Winding from Würzburg’s vineyard-ribboned hills to Füssen at the foot of the Alps, the Romantic Road strings together an enchanting collection of villages, cities and castles. But this fabled road is more than just one long photo opportunity.

The 350km-long road cuts through a cultural and historical cross-section of southern Germany; it traverses Franconia and a wedge of Baden-Württemberg in the north, and Bavarian Swabia and the Allgäu in the south. Along the way, you can get a completely different perspective by scaling medieval towers and town walls. For a greater challenge, there are hiking and cycling versions of the entire Romantic Road route.

Spring brings the area’s beer gardens to life and kicks off a jam-packed programme of festivals and concerts that extend throughout the summer. Cooler weather has its own allure: open fires, misty valleys and few, if any, crowds. Sure, visitor numbers pick up during the Christmas markets, but so does the area’s Gemütlichkeit (cosiness). Lingering at fairy-lit, snow-covered stalls selling nutcrackers, tree ornaments and hand-carved wooden toys, while sipping a steaming mug of gluhwein (mulled wine with sugar and spice), makes December perhaps the most magical time of all to visit.

No matter what time of year you’re here, the road proper is only a starting point. Venturing off on spontaneous side trips lets you experience the road’s true serendipity (and serendipity, after all, is the essence of every great romance).

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Glimpsing Ludwig II’s fantasy palace, **Schloss Neuschwanstein** (p283), rise through the mountain mist like a dreamy mirage
- Catching an organ recital in the ethereal basilica dominating the pastoral village of **Ottobeuren** (boxed text, p280)
- Sniffing, sipping and stocking up on superb white wines in and around vibrant **Würzburg** (p258)
- Dining alfresco on freshly caught fish on the harbourside promenade of Lake Constance’s charming island, **Lindau** (p286)
- Piecing together Augsburg’s still-thriving artistic and industrial traditions at the **Maximilianmuseum** (p273)
Getting Around

In 1950, the Romantic Road became one of Germany’s first tourist routes and remains its most popular today. Although billed as a single ‘road’, it’s actually a series of interlinking roads connecting Würzburg and Füssen via 25 key villages, towns and cities, along with an additional handful of castles and churches signposted just off the main route.

Most people travel the Romantic Road from north to south, which is how we’ve covered it in this book, but it works just as well the other way round.

Trains serve most (but not all) of the route’s major stops. There are also local buses year-round for places not reached by train, but these can be tedious, slow and complicated. For convenience and flexibility, the ideal way to explore the Romantic Road in depth is by car. Brown-and-white ‘Romantische Strasse’ signs are posted along the length of the route. However, if you’re driving, take note of road numbers and upcoming towns listed throughout this chapter, as signs are few and far between in some stretches.

With its gentle gradients and ever-changing scenery, the Romantic Road also makes an ideal bike trip, with its own signposted Romantic Road cycling route, mainly away from traffic. Tourist offices stock detailed cycling advice, including lists of ‘bicycle-friendly’ hotels and information about public-storage facilities.

Hikers can tackle the Romantic Road long distance hiking route, which leads mostly through meadows, fields and forests, as well as through each township en route. Allow three weeks to hike the full route at a brisk pace, or four if you plan to sightsee along the way.

A good first stop is the info-packed English-language website www.romanticroad.de. See also p22 for a recommended week-long driving itinerary.

TOURS

From April to October the Deutsche Touring Europabus (☎ 069-790 3230; www.romanticroadcoach.de), often referred to as the Romantic Road bus, runs one coach daily in each direction between Frankfurt and Munich, passing through most Romantic Road towns and villages along the way. However, check routes and pick-up/drop-off points with Deutsche Touring, as changes to the route were in the works at the time of writing, with several towns currently served by the bus mooted to be bypassed.