

I've always had a soft spot for Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort. He was dutiful and prim (compared with his rakish older brother Ernst and his son, Edward VII) but also smart, visionary and enterprising. He worked hard to promote and improve Britain, so it seems a bit shabby that, last December, the 150th anniversary of his death was almost ignored in this country.

Not so in Coburg. This Bavarian city is Albert's home town, and it is very proud of him. On the train from Munich, I read in my guide book that Coburg has more than 40 castles, fortresses, palaces and noble residences, and, as we drew into the station, sunshine broke through the clouds and boldly illuminated one of them – the fortress, Veste Coburg, high on a hill.

A fine moment for an Albert fan like me. Albert knew this old fortress well. Just one of several imposing castles owned by his family of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, it looms over the city, with towering stone walls, terrifying portcullis and small windows.

It seems like everything a German castle should be, yet appearances can be deceptive. After trekking through the park and climbing innumerable steps to its fearsome gate, I realised that it was not quite what it seemed.

Theatrical

Certainly, it's old (and stands on the site of an even older fortress), but it was also expensively refashioned about a century ago, and artfully arranged stags' heads, carved wooden doors and other stagey touches have softened the rough working fortress into more of a romantic mansion. To add to the theatrical effect, the dining room contains an uncanny wax bust of Albert's ancestor Prinz Friedrich Josias, looking tortured, and a ghostly half-figure in white marble lurks in a shadowy picture gallery wonderfully reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Ruddigore*.

Albert's family were great collectors, and the fortress is home to fine assemblies of armour, militaria and harnesses. It has several modern galleries of Old Masters and magnificent glass, a huge group of decorated sleighs and carriages, and even some relics of Martin Luther, who stayed in the fortress for a while.

It also contains one of the most fascinating and unusual rooms in Germany, the 17th-century Jagdzimmer or Hunting Room. If I lived in Coburg, I decided, I would visit this room often to explore the endless intricate detail of its many marquetry panels. They really show every detail of the ducal hunt, from readying the hounds to the boozy end-of-hunt festivities.

We stayed so long in the fortress that it was twilight when we left and Coburg's lights were already glitter-

Plenty of weird and wonderful sights in home town of Victoria's consort

Among its castles, fortresses, palaces and noble residences, Coburg in southern Germany holds many reminders of Prince Albert. And if you find yourself tiring of such sober delights, there's always the beer halls of nearby Munich



■ The quaint houses and shops of Coburg (left), a giant stuffed toy chess set (top) at the Doll Museum and a historic harness at Veste Coburg (above)

Pictures: Jenny Woolf

ing in the valley as we descended the wooded hillside. Halfway down, the natural history museum created a welcoming and enticing splash of light in the gathering darkness.

This well-modernized small museum is home to weird giant model insects, a creepy ethnography collection and several brilliant life-sized dioramas of different habitats. There was, of course, an Albert anniversary exhibition, which centred on an alert-looking replica of Benjamin Hawkins' giant iguanodon, a hollow construction in which Hawkins and various celebrated naturalists ate

their New Year's Eve dinner in 1853. Albert was keenly interested in evolution. He visited Hawkins' workshops while Hawkins was building his monsters for the Crystal Palace, and, as the museum's exhibition showed, he also had many natural history books and specimens of his own.

Visual

After he died, Victoria gave Coburg a big statue of him, which now stands in the town square. I quietly greeted the statue next day en route to Schloss Ehrenburg, another Saxe-Coburg-Gotha palace. Now a state archive, we discovered in

its high rooms a jewel-like set of large illustrations commissioned by Albert's sister-in-law, Alexandrine, to record events in her life. Albert has bit parts in many of these detailed visual journals, and it seemed particularly sad to reach 1861 and find him as the main image for the year, supported by sorrowing angels, at the age of just 42.

But of course, Coburg isn't just about Albert and the family. We also toured the excellent doll museum, whose curiosities include all kinds of 1930s china dolls and a bizarre giant chess set made with stuffed toys. And in St Moritz Church,

we spent more than an hour examining the famous old alabaster altar, which stands 10 metres high and covered in mysterious creatures and sculptures.

We would certainly have visited more Coburg attractions, in particular Schloss Rosenau, where Albert spent his happy childhood – but now it was time to go. We were expected in a hotel in Munich, and I have to say it turned out to be a delightful and very central one. Next day found us abandoning culture in favour of the famous Hofbrauhaus beer hall, eating sausages and drinking beer while musicians played oompah music

and everyone got drunk.

It was touristy, vulgar, but fun. And would Albert have approved? Well, perhaps it's just as well that he wasn't there to be asked.

FACTFILE

■ Jenny Woolf stayed at Hotel Torbrau, Munich (www.torbrau.de) and the Goldener Anker, Coburg (goldener-anker.de).

■ Rail Europe's return fares from London to Munich start from £159 and from Munich to Coburg from £134, subject to availability. Contact www.raileurope.co.uk, 0844 848 4070.