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Dusseldorf: A charming Rhine city

Features - May 04, 2003

Wahyuni Kamah, Contributor, Dusseldorf, Germany

Having got used to the relaxing and quiet atmosphere of southern German cities, arriving in Dusseldorf, situated further north in western Germany, made quite an impression. Its main train station, Konrad Adenauer Platz, is very busy, modern and huge.

The main hall is packed with travelers, ranging from backpackers to business travelers, walking back and forth. The atmosphere is hectic -- a long queue in the booking hall and all seats taken in the cafes and small restaurants, with travelers in a rush. Above all, though, everything was organized and seemed perfect.

Interestingly, I saw more people of different ethnic groups than in other cities in the south: Africans, Asians and, of course, Turks.

Whereas in Stuttgart most taxi drivers are Turks, in D • sseldorf they are Africans, who use their native language with each other. Of around 571,000 people living in D • sseldorf, 16.9 percent are foreigners.

"Turks account for the largest proportion of foreigners, followed by people from the Balkans and some Japanese," said Birgit Schierbaum from D • sseldorf Tourist Office.

Dusseldorf, the capital of Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia state, is a busy city. Heavy industry, mining companies, banks, and insurance companies have their headquarters here and about 5,000 foreign companies have made D • sseldorf the base for their representative offices. No wonder that traffic in the 271-square-kilometer city is congested at peak hours.

"Avoid peak hours if you want to tour the city," said Ingo, who lives in the outskirts of D • sseldorf.

Dusseldorf was first referred to in a document in 1135. Allied bombing destroyed more than 80 percent of D • sseldorf's city center in World War II. Amazingly, it recovered as a cosmopolitan city with many important businesses, and where many international exhibitions are held every year.

"You must see Rhine embankment promenade," recommended my German friend before I left for Düsseldorf.

Düsseldorf certainly cannot be seen in isolation from the Rhine, one of the huge German rivers, which crosses the city. Düsseldorfers are proud of the river and try to preserve its beauty. An enormous project was undertaken to keep its citizens close to the Rhine: the Rhine embankment promenade.

For decades the busy traffic artery, Rheinuferstrasse, had separated Düsseldorf with the Rhine. The artery was relocated underground in an expensive project costing DM570 million (US\$ 285 million).

The promenade was constructed on the roof of the tunnel, stretching over 1.5 kilometers, from Oberkassel Bridge along the Old Town to the parliament house of North Rhine-Westphalia.

When you are on this promenade the roar of traffic beneath is inaudible. On this promenade, pedestrian and bicycle lanes have been laid down and 600 trees planted, while there is also space for leisure activities and strolling around. It is now the most beautiful promenade on the Rhine.

The new promenade was a source of pride to Düsseldorfers, as the road project returned the city to the Rhine, their beloved river. About a million people celebrated the opening of the promenade in 1995, which was designed by architect Niklaus Fritschi.

The view of the Rhine from the bridge, with its twinkling lights and sailing ships, is excellent in the evening from the Burgplatz. It is a large square, which has become a meeting point for Düsseldorfers. If the sky is clear the 234-meter Rhineturm (Rhine Tower) in the south can be seen from the promenade. At a height of 164 meters, is a platform that offers a bird's-eye view of Düsseldorf. A revolving restaurant caters for visitors at a height of 172 meters.

It is fortunate that the charms of Düsseldorf are located close to the main train station. Altstadt (Old Town) and Königsallee, a world-class shopping avenue for fashions, are accessible on foot from the station. You can walk northwest from the station to Hofgarten (Palace Gardens), Germany's first public city park, built in 1769. Walking southward from the gardens, you will reach Königsallee.

Altstadt is walking distance from Königsallee. It is the place where the people of Düsseldorf can relax and enjoy their free time. In short, it is Düsseldorf's hot spot.

The hotels, museums, local and international restaurants, clubs, historical buildings, outdoor cafes and bars are concentrated in Altstadt. Hotels and places of historical interest often stand side by side in the

quarter that accommodates about 260 pubs.

In Altstadt you can visit, for instance, Mahn-und Gedenkstaette (exhortation & memorial site) on Muehlenstrasse, which has displays of the persecution and resistance during the Nazi occupation of Dusseldorf. Admission to this site is free.

As a big city, Dusseldorf is always pulsating. In the summer, late at night, you can still see people on the streets. The pedestrians and bicycle lanes are fully lit to allow users to travel safely.

Getting to Dusseldorf is easy. It is accessible from any German city by train. From D • sseldorf you can also travel to other cities in Europe. Be sure to make your trip to other German city on the weekend because sometimes there is a Schoenes Wochenende ticket, which gives a discount of 50 percent off the normal ticket price.

When getting around the city, it is advisable to use a D • sseldorf Welcome Card, which provides special offers and reductions to some museums, and is a two-day public transport ticket. Hotels are quite expensive in D • sseldorf, especially during fairs or festivals. The tourist information office is near the station, where you can ask about tour packages and hotel rates too.

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