

# Queen Victoria would be amused

After sensitive restoration, one of the great royal castles of Europe is lowering the drawbridge for the first time and Julian Allason is entranced by the secrets it reveals

**I**F Saxe-Coburg and Gotha has a familiar ring, it should, and not just to Britons. The dynasty—which continues to flourish here as the House of Windsor—has also furnished Belgium, Portugal and Bulgaria with sovereigns. Indeed, the descendants of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha have ruled Germany, Russia, Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece, Spain, Norway, Sweden and Denmark—and still do in the last four. As a result, it's unsurprising that the ducal house has been somewhat eclipsed, however, the family continues to thrive in northern Bavaria at Coburg and has opened its seat, Callenberg Castle, to public view.

Coburg lies between Frankfurt and Munich, reached from London by British Airways flights into either city thence by train through Railbookers. The medieval town nestles in a valley between two mountains commanded by castles: Callenberg and the fortress of Veste Coburg. It was here that Martin Luther sheltered in 1530 under ducal protection from the wrath of the Holy Roman Emperor.

Not having been bombed during the Second World War, the architecture of the old town remains delightfully intact. British visitors are welcome here, if comparatively infrequent. My questions in halting German to a market trader were, however, answered in fluent English—and the superiority of local beer asserted with a grin.

One feature of the architecture is the *erker*, a corner turret rising two storeys above a tall column, seen on the Rathaus and Stadthaus. Gates in the city wall ascend

**Prince Hubertus met his wife, Princess Kelly, when he was working in finance in the USA**

higher, the most handsome being that of the Judengasse, marking the entrance to the old Jewish quarter. The magnificent church of St Moriz is undergoing restoration, which is scheduled to be completed before the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

The elegant Landestheater remains open and boasts a playbill of productions remarkable for a town with a population of just 42,000. As a centre of advanced engineering, Coburg is prosperous and proud of a heritage inseparable from the dynasty.

Its head, Prince Andreas, has recently handed over the running of ducal affairs—including large-scale forestry—to his son. A tall, engaging figure with Wall Street banking experience and possessed of a self-deprecating manner, the 39-year-old Prince Hubertus maintains a low-key involvement in local politics. A formative influence has been the restoration of Callenberg Castle. 'It was our family's summer residence and greatly loved,' he explains. 'Every important family ceremony and event happened here.'

The last duke, Carl Eduard, remained in residence until 1945. Thereafter, it became a school and increasingly rundown, so much so that, in the late 1970s, the town invited the family to buy it back. 'To reinstate the fabric and interiors was a formidable undertaking and turned into a 15-year project,' recalls the Prince. 'But we wanted to do it authentically and worked closely with the conservation authorities.'

Not the least problem was to what stage it should be restored. Callenberg had originally been a fort, documented from 1122, and progressively enlarged. Duke Ernst I had the castle redesigned in 1827 by Karl Alexander von Heideloff, architect and master builder of Nuremberg. To this, his son Ernst II added a neo-Gothic façade in 1856.

The resulting layout is nothing if not eccentric: the audience room opens onto a rose garden atop the battlements. When exploring the castle, it isn't always clear on which level one will emerge. At one point, I found myself in the German Shooting Museum, which is hosted here.



‘The layout is nothing if not eccentric: the audience room opens onto a rose garden atop the battlements’

Writing in her diary, Queen Victoria recorded: 'A little steep, the way up to Callenberg castle, but once you have arrived there, you can enjoy a nice cup of tea in a beautiful surrounding.' Today, the Prince offers me coffee and an introduction to his American investment-banker wife, Princess Kelly. 'Let me show you something,' she enthuses, pointing out a portrait of Duke Carl Eduard, beside which are displayed the sword and Order of the Garter he's painted wearing.

This is the charm of Callenberg—grandeur alongside intimate glimpses of family life. In one suite of rooms hang pictures of Victoria and Albert and each of their nine children. It's reminiscent of the domestic atmosphere of Osborne House, the royal escape on the Isle of Wight where the little princes and princesses played in a Swiss chalet. Osborne's design was strongly influenced by Albert and inspiration for what Victoria lauded as its 'unpalacelike rooms' seems to have come from Callenberg.

Not only is the furniture original, much of it is of museum quality, notably the work

**Callenberg Castle in Coburg, Germany, is the family seat of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, a bloodline that appears in many of Europe's royal families**

of the 18th-century cabinet-maker David Roentgen, pioneer of new techniques in marquetry—and concealed drawers. An exquisite *secrétaire* required lengthy investigation before surrendering its secrets. The collection of Roentgen furniture, including clocks, is considered the most important in private hands. Certainly, David Linley was entranced on a visit and was prompted to give a talk on the work of the master. An exhibition of clocks is planned for April this year, including several by Roentgen.

The results of the castle's restoration are undetectable. The chapel royal has the pulpit positioned behind and above the altar. At the end of my visit, Princess Katherina was baptised here in a christening ceremony attended by members of the European royal houses. But for the insertion of an invisible steel frame, the chapel roof could well have collapsed upon those anointed heads.

In heritage circles, the Prince is credited with having persuaded German conservation authorities of the necessity of financial

sustainability for major projects. At Callenberg, this has taken the form of a sensitive conversion of stables and outbuildings into cottages and apartments for let. 'No one family can otherwise support the cost of maintaining such monuments,' remarks Coburg's director of tourism, Michael Amthor.

He welcomes not only the opening of Callenberg as an attraction to visitors, but also the availability of parts of the castle for meetings and weddings, all of which bring business to the town. Such is the interest that the German National Tourist Board has now added the castle to its Royal Heritage Route.

I stayed at the centrally located Hotel Goldene Traube, acclaimed for its Michelin-starred restaurant and sumptuous wine list. As I checked out, staff in traditional costume were preparing to bow in royal guests from across Europe, there for the christening of the new princess. In the world of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, family ties remain indissoluble. 🐾

## Visiting Coburg

British Airways ([www.britishairways.com](http://www.britishairways.com)) flies from London to Frankfurt and Munich from £118 return with checked luggage. Railbookers (020-3697 6829; [www.railbookers.co.uk](http://www.railbookers.co.uk)) offers short breaks to Coburg from £479 based on three nights, including BA flights to Frankfurt, rail travel and four-star hotel accommodation with breakfast. Hotel Goldene Traube (00 49 9561 876 0; [www.goldenetraube.com](http://www.goldenetraube.com)) offers double rooms from €125, including breakfast

*Callenberg Castle opens every Tuesday to Sunday from 11am to 5pm in summer and 1pm to 4pm in winter—visit [www.schloss-callenberg.com](http://www.schloss-callenberg.com) or telephone 00 49 9561 5515 0. For information about Coburg and the surrounding area, visit [www.coburg-tourist.de](http://www.coburg-tourist.de) and [www.germany.travel/royalheritage](http://www.germany.travel/royalheritage)*