

BY YOLANDA ZAW

YOU'D miss it completely if you didn't know it was there. I did. It was only when I doubled back that I found the discreetly signposted door and stepped into the treasure trove that is Seiberts.

Tucked away on a dull, quiet street in the centre of Cologne is one of the 'world's best bars'.

Inside, there's nothing discreet about this particular drinking hole. It is all brass chandeliers, velvet drapery and Chesterfield sofas. The bar at the centre of the room is luminous. Countless bottles of liquor in every shape and colour line the walls like potions in a mad magician's den.

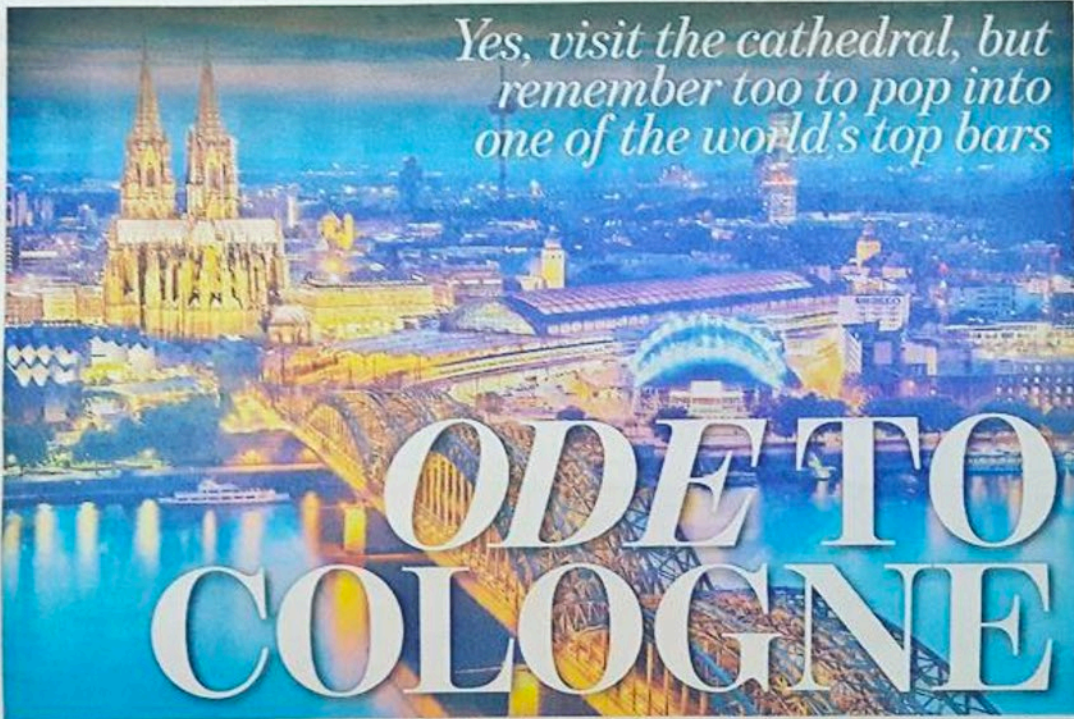
At the centre of it all, the magician himself, Volker Seibert, a world-renown mixologist, puts the finishing touches on one of his signature concoctions.

It looks more like a piece of art than something you'd chug on a night out. A posy of wildflowers seemingly growing, spilling out of a martini glass full of red liquid.

Seibert's is just one of Cologne's many hidden gems. At first glance, the west German city seems a little too subdued, too business and no play. But scratch beneath the surface and you'll find plenty to drink in.

WHAT TO SEE

The Cologne Dom is the majestic heart of the city. It towers above the skyline but is best appreciated up close where you can inspect the



Yes, visit the cathedral, but remember too to pop into one of the world's top bars

ODE TO COLOGNE

intricate, lace-like artworks that adorn the giant twin spires. It is the largest cathedral in Germany and once dwarfed all the buildings in Europe until the Eiffel Tower was constructed in Paris.

Behind the cathedral, Hohenzollern Bridge stretches over the River Rhine. A walk across the bridge gives you a spectacular view of the city and the cathedral. Along the bridge railings some 40,000 padlocks hang carrying messages of devotion.

These 'love locks', left by

local and foreign pairs, brighten up the minimalist steel architecture of the bridge. Each padlock holds a story and it's hard not to feel warm and fuzzy inside reading some of the heartfelt inscriptions.

Perhaps the most charming part of Cologne is its historic Old Town. Traditional, German-style houses line narrow cobblestone alleyways and tiny breweries and pubs bookend these streets, beckoning you in with the promise of a warm place to sit and an ice-cold beer. Kölsch beer is a must-try here.

WHERE TO EAT

PastaBar di Caruso is an excellent

Italian restaurant hidden away in a quiet part of Cologne. You'll never stumble across it and I only found it because locals tipped me off. It pays to ask around in Cologne.

Located near the unremarkable Barbarossaplatz square, this tiny diner is run by a passionate husband-and-wife team who whip up fresh, tasty fare. Everything about this place is intimate and rustic and the menu changes daily.

For a more extravagant dining experience, Taku at the Excelsior Hotel Ernst has a Michelin star and serves up authentic East Asian specialities with dishes starting from about €41.

To drink, whether it is pre-dinner



Majestic: Yolanda at Cologne Dom and, inset left, her cocktail

or post-dinner, the aforementioned Seiberts is an absolute must.

The bartenders in this 'Liquid Kitchen' wear chefs' whites and it makes sense. This place is like a Michelin-star drinking experience. Some of their cocktails have more ingredients in them than most restaurant entrees.

WHERE TO STAY

The Excelsior Hotel Ernst is the perfect place to stay in the heart of Cologne and offers excellent views of the cathedral.

One of the city's oldest hotels, the property dates back to 1863 and though it has been modernised in recent years, retains an old-world charm. Melodies from the grand piano float out of the main dining room when afternoon tea is served on neat little tiered trays. The breakfast buffet is very much a champagne and caviar affair.

■ *Flights from Dublin to Cologne start from around €37 one way. Rooms at the Excelsior Hotel Ernst start from around €200 a night.*