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TIMBER RAFTING TRAIL KINZIG VALLEY

Lossburg
Alpirsbach
Schenkenzell
Schiltach
Wolfach



Gefördert durch die
Glücksspirale
VON LOTTO



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Information board texts
in English



Stops between Lossburg and Alpirsbach

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- Refreshments
- Tourist information



Kinzigtal

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Tour the Black Forest free of charge with the KONUS guest ticket – of course, including the Kinzig valley! Ask your host or your tourist office.

Stops **1, 10, 21, 34**

WELCOME TO THE TIMBER RAFTING TRAIL KINZIGTAL!

Experience one of the most beautiful sections of the timber rafting trail between **Lossburg and Alpirsbach** and join the travels of Johann Staiger, a raftsman from the 19th century, along the second section from **Alpirsbach to Wolfach**.

The trail can be divided into as many single stages as you like.

Excellent train connections are available.

Comprehensive information on timber rafting is provided all along the trail.

Detailed information on routes by **bus, rail or automobile** is available at www.floesserpfad.de.

A TIMBER RAFTING TRAIL FOR EVERYBODY

The timber rafting trail between Halbmeil and Wolfach can be traveled without obstructions. For the return trip we recommend taking the Kinzig valley railway which can accommodate prams or wheelchairs without problems. Further information on barriers or obstructions is available at www.floesserpfad.de/barrierefrei.

GEO-CACHING

Between Lossburg and Wolfach a total of **four GPS treasure hunts** await old and young along the rafting trail, in Wolfach even free of obstructions! Each solved puzzle will be awarded with a stamp in the rafting quiz card and, of course, there will be a small prize for the successful treasure hunters!

Geocaching is presently only available in German. Please check our website www.floesserpfad.de/geocaching, to see if other languages have since been added.

Rental **GPS equipment** is available from the tourist offices in Lossburg, Schiltach and Wolfach.



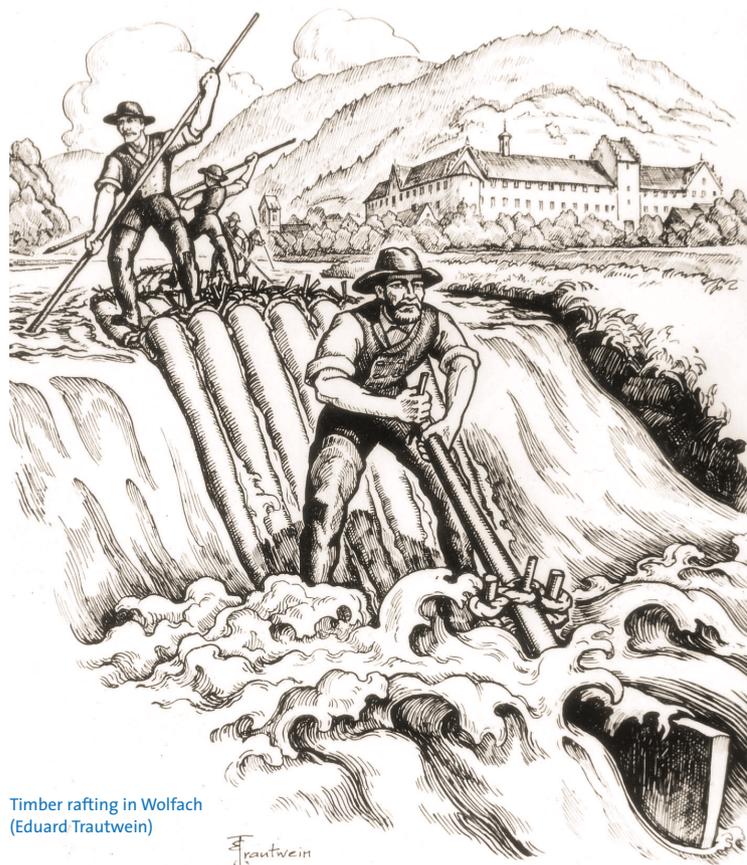
Stop **10**

Johann Staiger recounts his eventful life as a raftsman:

"On board everybody! I'll take you down the Kinzig to Wolfach on my raft if you wish. And if you then offer to buy me a jug of wine then I'll tell you a tale or two as we ride down the river."

Between you and me: the landlord of the Crown, the skipper who owns this raft, need not know! But please let me introduce myself. I am Staiger Johann, born in 1810, the year when my home town Schiltach passed from the kingdom of Württemberg to the grand duchy of Baden. Aged forty-five, I am the foreman on this raft and also its navigator. I stand at the front and steer the raft. You need a lot of strength and skill, but above all experience, and of that I have plenty.

There is many a tale I can tell you about timber rafting on the Kinzig and the timber business. So: make yourselves comfortable on the pile of planks behind me – and off we go! And don't forget: we stop off for my jug of wine!"



Timber rafting in Wolfach
(Eduard Trautwein)



Stop 11

THE KINZIG VALLEY IN THE “WOODEN AGES”

“Now, in the summer season I make my living as a raftsman as you can see, and in the winter I am a lumberjack. This is when the trees are felled and trimmed and taken to the collection points on the Kinzig and its tributaries.

And I can tell you, this is hard and dangerous work on the steep slopes. Nonetheless it is fun. Letting the logs race down the icy chutes into the valley, so fast that you can hardly see them.

Fortunately there is plenty of forest in the upper Kinzig valley. Here it is not as bad as in other parts of the Black Forest where the mountains are often bare as the towns need so much wood.

Strasbourg for example, now there’s a city that just seems to devour building timber and firewood from the Kinzig valley. Even the Dutch need our timber. The most magnificent Black Forest fir trees adorn the Dutch sailing ships as masts across the Seven Seas – places I will never ever see.”

With a length of 92 km and numerous tributaries, the Kinzig has the greatest catchment area of all rivers in the Black Forest (1422 sq km). It is the only river to cross the mountains completely from east to west. From its source near Lossburg at 680 m height it drops by a massive 550 m until reaching its estuary into the Rhine at Kehl.

Its many branches shape the countryside, a “valley Black Forest” with high mountain tops and deep valleys, the vegetation being mainly woods.

Even in the Middle Ages these forests attracted the attention of the cities on the Rhine which needed timber in all its forms, whether as building timber for timber-framed houses or lofts, as working material for craftsmen, as firewood or charcoal for heat or energy.

The fast-expanding cities, located in forest-free areas, had an enormous appetite for timber. Even in the 14th century timber traders from Strasbourg came to the remote upper Kinzig valley to acquire the rich timber reserves. Wood was so important in those days, that the period prior to 1800 was called the “Wooden Ages”.

