

4-ROETGEN

Roetgen in the foothills of the Fen – “Gateway to the Eifel”

Extended areas of green between softly rolling hills give the foothills of the High Fen its gentle character. Livestock and dairy farming look back on a long tradition here. The climb from here up to the Fen plateau is a different story, however. This wilder zone, the sloping roof of the Fen, is more barren in appearance. It is not well suited to farming, in contrast to the milder foothills around Roetgen, below. In the Trekking Station is a National Park info point. The Fen foothills lie in a watershed area between the bay of North Rhineland and the Eifel, one of Germany’s significant central uplands. To the South, it is limited by the Mosel, to the East by the Rhine and to the North by the Aachen –Düren – Bonn line. Less clear is the western border, where it straddles the frontiers to Belgium and Luxembourg, to merge into the Ardennes and the Ösling region. Yet the Eifel also straddles two federal “Länder”, the Rhineland Palatinate and North Rhine Westphalia. The expression “Gateway to the Eifel” used to describe Roetgen, however accurately, should not be confused with the physical, if symbolic, “gateways” (Eifel Toren) that have been built to mark the borders of the Eifel National Park, of which the two nearest to the Vennbahn are to be found at Simmerath-Rurberg and Monschau-Höfen.

With the Vennbahn through a central upland region

Eifel and Ardennes are uplands belonging to the central European, or central German highlands that begin to gradually appear to the south of the Great North German plain. For two completely different topographical experiences of this transitional region, we need only cite the “Himmelsleiter” or Heaven’s Ladder, which takes the motorised traveller on an impressive climb, straight as an arrow through the foothills up to Roetgen. The complementary opposite of this quick approach is the Vennbahn, which leaves the basin valley of Aachen to work its way gradually higher in wide and lazy loops through the picturesque foreland of the Fen. If Heaven’s Ladder engages the pulse with climbs of up to 10% and sometimes three lanes to speed past the trucks, the Vennbahn engages the senses with a steady effort up into the highland air. Only between Roetgen and Lammersdorf is the gradient limit of a tolerable 1.7%, the steepest on the line, maintained for any length. The choice between these routes is subject to the different needs and mobility of their users: to enjoy a gentle but steady regime of exercise through natural surroundings that are not so much subdued by rail as they are wedded to the sinuous curves of the track, or to let it flash by like a film strip as part of an entirely rational progression towards a goal and a time. Yet the rational choice is nothing new, and it was the motive for the first road up to the Eifel, a full two centuries ago.

The “Himmelsleiter” is smoothed out, 200 years after it was constructed

Between 1809 and 1818, a road was built from Aachen to Trier. The road was begun in Napoleonic times and finished under the Prussians. It is said to have been Napoleon Bonaparte himself who ordered the construction of a road from Aachen via Monschau to Metz in 1804. Apparently, it was at the behest of Monschau textile manufacturers that the project was initially laid before the emperor, who from 1806 to 1813 was Protector of the Rhine Alliance. Yet behind the project were not only commercial but also, and above all, military considerations: a way was needed to move battalions of troops quickly. This called for new qualities in road construction, route planning and the organisation of road users. Thus, the Emperor ordered that traffic on all roads must proceed on the right. Extension and improvement of the road network was one of his key priorities. Between 1800 and 1815, the journey time on roads within the Empire was halved. Planning for the Himmelsleiter was considerably influenced by such goals. The Vennbahn only once intersects this road, and these days even that is underground. Because after long discussion of a bridge solution, it was decided to go ahead with a tunnel near the “Sprungschanze” or “ski jump” on the Himmelsleiter, to which end the level of that section of road was raised slightly. Nowadays the Himmelsleiter is a far smoother experience in its vertical run, doubtless to the delight of all boy racers. Cyclists, who are fans of softer mobility, are simply happy that they can now negotiate the high-speed stretch in safety.

Once by train, now by bike in gently rising curves up into the high Eifel

From Roetgen, the Vennbahn begins to scale the heights of the Eifel. Here, the cyclist meets with the steepest gradient on the entire line. At 1.7 %, this is a mere fraction of the slope taken by the Himmelsleiter, for which we can thank the railway builders' concern to conserve energy. Until the beginning of the age of rail, roads climbed the backs of hills, plunged through valleys and avoided obstacles. The train levelled all these by bridging valleys, tunnelling through mountains and cutting through obstacles. The best solution was always the one with the least gradient. The legacy of railway engineers is now to the advantage of cyclists. The minimal gradient philosophy of railways now gives us these tracks to the left and right of the Vennbahn, one of the longest rail embankment bike trails in Europe.

Cycling the railway embankment, not only in the Eifel ...

Along with riverside tracks, former rail embankments are another feather in the cap of the Eifel cycle track network. Among these are the 58-kilometre-long Maare-Mosel Cycle Track, as well as the Eifel-Ardenne Cycle Track, which connects the Vennbahn after St Vith with Adenau on the Nürburgring. As far as Gerolstein, this track follows the embankment of the former West-Eifel-Rail. Instead of equipping busy main roads with expensive and often unattractive cycle tracks, the parallel experience provided by old rail lines offers a traffic-free, level alternative, with occasional gradients of up to 2.5%. The potential of this network of former rail embankments has been surveyed by Rail-Track-Cycle expert Dr. Achim Bartoschek, who concludes: "The density and quality of the tracks available in the Eifel region make it a sensible solution to ally these with their counterparts in Luxembourg and East Belgium to create a large-scale network of ex-rail cycle tracks."

