

A house to hold a mighty God

BOCHUM, Germany – Life is old here, older than the trees, as the late John Denver might have said. Here instead the threads of existence are measured in the stones that form the cobbled streets of a 1,700-year-old city and the weathered walls of buildings still standing from the Middle Ages, survivors of war, the elements and the intermittent indifference of man. The aged and wizened among us have always been storytellers, and these stones undoubtedly have a thousand tales to tell. Listen hard enough as you walk the streets, and you can almost hear them whispering.

Old – ancient, even – but hardly slowed down by time. From the moment you land in Cologne and venture down to the train station in the belly of the airport – an economy of design for which the Germans are much noted – you begin to understand the often frenetic pace at which this culture moves, on foot, by bike or on public transport. Ride the rail down four stops into the heart of the city, and you witness the pace seemingly tripled; the main train station bustles with people of all nationalities and walks of life, scraps of several different languages clearly audible to the traveler walking by. Human-sized ants in a maze, the crowd busquely roves about in precise, determined patterns geared toward making the next train, stowing luggage or catching a quick bite before venturing out into the city. It's a complex and relentlessly efficient minuet of motion indeed; the Germans have had many years to perfect this system.

Downtown Cologne quickly envelopes you with a mixture of modern industrialism and Old World charm, all the more noteworthy due to the fact that the city, by all rights, shouldn't even be here. Located on the Rhine River in western Germany, Cologne was and is a crucial part of the country's economic heartland, and was accordingly targeted mercilessly by Allied bombing during the Second World War. One particularly destructive 1942 raid dubbed Operation Millennium sent 1,000 British and American bombers to destroy Cologne from the air; by 1945 262 separate raids had obliterated 95 percent of the city – think about that for a moment – dropping the population from 800,000 to just 40,000. Yet the city recovered; the Rhine rolls onward toward the sea as Cologne Cathedral looms high toward the heavens, a great, dark Dracula's castle of a church sending a message of resolution: mere bombs will never take down this monument to the Almighty.

The cathedral itself is one of the most staggering structures ever created by man (a common complaint seems to be that the soaring spires are much too high to fit in a camera frame), and a testament to man's perseverance, albeit of the excessively stubborn sort that might have been leavened by a sense of proportion somewhere along the way. Designed in the Gothic style, the cathedral was begun in the year 1248 and partially finished, until funds dried up and caused a 300-year delay in construction that was finally alleviated by a national tax in the 19th century. The 632-year building project was completed in 1880.

The result is one of the most breathtakingly elaborate and awe-inspiring houses of worship ever created. Walk inside and you're faced with a towering 140-foot ceiling, priceless stained-glass

windows depicting everything from the birth of Christ to the martyrdom of St. Stephen, a massive golden chest reputedly containing relics of the Magi (though it's difficult not to question the authenticity of the skulls within) and a subterranean treasury containing historic treasures of the cathedral: golden staffs and crucifixes, gold- and silver-inlaid bishop's vestments, and reliquaries containing bones of additional saints (there's also a nail from the Cross and a thorn alleged to have come from the Crown of Thorns).

It's an extraordinary time capsule of the Catholic Church during medieval times, no question, and one struggles to comprehend the enormous level of effort that went into its creation. Equally difficult to ascertain is whether God would have regarded it as a wise use of resources; indeed, you can't help but imagine a 16th-century Martin Luther holding up this ecclesiastical palace as a sign of a church that had lost its way.

Such questions and conflicting forces – a towering monument to Christendom that took six centuries and untold levels of toil and treasure to build, only to come within a dagger thickness of being destroyed in wartime – are those Europe has grappled with for years as part of the enduring character of this land, and of these disparate cultures now struggling to become one people. Western civilization started here, and spread throughout the globe; so did the torrid passions that twice tore the continent apart, necessitating, in Winston Churchill's memorable phrasing, that the New World step forth and rescue the Old. Six decades ago Germany – temporarily driven mad by hate-driven ideology and mass hysteria – lost the war and its self-respect, paid dearly in blood and lives, and then picked itself back up and started to rebuild.

In the end, that resiliency may be the finest monument to a people – far greater even than Cologne's mighty fortress, built to house a mighty God.

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