The oldest map of the Upper Rhine and the Kinzig valley (Martin Waldseemüller, 1513)

Strasbourg in the late Middle Ages (Schedel’s World Chronic, 1493)



Lumberjacks (before 1917)

“Today the forest farmers are allowed to raft on their own account. But in earlier days, when I learned rafting from my father, only the skippers were allowed to run rafts. They owned the privilege and exercised rigid control over timber rafting.

By trade, many of them were landlords of inns. They were all members of guilds – and that is where the money was. And it’s not that different today either. Money attracts money. And we, the raftsmen who receive a daily wage for trimming the trees, building the rafts and then get a fixed wage for bringing the goods to their destination, can see how we make ends meet.

And, as the skippers assemble their crews for the next journey in the pubs – their own pubs, of course, if they own one – you have to spend money in the pubs to earn anything.

Nothing against a nice pub though – don’t forget, my jug of wine!”

“Sammel Isaac”, a Schiltach raftsman (around 1885)

Stop 12

SKIPPER GUILDS AND SKIPPERS

Already in the Middle Ages, the sovereigns assigned the rights to timber trade to selected subjects. They were called skippers which indicated how they solved the problem of timber transport: by utilizing the rivers, the natural path to the Rhine.

Such means of transport required organization and considerable financial means: the waterways needed to be cleared, weirs had to be constructed – and repaired often! This was not possible by individuals, which led to the establishment of “skippers guilds”. In the Kinzig valley they were based in Wolfach and Schiltach. In 1544 it was said: “The people of the Kinzig is fed by wood which they raft to Strasbourg and make a lot of money”.

In 1766 ten skippers had been appointed in Württemberg’s Kinzig valley, 12 in Schiltach, six in Alpirsbach and two in Lehengericht. The sovereign Fürstenberg allowed 20 Wolfachers to trade in timber, so that this region had a considerable number of timber traders.

They were usually merchants or innkeepers for whom the timber trade provided additional, if risky, income. A skipper was to call his own the sum of 300,000 thalers, 100,000 as forest, 100,000 on the water and 100,000 in cash – just in case!

Wolfach’s raft owner Roman Armbruster and his raftsmen (1887)

“The timber rafts at Wolfach” (unknown painter, around 1823)



Stop 13

HOW THE KINZIG BECAME “WOODEN”



“When I was a boy there was no better opportunity of earning good money than when we drifted firewood down the Kinzig: you throw chopped logs for firewood into the river and fish them out at their destination.

It is tough work for a kid to carry large chunks of wood from morning to nightfall from the stock piles to the river bank and throw them into the water. Every piece has its own weight.

In the evenings every single muscle hurts, and it is only then that you realize how many muscles you have! But I was certainly proud when I received my wages and counted the coins!

However, I had to give them to my mother, but so what. Once I was given a penny extra as I had worked really hard at throwing firewood into the Kinzig and I thought I could keep it for myself.

But my mother found out. And I am not going to tell you what happened then.”

In 1398 Strasbourg sent carpenters to Schramberg in the Schiltach valley to buy timber and turn it into firewood. But how to transport the volume of timber over 120 kilometers? The roads were too bad a state for carts, the distance too great.

The river proved to be the solution: it flows into the Kinzig which flows into the Rhine, which in turn passes Strasbourg. This provided a waterway which made the operation possible.

Letting timber drift was the easiest form of transport: blocks of wood and logs were simply thrown into the river and moved downstream in their thousands, accompanied by lumberjacks who broke up dangerously congesting wood with poles. This form of “wild rafting” took place in spring when the water is plentiful and carries well.

Up to 8,000 fathoms of wood drifted down the Kinzig annually towards Strasbourg. They also supplied the iron foundries in Schiltach and Wolfach with wood, as well as the paint mill in Alpirsbach and the ironworks in Hausach.

Even in 1860, some 11,000 fathoms (30,000 m) were drifted down the Rhine. This equals a wooden wall 30 kilometers long and 1 meter high, making the Kinzig look “wooden”.

Raftsmen bringing drift wood to the stream, with the flush in the background (around 1865).

Drifting: the drifting timber is recovered and stacked (around 1720).



Drift wood rafting

Stop 14

THE BLACK FOREST SECTIONAL RAFT

Even today a tall fir tree is referred to as a “Dutchman” in the Black Forest: trees in this category (minimum size 18 m long and 48 cm circumference at the narrow end) were transported all the way to Holland where they were sought after for civil engineering, and the building of harbors and ships.

It was impossible to just let these giants drift. They were tied to give “sections” and maneuvered by raftsmen. Connecting 20 to 35 of these sections resulted in “vehicles” of up to 450 m length. This was an amazing new capacity, so that the sectional raft is regarded as being a major development of the Black Forest raftsmen.

This required considerable knowledge about the behavior of timber in such large volumes: specially twisted branches were used to make flexible ropes. Shorter sections were placed at the front of the raft, wider and stronger sections in the middle to give the raft stability. The branch ropes made the raft so flexible that it was possible to navigate bends and weirs.

A raft was highly efficient in terms of economics and ecology: a vehicle and goods in one, it was taken apart at its destination and all its parts were sold. Once on the water, the timber required no other means of transportation, the moving river provided the energy required – free of charge!

Tip: the “hanging stone”, a natural monument was already mentioned as the “Wagodenstein” around 1100 as a border stone of the Alpirsbach monastery.

“See that cliff over there protruding into the river? That is the Hanging Stone. Steering a raft past this narrow section is an art in itself. You need a practiced eye and a good sense of judgement – and, of course, a raft that will do as it is told.

Have no fear, I know my work, the raft is well constructed, the way my father built it: the flexible joins between the individual sections of the raft are the most important parts for navigating a raft along the narrow bending rivers and streams here. It is this flexibility that allows the raft to maneuver through the tight bends. I steer the first section and the others follow.

The raft is built with the narrower ends of the logs next to each other at the front of the raft section. This makes the front of the following raft section narrower than the end of the preceding section which ensures that the raft does not connect with the river bank. I'll tell you more later on, now I have to pay attention during this tight bend!”

“Rafting timber in the Black Forest” (Karl Roux, 1868)



Raft construction in Schiltach's “Harzwägler”



“Right, we’ve passed through this dangerous bend! Now you can relax again on the piles of planks. But please stay clear of the barrels! They are not full of beer! They contain cobalt from the mines in this area. The cobalt is en route to Holland.