... but also on the RAVeL routes of East Belgium

Since 1995, the Walloon Region has been recommissioning disused railways and canal tow paths, converting them into a network of "green routes" known as RAVeL (Réseau Autonome de Voies Lentes: Autonomous Network of Slow Traffic Routes). When finished, this network will be about 2000 km long. A similar plan is underway for disused railways in Flanders. The RAVeL tracks offer a slow-mobility infrastructure for cyclists, horses, pedestrians and, depending on surface quality, inline skaters. Most RAVeL routes are still owned by the Belgian Railways. The renovation of these tracks is under the aegis of the organisation "Chemins du Rail". Under RAVeL nomenclature, the Vennbahn is known as the line L48, between Schmidthof/Raeren and Kalterherberg/Leykaul.

The Vennbahn, a game of cat and mouse with national frontiers

On the section between Schmidthof/Raeren and Kalterherberg/Leykaul, the Vennbahn traces the Belgian border. Well, almost! Actually, it slices off a sliver of Germany five times, creating five German "exclaves" (see more detailed information under Kalterherberg/Ruitzhof). In Roetgen, we find the first enclave in the former station enclosure. On this 35-kilometre stretch, Belgian and German territory is changed in 11 places. Between Raeren and Roetgen, after Perschei (kilometre 23.73), we find Germany on both sides of the track, 50 metres further at Roetgen station, we have Germany on our left, Belgium on our right, 80 meters further at kilometre 27.86, Germany is once again on both sides. For Gilbert Perrin, President of the non-profit organisation "Chemins du Rail", this has to be one of the craziest borders in Europe. He likens it to a game of cat and mouse with national frontiers.

Roetgen in the Second World War: even after liberation, the "Reich" strikes back

From a historical point of view, Roetgen holds yet another honour as "gateway", because it was here that allied troops crossed for the first time into Germany at the end of World War II. On 12th September 1944, three months after their landing in Normandy, the first American soldiers coming from Raeren crossed the frontier at Roetgen to tread German soil. Among these US soldiers was Ernest Hemingway, already a famous author, who would win the Nobel Prize for Literature a decade later. Once US troops had broken through the West Wall, Monschau, the Eifel villages and the suburbs of Aachen were taken. In the following months the battle of Hürtgen Forest and the

Ardennes offensive (Battle of the Bulge) would dramatically escalate the situation on the ground. The defence of the thinly populated plateau between Roetgen and the river Rur was the result of various strategic considerations: the allied advance had been significantly slowed before Aachen by the West Wall. This gave German troops time to regroup and dig in. For the Germans, Hürtgen Forest was an excellent defensible position because, by breaching the reservoir wall, the entire Rur valley could be flooded and the American advance made even more difficult. In addition, this area was deemed necessary as a mustering zone for the coming Ardennes offensive and had to be secured. Estimations of the number of casualties vary widely, even today. The Germans are believed to have lost between 12 and 15,000. The US estimates its dead at 32,000 for the period from September to December 1944. American veterans pronounce the first syllable of Hürtgen as “hurt”, adding a further layer of symbolism. For Ernest Hemingway, the battle signified the end of his manly and triumphalist attitude to war. His novel “Across the River and into the Trees” is the swan-song of an embittered, war-weary veteran and a celebration of life and love.

The West Wall - symbolic construct of the Third Reich, now metaphor for the fickleness of history

The foothills of the High Fen are not only segmented by roads and the raised track of the former Vennbahn, but also by another strategic line, the West Wall. This was intended to hinder the advance of enemy troops into Germany. With a total length of 630 kilometres and more than 18,000 bunkers, countless galleries, trenches and tank traps, the West Wall stretched from Cleves on the Dutch border to Grenzach-Wyhlen on the Swiss one. Chancellor Hitler ordered its planning in 1936 and its construction between 1938 and 1940. Work on the West Wall consumed enormous resources. In Roetgen, one can still see the remains of a destroyed bunker in an enclosure just off the L238 road. The Vennbahn only once intersects the West Wall in the village of Schmithof between Aachen and Roetgen. The West Wall was not only of strategic value to the Third Reich, but was also intended as a concrete symbol of the inviolability and superior power of national socialist ideology, according to historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch. Yet once again, irony emerges as the tutor of history: just before Aachen, not far from Lichtenbusch, one particular field seems to rear up unnaturally high, completely swallowing the concrete “dragons teeth” pyramids of the tank barrier. Local farmers had buried the wall under tons of earth, in order to be able to reach their fields and meadows cut off by the defensive line. This was a blessing to the 3rd US Armoured Division in its march on Aachen, which was thus able to easily surmount the defences, despite the presence of land-mines. This unplanned feature can be seen in hindsight as the revenge of those farmers whom the war and the wall had deprived of their farms and fields.

The West Wall today – preferred biotope for bats, squirrels and Europe’s most “European” badger

In the meantime, the teeth of time have been gnawing at the dragon’s teeth of the West Wall and nature has long since returned. The wall, with its bunkers and galleries, has developed into a valuable interconnected, biotope system. In an otherwise over-fertilised agricultural landscape, rare plants now live on the dry fortified earthworks, even flourishing on naked concrete. Bunkers offer a rare habitat for wild cats, bats and cave spiders. Michael Zobel, nature guide at the Belgian-German arts and culture association KuKuK (cuckoo: “Kunst- und Kultur-Verein Köpfchen), housed in the former border post, has increasingly observed animals making good use of the West Wall. Shredded pine cones on the dragon’s teeth are a sign that squirrels use these as a secure place to keep an eye open while they feed. Moreover, entirely in the spirit of a new borderless union, close to the West Wall at the Köpfchen frontier lives Europe’s most “European” badger. His burrow is right on the border, if a few metres under it, with exits on either side ... to Belgium or Germany!