allowed the family to



Burg Katz

Burg Maus



see over the intervening peak and look down on their rival's castle. Before long, people began calling the Katzenelnbogens new, taller castle Burg Katz (Cat Castle), and the smaller one, scornfully likened to a mouse by the late count's wife, Burg Maus (Mouse Castle).

As the fractured territories of the old German Empire were consolidated over the succeeding centuries, the two castles became part of the same domain. In the late 1600s, when King Louis XIV of France invaded the Rhineland, both were used to defend the fertile lands along the Rhine and the river's valuable shipping trade. The French king's armies battered Burg Katz in 1684, Burg Maus in 1689, and Burg Katz again in 1692, reducing large parts of both castles to rubble.

During the Napoleonic wars, the House of Hesse-Kassel repaired Burg Katz enough to make it usable, but it fell to Napoleon's army in 1801. A few years later, according to local lore, Napoleon was riding toward Katz when the castle fired a cannon salute in his honor, which made his horse shy.

Napoleon lost his temper and ordered the castle blown up. Whether for this reason or another, in 1806, the castle was blown up at Napoleon's orders.

#### Modern Rebuilding Efforts

The Prussians eventually drove Napoleon out of the German territories in 1814. With this, peace came to the Rhineland, and an army of tourists descended upon it. The Rhine's literary visitors included Victor Hugo, Lord Byron, and Washington Irving, who spread word of its beauty and romance. Its rocky cliffs, crowned by ruined and overgrown castles, brooded over a serene and misty river. Its vineyards, tucked into steep hills, produced superior wines to delight the connoisseur. And Burg Maus generated a wealth of ghost stories.

In the late 19th century, Ferdinand Berg, the owner of Burg Katz, hired architects to construct a restored castle over its ruins as his family residence. Many German scholars and historians were horrified by the result,

but the architects defended their design, pointing out that the original castle had been a military fortress, and a design strictly faithful to the original plan would not have made a comfortable home. For example, the family wanted wide windows from which to enjoy views of the river while the original castle had arrow-slits that let its defenders shoot at attackers without exposing themselves to unnecessary risk.

From 1902 through 1906, Burg Maus too was rebuilt, also for use as a private home. Its owner, architect Wilhelm Gurtner, respected the original design and preserved most of the remaining structure, including areas showing traces of the original red plaster. Some of his touches, though, such as the

drawbridge at the entryway, were more theatrical than accurate.

Today, Burg Katz is owned by a Japanese businessman who operates it as a luxury hotel. Although visitors to St. Goarshausen can still see it looming dramatically over the town, access to both castle and grounds is forbidden to all but hotel guests. Burg Maus, too, is privately owned, but resident falconers Ulrich and Edith Voell welcome visitors during the spring and summer months, when they present flight shows with eagles, falcons, and other raptors.

Katz and Maus may look like dwellings from a land of legend, but their foundations still testify to a real past in which it was not fairytale romance but force of arms that decided the fates of the men and women who lived within them. ☺

*Directions: Burg Katz and Burg Maus are located on the eastern bank of the Rhine River roughly halfway between Koblenz and Rodesheim, above the towns of St. Goarshausen and Wellmich.*