Cobalt blue – does that mean anything to you? And Delft? The landlord of the Crown Inn, the skipper who owns this raft, decorates his home with the blue tiles from Delft. With a wide grin he always says this is how the cobalt returns to the Black Forest. It is easy for him to smile! He can buy a lot of tiles with the money he earns from transporting the barrels of cobalt, at least that is my opinion.

The skippers are always keen on earning a bit extra by taking on extra loads. And for the traders it is still cheaper and easier to have their planks, beams and other goods transported on the raft rather than using the poor roads with horse-drawn carts.”

Stop 15

THE LOAD – WHAT WAS TRANSPORTED ON THE RAFTS?

When the old Earl of Fürstenberg was invited to medieval games at Offenburg in 1483 he was to “come on the water” by raft. Travelers often used the Kinzig for this purpose in those days.

The rafts also transported products, “the load”, which could be transported down the valley cheaply: heavy oak trees for building houses and ridges, saw mill products such as beams, planks, boards, sticks and poles. Craftsmen supplied spokes, handles, barrel staves, wheels and slates and their sales areas increased dramatically with transportation by river.

Resin was gained from spruce trees which was then processed in resin boiling houses, pine carbon black huts and tar kilns. Packed in barrels, their products (resin, turpentine, carbon black, tar) were transported to the users on rafts who then used them to make shoe and saddle pitch, resins, pigments, inks and printing ink.

Other forestry products included the barks of oaks and spruce which the tanners used as tanning agent as well as potash and buckthorn which was used for making gun powder. The cobalt pigments of the paint mills in Alpirsbach and Wittichen were also fated to Holland where they gained fame as “Delft blue” in the local ceramics.

The oldest illustrations of rafting (around 1600): raftsmen navigate a sectional raft from the Kinzig into the Rhine, Strasbourg on the left.

Tedious rafting on a narrow stream

Three-sectional raft with load and passengers, the landing pier in the back with stacks of timber.

Delft tiles



Stop 16

LASHING AND DAM SITE

Here in Schenkenzell was where the rafts from Alpirsbach passed through, but also where new rafts were joined together. Once the heavy logs had been brought to the stream from the forests, the raftsmen joined them together to raft sections and lashed them to make new rafts. Such a “lashing station” was found wherever timber had been transported from the mountains and valleys, always fronted by a weir.

At the same time it formed a “dam” for the water. This was necessary to provide water levels which would carry the rafts on rivers which were often too shallow for the rafts. This involved an elaborate water damming technique consisting of weirs and dams where the water was “dammed”.

The created swell was never enough to provide a complete journey to the Rhine. In times of water shortage this could take up to six days, and “rewatering” was a frequent exercise. This was the task of the raft boys: early in the morning they went upstream, raised the water traps and opened the gambers, the large lifting beams which blocked the passageways for the rafts.

As soon as a swell came, the “raft crew” joined together and prayed for a successful journey. Once the water lifted the raft sections, the “retaining lashing” was chopped in two with an axe – the wave took the raft with it and the “journey through the lands” was on its way.

Tip: a reconstructed original gamber is on display at the Flößerwiese (raft site) in Schiltach.

“Now this is where it counts. We are approaching a weir. I only hope that my raft boy, Uli, who runs ahead of the raft has opened it in time. Not too early, so that the dammed water has already drained off before we get there. But not too late either with the water still dammed before the weir instead of covering the stones below the weir – or even worse, with us ramming the closed weir which would endanger not only the raft but also our lives.

Uli has to open the weir at just the right time so that our raft is carried along on the wave and the released water carries us over stones and shoals.

But one thing I can tell you: this is going to be a wet experience for my passengers. I often stand up to my hips in the swirling spray at the front of the raft when we shoot down the ramp, and the rear raft sections get their fair share too plus a nice wave as well. So, here we go!”

Old raft weir in Schiltach: the raft channel is opened by swiveling the gamber (drawing by H. Eyth, 1902)

Stream installations for rafting on the Upper Kinzig (design: Luise Herrmann-Jehle)

Kinzig raftsmen passing a weir (around 1885)





Stop 17

RAFT HANDS, RIVER CRIERS AND FLAZIERS (VULGAR PEOPLE)

“Done. We have passed the weir. Everything went the way it should. But that is not always so. I have experienced a number of hairy situations during my rafting career.

When the rear raft sections move faster than the front sections and cannot be slowed down in time, then the situation becomes precarious.

Even worse when the raft hits an obstruction and the sections slide over each other and break. In the worst case scenario you could get crushed by the logs.

Thank God nothing serious has ever happened to me. I have been lucky, many raftsmen have broken a leg or two. And I know of more than one lethal accident.

Once, the gamber (opening in a weir) was not luffed in time and the raft could not be stopped. The bow section jammed between the beam and the planks and the raftsmen was crushed.

I always say the Lord's Prayer when I go rafting.”

The request for prayers on the wayside shrine are dedicated to a certain Matthis Bühler who “staid in the water following death by accident”. He had a fatal accident.

Reports of such accidents are common. Some were crushed between the logs, another slashed his carotid while luffing. The writer Hansjakob writes “they all ended up with disabilities, usually broken legs”.

The raftsmen were subjected to the sheer force of the elements in the forests and on the rivers. They had a hard and dangerous job with the forces they unleashed and controlled.

Their standing in society as “raft hands” was low: they were regarded as violent, hard drinking and vulgar. Because of their loud voices they were called “river criers”, and their robust character resulted in sayings such as “swear like a flazier”, “coarse as a flazier”, “thirsty like a flazier”.

It was only when they no longer existed that they were glorified, their work declared adventure which could only be handled by real men: true characters, courageous and strong. It was largely painters and writers of the time that transformed the reality of rafting with poetic glory.

[Raftsmen from Alpirsbach-Rötenbach with their tools \(around 1880\)](#)

[Ride over the weir at Hochmutsteich \(Eduard Trautwein, 1942, town hall Schiltach\)](#)



[Raftsmen on the Kinzig above Schiltach \(around 1885\)](#)

Stop 18

“OUR WATER FOR RAFTING IS FETCHED AT NIGHT”

The Schenkenzell weir was of special significance: this is where the water was dammed for the large rafts. But often there was only enough water to travel 20 to 30 km, then the rafts grounded. This meant that one of the raftsmen had to go back up the river, dam water again and release a new swell. Because this was done at night and he missed out on his sleep, he was given the “night gilder”.

