Fun-loving **Cologne** is the greatest of all western Germany’s cities, though – given that it was visited early and often by the RAF during World War II – perhaps not its most beautiful. Nevertheless, it has a unique architectural inheritance from its long history which creates a powerful sense of continuity – above all in the instantly recognizable shape of its **cathedral**, one of the most famous religious buildings on the planet and the seat of Germany’s Catholic primate. Cologne also has a highly developed sense of its own distinctiveness, expressed through the strong Kölsch dialect, the beer of the same name, and a hedonistic approach to life most apparent during **Karneval**. Though its museums and galleries are first-rate, there’s nothing museum-like about Germany’s fourth city: it’s the nation’s television centre, home to the major broadcasters WDR and RTL, and is also – despite rivalry from Berlin – still an important centre for the art world, with small commercial galleries peppering the inner city.

**Brief history**

For centuries **COLOGNE** was the German metropolis. The city’s origins are Roman: the Emperor Claudius’s fourth wife Agrippina – Nero’s mother – was born here, and after their marriage he raised the city to Colonia status, from which it derives its name. Later, while upstarts like Munich or Berlin were still a twinkle in the eye of their founders, early medieval Cologne was the largest city north of the Alps, ruled by powerful archbishops and benefiting economically from its strategic location astride the Rhine.

**The twentieth century**

The twentieth century brought harder times for Cologne, occupied by the Allies after World War I and bombed terribly during World War II; the Dom was spared yet much of the rest of the city left in ruins. In the postwar years, Cologne radiated moral authority as the hometown of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and of Heinrich Böll, the Nobel Prize-winning author who was dubbed the “conscience of the nation”. Yet it was also the scene of one of the bloodiest episodes in Germany’s terrorist war of the 1970s – the kidnapping by the Red Army Faction of the industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer at the height of the “German Autumn” of 1977, in the course of which Schleyer’s driver, bodyguard and two policemen were shot dead. Schleyer himself was subsequently murdered.

**Cologne today**

The local tourist office’s slogan *Köln ist ein Gefühl* (“Cologne is a Feeling”) neatly sums up the city’s appeal. This is one of Europe’s most liberal and diverse places; one in ten of its one million residents are lesbian or gay, making it a pink citadel to rank with Amsterdam or San Francisco. Another tenth of its population is Muslim, with a splendid new mosque currently taking shape in the Ehrenfeld district. You could tick off Cologne’s sights over the course of a long weekend or so, but to get the most out of your stay you need to get away from the tourist haunts by the river and explore at least some of the quarters where the locals live and play.