

Do you know Tunbridge Wells?

Hand on heart. Do you know Tunbridge Wells?

More precisely Royal Tunbridge Wells?

Isn't that one of Wiesbaden's twelve twin towns?

Hundreds of kilometres away somewhere in Scotland or England?

This, or something like it, would certainly be the way this question would be answered by most people in Wiesbaden whose knowledge of our twin towns is limited to knowing their names, thanks to the public sign boards placed at strategic points in the central part of town. We will not ask here the provocative question of how big the proportion of Wiesbadeners is who think Nice is one of our twin towns, because after all we are the "Nice of the North". Reason enough for VivArt to pay a visit to this unknown twin town and gain an impression on the spot of why Wiesbaden is not known as the "Tunbridge Wells of the South" or Tunbridge Wells the "Wiesbaden of the North". A quick piece of research yields the surprising discovery that Royal Tunbridge Wells is the twin town that, superficially, has most in common with Wiesbaden: old spa town with medicinal waters, playground of the nobility in the 18th and 19th centuries and, to crown it all, in the middle of vineyards. Vineyards in England? Vineyards in England!

On a wet August day we find ourselves in the pedestrian zone of Tunbridge Wells, which, incidentally, is 50 kilometres south-east of London in the county of Kent. Only Montreux and Berlin-Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg are nearer to Wiesbaden. The English weather quickly tempts us into "Royal Victoria Place", a shopping centre next to the pedestrian zone which with its more than 30,000 square metres is a third larger than the Luisenforum and Liliencarré. No trace of empty shops and the multitude of visitors leads one to conclude that the businesses are flourishing. No wonder then that Tunbridge Wells is one of the towns with the lowest unemployment rate in Great Britain. Ringed with pillars and under the daylight shining in through the glass roof about 110 shops and three department stores in the predominantly higher price range await the visitor. "Shop till you drop", or as they would say in our twin town Berlin, "gawp and get it - look and buy". The town map obligingly displayed in the shopping centre tells us that the spa area is unfortunately at the other end of the centre of town. After the quick purchase of a brolly we move off at a smart pace to the spa area. The walk down the main thoroughfare shows us, however, the other side of this shopping temple. Empty retail premises, run-down bric-a-brac shops and lively pubs line the street. More than once one asks the dubious question, what the "The Pantiles" spa area will look like.

The fear was unfounded. The sun breaks through the clouds and the spa area reveals itself as a quarter with lovingly restored Victorian houses decked with flowers. In the narrow streets here one finds a number of wine shops, jewellers and antique shops. Bearing in mind the instruction from our chief editor to try also the local firm and fluid specialities, we go into a picturesque pub which has a notice by the door "Warning - we have Stinking Bishop". The stinking bishop turns out to be a cheese speciality from the South West of England, which tests the sense of smell to the limits and lives up to its name, but which for taste can be described as thoroughly interesting. It is accompanied by a glass of local white wine, which, thanks to the bishop, leaves no gastronomic impression of its own.

All streets lead to the Pantiles colonnades in the centre of the historic precinct. Aside from this original 17th century heart of the town are splendid detached Victorian villas in their own grounds. 719 kilometres as the crow flies from the Kochbrunnen hot spring in Wiesbaden we find the “Chalybeate Spring” with a water which for taste lags not far behind our own cherished spring. Instead of the usual self-service at the well in Wiesbaden there is a winsome maid in historic costume (surprise number 1) who hands you a glass of the health-giving water. But service also has its price and so we tender a groat (surprise number 2) for this pleasant way of handing out the water. Only in England can one lose a pound so quickly. Thus relieved, and at the same time fortified by the water, of which it is said that it is effective against infertility, hang-overs and water on the brain, we wander through the colonnades and take in the differences between Wiesbaden and Royal Tunbridge Wells. Notwithstanding the similarities as favoured watering place of the respective rulers, the Wiesbaden spa area is clearly architecturally more impressive than the same now faded area of Tunbridge Wells with its fussy ornamentation. With the rise of the English seaside resorts and particularly after the First World War the spa scene lost its significance and now plays only a tourist role. The former Opera House, after being turned into a bingo hall in the 1960s, is now a pub-restaurant.

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