The weir was a massive river installation: behind the wooden constructions the river was dammed to form a “pond” behind the weir. To release the swell water, the raftsmen retracted the weir panel and loosened the planks. There was a separate channel for rafting.

Whereas the Alpirsbach skippers had the right to pass through, the forest farmers had to stop and offer their timber for sale to the skippers from Wolfach and Schiltach. These then converted the small “forest rafts” to longer and wider rafts.

The Schenkenzell weir belonged to the state of Baden and was supervised by the river bailiff. Like the Kinzig as “road for rafting”, the weir had to be serviced annually to stay in a “rafting condition”. This was referred to as “cleaning the river” and “sealing the weir”. The costs were divided among the skipper guilds of Wolfach and Schiltach.

[Schenkenburg, Schenkenzell and Schenkenzell weir \(Maximilian von Ring, 1828\)](#)

[Plan of the Schenkenzell weir \(1840\)](#)

“We are approaching the Schenkenzell weir. Can you see the men there standing in the water between the floating logs in their hip-high boots?

They manouver the logs into the right position for making raft sections.

That is no easy job I can assure you, standing in the cold water for fourteen hours every day, even if the boots are waterproof! And quite a few raftsmen end up with rheumatism in their older days.

I have often been a party to joining the raft sections here at the Schenkenzell weir as it is one of the more important joining points. According to the new rafting regulations, rafts can be wider and longer from here on than on the upper parts of the Kinzig.

And I have earned many a penny here – and spent most of them at the regulars' table for raftsmen in the Schiltach pubs. After all, after a long day in icy water the body needs some warm refreshment from the inside. But my wife does not understand that, women, is all I can say.”

[Raftsmen working the river \(around 1885\)](#)





"We are now approaching Schiltach, where I live with my Luise and the boys.

A very capable woman, is my Luise, and educated too. She knows a lot of sayings. My favorite is: "An axe in the house saves paying the carpenter." Luise always uses it when something is broken. And then I know, it is my turn to get things fixed.

And handle an axe, that is something I am certainly capable of. After all, it is my most important tool. To get one of these proud trees out of the forest and float it down the river as a raft takes a lot of blows with an axe! And once the tree is felled, the branches need to be trimmed off, the bark removed, the tip of the log needs to be rounded off and holes made with a drill so that the log can be lashed to make a raft. We call it prep-work and what would I be without my axe. I also like using my axe to reign in logs although there are explicit raft hooks to do the job.

You are welcome to lift my tools! And then you can feel that my job is nothing for fine gentry with no muscles!"

"Glaser Ulrich", a Schiltach raftsmen around 1885

Stop 19

PREPARATION – WITH A RAFTSMAN'S AXE AND LASHING DRILL

While the logs were transported to the river with carts or via chutes (lowered), they had to be prepared for rafting: it was hard work assembling logs of the same size and length.

The next step was "holing": holes had to be drilled at the top and bottom of each log (thin and thick ends) through which the lashings could be threaded.

To this end, triangular recesses were chopped with the axe before using the sharp lashing drills. These recesses avoided sharp edges which would have otherwise splayed the lashings. One can still find such lashing holes ("rafter's eyes") in old timber frames and lofts which indicate that these timbers had been rafted originally.

Next to the lashing drill and the axes, other tools were also used for preparation: the sapie (hammer and cant hook) for rotating the logs, cantilevers for lifting, turning rings for moving. The diameter of a log was determined with a timber measuring instrument, the length was determined using the "river crop" which measured 10 feet (3 m).

While lumberjacks worked in the forests, preparation was the work of the raftsmen.

Utensils and tools used by raftsmen
Schiltach raftsmen during preparatory work (1889)



"Here at the Harzwäggle the logs from the Häberlesberg are joined to raft sections in the water and the sections then joined to form a raft. And not with ropes made of hemp as you might think.

Such a raft is subjected to enormous forces, and especially the joins between the individual raft sections really take a beating, no rope can handle this. This is why we use lashings for joining, largely made from long strong hazelnut branches or also from young firs or spruce trees.

If I can't find a job rafting, then I am glad to earn money making lashings so I can bring something home to my Luise in the evening. Once the branches have been properly immersed in water they are placed in a pre-heated kiln right next to the fire and truly heated, we call it "gebäht". Immediately after they need to be twisted to make a sort of rope. To do this, we fix the thicker end of these heated rods to a solid tree trunk, the lashing anchor, and wrap them round a wooden pole starting from the thinner side.

This requires quite some muscle power and experience I can tell you, as does everything to do with my job. But any lashing I make will hold just about anything together, and at least I know what I have."

Lashings join logs and raft sections

Stop 20

"ONCE THE TIMBER IS PREPARED, LAUNCH IT."

After preparation, the logs are rolled into the water (launched) and lashed together. This was done at the lashing site, also called the "Waag" (a deep place in the river).

There were four of these sites, the Harzwäggle, the Scheidwaag, the LeubacherWaag, and the Brückenwaagteich. The heavy logs are easier to manhandle in the water, so the raftsmen worked in the water, in teams of up to twelve men.

As soon as 20 to 35 of these raft sections had been lashed, they were joined together with lashings. The first section was the guiding section with the rudder. The brakes were placed on on the rear sections: mechanical brakes made of sturdy beams, which, when pushed into the river bed, either extended the raft or brought it to a standstill.

It was this invention which made safe navigating of larger rafts possible.

There were regulations for the length and the crew: in 1850 the rafts from Schenkenzell to Schiltach were allowed to be 18 feet wide and 1600 feet long (1 foot = 30 cm), they had to be equipped with two brakes and a crew of eight.

From Schiltach onwards, a width of 20 feet and a length of 2000 feet were permitted, with three brakes and a crew of twelve. It is said that a raft with an amazing 750 m length once left Wolfach.

Raftsmen joining rafts at the "Harzwäggle" in Schiltach (1889)
Weir and trap of the "Harzwäggle" (Karl Erth, 1907)



Stop 21



"And over there, that is where my stepson Jacob works in the tannery. He wants to become a foreman like his father who has passed away.

That surprises you, that I married the widow of a tanner? Without the inheritance of my Luise we would barely have managed to survive the bad years when famine reigned and the timber trade had virtually come to a standstill due to the revolution.

But now things are looking brighter again and Luise has no reason to complain. Which she actually never did. She knows what she has in me. And she would not really have known how to manage life together with Jacob, who was missing a father.

I took him with me into the forests and showed him how to remove the bark from logs so that he could see where the tanning agent comes from which he will use later on to tan animal skins to leather. And then I told him to drive the sled packed with bark into the valley. In the evening he was tired but happy, no time to come up with any silly ideas!"

A tanner demonstrates his historical craft (Picture: D. Albert)



Stop 22

"Rafts have the right of way. No matter how irritated they may be, the millers: when I, as "commander" of a raft demand they close the locks to their mills so that enough water can accumulate in the weir to provide a swell for the raft, then they have to obey.

This always spells trouble, but that's not my pigeon. Let the millers and the skippers guilds sort this out with regard to damages due to lost income as the mills have to stop working because of the timber rafts. And as of late, factories are now being built along the Kinzig.

The industrialists holler even louder than the millers when their machines stop running as the water is diverted for rafting. But who was there first? The factories? Where do factory owners take the right from to complain when their new fancy machines are at loggerheads with a trade that has been inherent to the Black Forest and fed its people for hundreds of years. Can you explain that to me?"

Stop 22

SCHILTACH – "THE CITY OF HALF-TIMBERED HOUSES, RAFTSMEN AND TANNERS"

The medieval townscape and the old trades are characteristics of Schiltach and are maintained as cultural heritage. The old part of the town with its half-timbered houses is both picturesque and busy, even if rafting is something of the past.

In 1894, when the last raft was launched, the majority of the population made their living from trading timber, and reminders of those days abound: memories of skippers and raftsmen, the remainders of weirs and ponds.

And writers like Hansjakob and painters like the brothers Eyth, Hasemann and Trautwein have done everything to keep memories of timber rafting alive.

A tawery – the only one far and wide – still tans skins and leather the old way in Schiltach's tradition as a city of tanneries.

In 1998, the "Schiltach raftsmen" revived rafting: they twist lashings, build rafts and journey down the river demonstrating the old techniques. They have a gamber, a chute and a "Dutchman" on display at the raft site. The rafting museum on the river bank possesses a collection of rafting paraphernalia: tools, rare photos, models of rafts and chutes.

The rafting town of Schiltach in the 19th century (surveyor Weber, 1843)

A visit to the old town center is well worth doing. Cross the bridge and walk up the steps.

Follow the rafting trail in direction of Wolfach and you will reach the raft site after approx. 100 m. Here you can view a real "gamber". To get to the highly interesting rafting museum, follow the rafting trail in the direction of Wolfach, cross the bridge after approx. 400 m and then proceed left for 100 m. The museum is located directly on the Kinzig.

Schiltach in the year 1885. A raft with eight sections on the Kinzig.





“Abraham, brake!”

Yes, Abraham our brakeman has heard me. Together with his braking assistant he rams the brake, a strong beam, through a hole on the raft into the bed of the river, the raft starts to slow down.

You sure need a loud voice to carry from one end of the raft to the other where the brake is located. But we are still too fast, we need to stop and dock the raft (we call it ‘hobbling’): I can already see the rings on the wall at the river. ‘Abraham, brake!’ Now we need to steer the bow of the raft that it comes alongside the wall without ramming it. I have to steer and Abraham needs to brake and all the other raftsmen in the middle of the raft need to guide the sections along the river bank with their poles so that we can dock safely.

We have to take on some load here, a few crates with leather and furs from the tanneries. A good time for a quick break in the pub for a mug of wine, what do you think?”

Stop 23

ALL ABOUT RAFTING – A JOURNEY THROUGH THE LANDS

The writer Hansjakob referred to the raftsmen as “prehistoric musclemen”, and indeed, they needed their strength when navigating their rafts on the rapid swells at speeds up to 15 km/h. This required courage and fast reactions to bring the wet and wobbly vehicle safely to its destination Willstätt some 70 km away.

The “driver” was at the helm who had to direct the raft into the rafting channels and avoid any collisions. Other raftsmen shoved the rafts from the river banks. Two of the crew manned the brakes and waited for orders, for example, to prevent the raft from jack-knifing. Then they rammed the “brake peg” into the river bed to allow the raft to stretch. However, if they braked too much, the water could speed ahead of the raft, grounding the raft. The fresh water had to be supplied and this could cost a complete day’s work.

In 1850, the daily wages for raftsmen at the lashing site – which started and ended with daylight – were 40 creutzers. The raft journey, regardless of duration, was remunerated with a sum of 3.5 to 4.5 gilders, plus “soup money” for food and accommodation.

*Raftsmen on the Kinzig
(Wilhelm Hasemann, around 1890).*

*Braking section with protruding brake
(Wilhelm Hasemann, 1889)*



Rafting in Wolfach on the occasion of a traditional costume festival in 1929

“Fortunately the river carries enough water today so there is no risk of stranding and spending hours if not days to get the raft afloat again.

But rafting is not always plain sailing like today. And on some of the tributaries you can sure break out in a sweat! Especially here at the Heubach, every raftsmen looks death straight into the eye, they say.

Rafting through the dark steep ravine is hell – and that is why the gorge is called just that! I find it difficult to find grip on the wet logs in the swirling mist, and yet I have to navigate through the narrowest of gaps and the most dangerous bends as we speed along.

But that is the way it is: no stream is too narrow, steep or rocky for a rafting trail! This means, removing stones, blasting rocks and leveling river banks just to fit a timber raft through! And we have to risk our lives for that.”

“A ride through hell”
by Wilhelm Hasemann (1897)

Stop 24

RAFTING THROUGH “HELL”

So-called river associations were established for the tributaries to the Kinzig. These included the major forest farmers, and the sovereign Fürstenberg for their forests. However, they only had the right to raft their timber to the Kinzig.

To this end, a dam was erected at the upper Heubach: a wall with a water gate and a trap which was retracted for damming. The lashing site was positioned in front so that the raft could be carried away by the water swell. Rafting on this narrow, 6 km long section of the river was only possible by using this installation. The raft sections were only 4 to 5 logs wide, the rafts 150 to 200 m long.

Before reaching the Kinzig, the raftsmen had to pass through “hell”, a narrow gorge, and “catch” the raft several times: the river is so steep that the raft became faster than the current and this had to be prevented to avoid grounding. The “catcher” jumped onto the river bank with a rope, wound it round a tree trunk and thus stopped the raft. Once the water had caught up with the raft, he jumped back on board, a risky procedure which had to be performed more than once on each journey.

Nobody gives greater insights into timber rafting than the local author Heinrich Hansjakob in his book “Forest people” (1897).

The “swell” at the Upper Heubach, erected of sandstone (1980)

*Raft building on the Kinzig at Hohenstein
(Heinrich Eyth, 1923)*



A CHUTE FOR TIMBER

“Another task where I am always in fear for my life is working the chutes.

The chutes are constructed on the slopes to let the logs race down the mountains. But often enough a log gets stuck halfway down. And if the following logs would smash into the stuck log – it hardly bears thinking about!

We men, as chute guides, have to stand at the side of the chutes and make sure we free every log immediately. Once a log has reached its destination in the valley a signal is sounded and the next log is launched.

But beware, should there ever be a mistake! In the winter these chutes turn into icy canals and the logs really pick up speed. This is when we find out if we had built the side-walls high enough or if logs will just shoot over the walls.

You need a sixth sense to know where to stand and to anticipate danger from an oncoming log to make sure you can jump aside in time.”

The timber, the felled trees or the firewood had to be brought from the mountains to the water. Often this was only possible using artificial chutes along which the timber slid into valley – sometimes over distances over 1000 meters!

A chute was usually reinforced with logs on both sides, uneven terrain was straightened with stone walls. The logs were pulled and manhandled – hard work indeed – into the chutes and raced to the valley at high speed. A life-threatening job for the chute assistants as the logs could jump from the chutes. Chuting was done during the summer and the winter as snow and ice made chuting easier.

There are few chute remains left as the timber used for construction was then used for other means or left to nature. Only the sandstone or granite walls can still be found in the forests. This is why up to 100 m long and 4 m high walls or viaducts can still be found on mountain slopes or in the forests for apparently no reason.

Such walls and viaducts are still in existence at Alpirsbach and Bad Rippoldsau. These chutes were still in use up to 1950 when modern transportation roads took their place.

A timber chute made of logs
(Absbach in the forest near Bad Rippoldsau 1977)

Demonstration chute in Bad Rippoldsau 1980

Remains of a sandstone wall which was used as substructure for a timber chute near Bad Rippoldsau



Timber chute in the winter
(Bad Rippoldsau / forest
around 1950)

“Can you see that man over there, surveying the river bank? That is the rafting supervisor from Wolfach, a person who commands respect.

He is just checking on the junctions to the industrial channels and the field irrigation. He also inspects the weirs every week, after all they need to function perfectly every time.

In mid-summer, from July to the middle of August, they are overhauled completely as timber rafting is forbidden during this time according to the new rafting regulations. The river banks are also maintained during this period. A nice opportunity for a day laborer like me to make some money during the raft-free period.

So, there is always work to do, except when there are floods. But then there is plenty of work after the floods to get the repairs done and every hand is needed – hands like mine at any rate!

After the big flood in the summer of 1851 all the rafts had been pulled from their moorings and all the bridges had been destroyed, and we had to work until October to repair all the damage.”

Construction of a weir at the
Gießenteich in Wolfach (1895)

“EVERY RAFTSMAN WHO BELONGS ...”

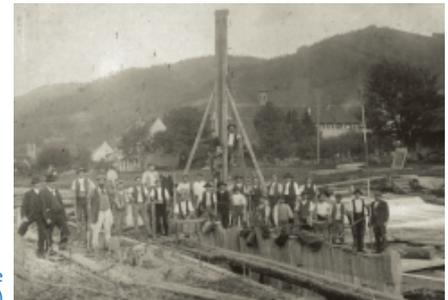
The river installations, weirs and ponds necessary at certain intervals had to be serviced meticulously. Supervised rafting was only permitted from April till November. Supervised rafting was risky during winter, when the snow melted or in case of floods. The weirs had to be in perfect working condition so that they could be opened quickly for oncoming rafts and then closed again.

One of the oldest statutes available for the Wolfach skippers' guild stems from the year 1527. This gives us insights on the establishment of the guild and its rights and duties: “Each skipper in the guild is to pay a certain sum, half of which is to be used by the guild for providing the necessary river installations (dikes, weirs, river bank installations), the other half to be distributed equally between the town and the sovereign!”

Strangely enough, there is no evidence of rafting here in Sulzbach, at least no documents are available. Timber transportation was possible by a chute next to the road.

Rafting accident due to delayed opening of the weir at Schiltach (drawing by Heinrich Eyth, original in the rafting museum Wolfach)

Excerpt from a geographical description of the Black Forest: “The people living near the Kinzig, especially in the vicinity of Wolfach, make their living from large timber which they raft to the Rhine down the Kinzig to Strasbourg and make a considerable fortune.” (Sebastian Münster, “Cosmographia Universalis”, 1544)





Stop 27

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE TIMBER THAT WAS NOT RAFTED?

“We have to stop again at the next sawmill and load some beams and planks to be taken to the Rhine.

But don't think that we export all our timber! A large portion remains in the Black Forest. You would be amazed at the amount of timber needed to build a farmhouse! And the mines need pit props, at least the remaining mines in the Black Forest.

The big days of mining are over, same as the heyday of charcoal burning. Charcoal used to be a fuel in high demand, it was amazing how much charcoal the glassblowers used – and the melting furnaces and ironworks! But demand is decreasing more and more and charcoal from the Black Forest is losing out to cheaper coal from the Ruhr region.

And this new-fangled demon, the railway which runs through the Rhine valley is also fired with coal – and some factories have steam engines where water power is said to be insufficient. I tell you, the times are a'changing.”

Of course, timber was not only transported to the Rhine. The towns along the waterway also had to be provided with timber and firewood. Many old instructions and contracts also include a mandatory supply of firewood to the population at large as well as to the sovereigns and authorities. The monasteries in Alpirsbach as well as Rippoldsau on the Wolf traded with large volumes of firewood for use in the valley as well as for use in Strasbourg.

Vast amounts of timber were used for the many glassworks, melting furnaces, mines, ironworks, for making charcoal, and, of course, for building purposes.

Paint mills, for example near Alpirsbach, required firewood to manufacture cobalt pigment for “Delft blue” in Holland. Silver mining was profitable and today former mine shafts are open to the public as showcases.

Tip: experience mining close-up in the Kinzig valley: mines open to visitors “Grube Wenzel” in Oberwolfach and “Segen Gottes” in Haslach-Schnellingen, mining museum “Erzpoche” in Hausach, mineral stockpile of the mine “Grube Clara” in Wolfach-Kirnbach.

Old Black Forest glassblowing and mining operation (unknown artist)

Mining museum “Erzpoche” in Hausach (-village)



Employees of the Schiltach “steam sawmill” (around 1920)



Stop 28

RAFTSMEN IN DEMAND AS INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS!

“Everything I know I pass on to my boy Uli so that he will once become a fine raftman and be respected by others.

The same way my father taught me everything I know, and that was quite a lot. He was a strong man, but a sick man in old age, he was simply worn out. I only hope that my time is up before the same happens to me.

Amassing a fortune to live off in old age is not possible for the likes of us. The skippers who own the rafts, yes, for them life is a lot easier. They can put plenty aside for old age. And they can still do business even when they are frail.

Some raftsmen have also acquired another craft and are bakers or butchers and the like, this makes live easier for them in old age. But someone like me who rafts timber in the summer and fells trees in the winter – we can only pray I stay fit and in good health. Amen.”

Compared with skippers and timber traders, the raftsmen were true craftsmen. They were day laborers, lumberjacks, craftsmen or farmers, who processed timber and lashed it to raft. They rafted along the Kinzig and delivered the timber to the Rhine. They were not incorporated in associations. They learnt their trade from their ancestors. Due to their experience and knowledge of timber rafting they were in demand as experts and immigrant workers in other regions, for example, the southern Black Forest, Austria and even Romania (Transsylvania).

The commercial aspects of marketing and financing was the task of the skippers guilds in Alpirsbach, Schiltach and Wolfach. These early guilds controlled the timber trade. Of course, the business had its ups and downs and inherent financial risks. In the middle of the 19th century the end of timber rafting was foreseeable, the skippers guild in Wolfach went into liquidation. This also involved a bank in Frankfurt.

Kinzig valley skippers and raftsmen in contemporary dress (Charles Lallemand, original painting in the rafting museum Wolfach)

Group photo with Black Forest raftsmen in Transsylvania, Romania (town archives Schiltach, 1871)

Monumental raft with Schiltach raftsmen on the Ybbs in Austria (photo Schiltach raftsmen)



Wolfach raftsmen (around 1865)



Stop 29

SAWING, PLANK RAFTS AND VINE POLES

“Sawmills are growing like mushrooms after a warm rain in the region. Up ahead is the next one. And if I am not deceived, I can see the lads of the sawmill working on a raft of beams and planks.

They are allowed to do that once a year and take it down the Kinzig on their own account. I only hope they don't cross my bow.

Rafting skills need to be acquired and these once-a-year raftsmen are best avoided. Not that they enter a weir sideways and block everyone's way!

Then all one can do is help and get that thing ship-shape again. This could mean reaching our destination in Willstätt one day later and we lose good money as we raft for a lump sum. Whether we take two days or three, that's our business. And after a journey of eight days means there is nothing left for a beer, if you know what I mean.”

Sawmills processed the rafted logs locally. What was not used for the local market, was transported further as “load” and sold as far as Strasbourg. This is why rafts were also made from planks.

Once a year the sawmill hands were allowed to run such a raft for their own account.

Not only were there sawmills in Alpirsbach (a museum today) and Wolfach, but numerous small sawmills existed near the Kinzig, owned by farmers or the bigger forest farmers in the side valleys. Large amounts of vine poles were produced for the Rhine valley.

There were seven sawmills below Wolfach, with financial participation of the Wolfach skippers guild. Later on, a power plant was erected which utilized the Kinzig's hydropower. A sawmill belonging to the barony Fürstenberg and a cellulose factory were located on the other bank of the Kinzig, before Kirnbach.

The sawmill Heinzelmann/Koch still exists today in Wolfach/Halbmeil, depicted here around 1890

Former “Sawmill of the Barony Fürstenberg” at Wolfach/Kirnbach (photo town archive Wolfach)



Plank raft of the “Wolfacher Kinzigflößer e.V.”

Stop 30

BORDER REGION KINZIG VALLEY?

The numerous territorial dominions along the Kinzig impeded the work of the raftsmen considerably over the centuries. Numerous regulations between these houses governed the traffic on the river and thus the taxes and duties to be paid.

The monastery in Alpirsbach, the house of Fürtenberg, the Württembergers, the house Baden, the Geroldseckers near Lahr, the Lichtenbergers of Willstätt, the Strasbourgers and many other were involved in timber rafting. Disputes were difficult to avoid.

However, mutual intentions and the acceptance that the Kinzig's water was the only way to transport timber and thus earn money, eventually resulted in agreed tax and fee scales.

Here, at the entrance to Ippichen, it is said that a customs house and chapel for raftsmen once existed, however, there is no proof. The Klausenbauer farm was erected in 1561. The renovated farmhouse today serves as farmed event location and overnight accommodation. A converted outbuilding could have been the remains of the raftsmen's chapel. But maybe the facade also belonged to an old storage building.

Tip: Bartles farmhouse in the valley offers local snacks in an old converted farm store.

Preserved facade after several conversions, presumed chapel for raftsmen or farm store.

Historical map of the royal territories in the margraviate Baden (1771)



“When I was a boy my father told me there used to be a customs house here. He was a raftsmen before 1810 when the place was full of customs houses.

There were countless baronies in the Kinzig valley then, I can't even tell you who many borders there were. And each one of these “authorities” charged for passing, a real pain my father told me.

Especially as there were always arguments about the amount of tax to be paid if a customs officer calculated the amount of timber differently from the raftsmen or if the gentry simply decided to raise the taxes without prior notice.

Meanwhile we can be glad that the business of the many tax borders has come to an end and that we Schiltach people can journey to Willstätt without interruption – one hassle less for me as “commander” of the raft!”

Raftsmen crossing the weir at the “upper sawmill” at Schiltach (around 1885)

Stop 31

ANYONE WHO WORKS HARD, NEEDS TO EAT AND DRINK WELL!



“Soon we will have come to an end of our joint travels and I am really looking forward to a good jug of wine!

Unfortunately the flask on board is already empty. Uli needs to fix that quickly, and Luise has provided us with enough bread and bacon so that the food money paid by the skipper will suffice for the return journey.

They say: who works hard needs to eat well. And drink, I hesitate to add. Nothing will come of nothing – and lashing and rafting sap your energy and make you sweat.

All through the year I look forward to the big rafting event in November after the last journey, where even the skippers are not stingy. The landlady in Willstätt adorns our hats with a small bouquet of flowers and the skipper drives us around in the cart and we stop over at every pub we visited during our rafting journeys and get a free drink everywhere. I wish it were November!”

This is the smelters meadow. As the name implies, a smelting furnace used to be located here to smelt the ore from the mines in the vicinity. And some of the chutes from the surrounding mountains also ended here on the water. A sawmill was operated on the other side and was later converted to a weaving mill, today it is a metal-processing company.

The raftsmen obtained their food from local sources. Pork was taken along as smoked bacon, wine, beer, and later on, cider were the fashion. However, only wine was allowed on the rafts. Imagine a barrel of beer being “tortured” on a raft! An attempt at growing vines, to which the skippers of the Wolfach Vorstadtberg had been ordered, was rather short-lived. Wine was generally obtained from the Vorberg region near the Rhine.

Once the raftsmen around Martini had delivered the last raft of the year in Willstätt at the lower Kinzig, they all conversed for the legendary raftsmen’s “booze-up”. This was paid for by the skipper who did not skimp on a few extra liters of wine following a good rafting season.

Traditional “bacon snack” with meats and sausages from local agriculture.

Raftsmen near the Rhine dismantling a Kinzig raft or building a Rhine raft.



Wooden drinking and storage vessel of raftsmen in the forest and on the raft, the “legel”

“Soon we will be reaching the raft harbor of Wolfach which is the final destination for many rafts. Often the logs transported here from the Wolf to the Kinzig will be joined to larger units with the rafts from Alpirsbach and Schiltach.

But we will continue a little further before saying goodbye to each other. And tomorrow I will continue to the Rhine without you. If we are lucky our raft will reach our final destination, the Willstätt weir before Kehl by the day after tomorrow in the afternoon. There we will receive our pay and then start our return journey on foot with the rafting pole, axe and lashings over our shoulders.

What happens later with the timber is not our business. Maybe it will be sold to a city in the vicinity or rafted further down the Rhine, to Mannheim or Cologne or even to Holland.

These Rhine rafts are massive monstrosities, you need a completely different technique than on our narrow shallow rivers and streams in the Black Forest.”

Raftsmen returning home, photographed by W. Hasemann (around 1888)

Stop 32

WOLFACH IN THE DAYS OF TIMBER RAFTING

A smaller dam weir used to exist here at the Brückenwaag pond. This was used as collection point for incoming rafts from Schiltach and Alpirsbach. The raft dock was situated somewhat lower down in the estuary of the Wolf into the Kinzig. The rafts landed there or were dismantled before being assembled to make larger rafts.

Today’s raft park gives information on timber rafting with information boards, a raft model and a lashing kiln.

The high embankment walls were erected as protection against the frequent floods and ice drifts. A channel above the present town bridge diverted water to the various small businesses, such as a mill, and the open canal flowing through the town, the Riesner.

The main street of the 900 year-old town is framed by Fürstenberg Castle and large merchant houses. The old town hall was rebuilt after a fire in 1893 and is an indicator for the riches of population – last not least to timber rafting! In the Vorstadt (town suburb), a pine needle bath flourished on the mountain slope until the late 19th century, an attraction for many guests from home and abroad.

Wolfach with raft dock, dominated by Fürstenberg Castle (panoramic view by Adolf Neef around 1855)

Main street in Wolfach with old town hall, destroyed by fire 1892 (engraving by Robert Geissler 1870)

Mineral and pine needle baths in Wolfach – already a tourist attraction in the early 19th century (illustration 1880, original painting in Wolfach museum)





Stop 33

WOLFACH THE FINAL STOP? NOT BY FAR!

“My grandfather on my father’s side of the family still lived through the big days of the Rhine rafts when there was still an abundance of ‘Dutchmen’.

He even hired aboard one of these Rhine rafts. Floating villages further down the Rhine he called them, with an exclusive wooden hut for the raft’s captain and control towers and sheds for the animals which were slaughtered en route as well as with quarters for a crew of five hundred men.

Today, the Rhine rafts are nowhere as big, but still big enough and I do feel the itch to travel on one of these rafts and see the cities along the Rhine, to raft through the infamous ‘Binger hole’ with its many tales of incidents, right through to Dordrecht in Holland.

It would be nice to see something of the world like the skippers and timber traders for whom it is no big deal to do business abroad. Who knows, maybe one day I will make my dream come true ...”

From here on the timber to be sold moved down the river to Haslach, Gengenbach, Offenburg, past Kehl into the Alsace and Strasbourg. The large logs, the Dutchmen, went to Holland along the Rhine where they were used for building ships.

Some of the skippers, the trade merchants, even managed to travel to Basle, Strasbourg, Cologne and Holland. They learned about different cultures and traditions. They brought back paintings from Holland and introduced the Christmas tree, to give some examples.

The railway came to Wolfach in 1878. This forced the skippers and their raftsmen to finally give up their business. The Wolfach skippers had already gone into liquidation with a short spell of recovery. Floods also destroyed many of the river installations.

Fürstenberg Castle, erected in the 14/15 century, is located here, near the former raft dock on the Kinzig. Following numerous conversions it protected virtually the entire valley against intruders. Today it houses administration departments, a castle chapel and the local history and timber rafting museum. The arduous work of previous generations is presented here against a historical background.

Arrival of a large Rhine timber raft in Dordrecht harbor – timber for ship building in Holland (copper engraving approx. 1785)

Wolfach railway station with timber stockpile near the rail tracks leading to Freudenstadt (around 1895)

Local history and timber rafting museum in the castle with historic displays and documents, not only from the rafting period.



Large Rhine raft at Unkel (copper engraving by J. Ziegler)

Stop 34

“Folks, this is where we reach the end of our joint travels from Alpirsbach. I hope I was able to entertain you well enough on this journey and give you insights on the customs of raftsmen and everything to do with timber rafting.

You may have noticed: I understand timber rafting, you can’t fool me on that score. And although I am not the youngest any more I still have the energy to stand at the front of the raft and navigate it safely through weirs and dangers. And one day Uli will also be able to follow in my footsteps, I will teach my boy everything he needs to know.

And, honoured guests, before we go our separate ways, may I remind you kindly of our agreement – you know, the jug of wine you promised me. Goodbye and I wish you a pleasant stay in Wolfach, the town of raftsmen and skippers. Your Staiger Johann, raftsmen, from Schiltach, born 1810 – now forty-five years ago. Goodbye!”



A smaller raft casting off in Wolfach (original picture in the Wolfach museum)

The Nature Park Black Forest Central/North, the largest nature park in Germany, is a paradise for everyone who wants to experience the Black Forest and its nature actively.

The aim of the nature park is to preserve the beautiful and intact Black Forest countryside. At the same time the region is active in sustainability and supports projects which create a balance between nature preservation and recreation, for example, the timber rafting trail.

You can find further leisure activities on the homepage of the nature park. Just click:

www.naturparkschwarzwald.de

