

NORTH RHINE-WESTPHALIA

Europe's heartbeat



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The economic and logistical center of Western Europe

Andreas Pinkwart, State Minister of Economic Affairs, Innovation, Digitalization and Energy, introduces North Rhine-Westphalia

Situated at the heart of Europe and bordering both the Netherlands and Belgium, North Rhine-Westphalia is the most densely populated of Germany's 16 federal states. How would you sum up the region's importance from an economic standpoint?

In a nutshell, North Rhine-Westphalia is among the largest metropolitan and industrial regions in Europe, which is comparable in importance to the metropolitan areas of Greater London or Paris. It is the biggest state in Germany and, with 18 million inhabitants, our population is as large as that of the Netherlands. If the state was an independent country, it would be the seventh-largest industrial nation in Europe in terms of its gross domestic product.

North Rhine-Westphalia benefits from having an excellent geographical location in the middle of the continent: we are just two hours from Brussels, three from Paris and we are very close to the major European harbors of Rotterdam and Antwerp. The state is extremely well connected by fantastic highways, railways, waterways and airports. As a result, it is possible to travel between any of our main cities—which include our state capital Düsseldorf, Aachen, Bonn, Cologne, Dortmund and Essen—within an hour.

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The most industrialized part of the state is Rhine-Ruhr, where 12 million people live. North-Rhine Westphalia hosts the largest European cluster of energy-intensive industries, which involves sectors like aluminum, chemicals, cement, glass, paper and steel. However, North Rhine-Westphalia is also an excellent base for enterprises working in science and technology, and we are home to some of the world's largest and most innovative companies in those sectors, such as Bayer, Henkel, E.ON and Evonik Industries, as well as hundreds of thousands small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) and startups.

Overall, North Rhine-Westphalia boasts 690 hidden champions that are international frontrunners in their specialized fields. They are innovative, globally oriented and most of them are family owned companies. They, along with all businesses in the state, benefit from



Düsseldorf is the state capital of North Rhine-Westphalia

having access to highly qualified employees, as our universities are phenomenal and have a combined student body of over 770,000 students, with a substantial number of them studying engineering and natural sciences.

North Rhine-Westphalia is Germany's top destination for foreign investors, with international enterprises having invested €162.5 billion in the state by the end of 2019. What are some reasons for this?

The state is a prime location for international enterprises and over 20,000 foreign companies have invested here, including very prestigious names like 3M, Johnson & Johnson, Boeing, BP, Ericsson, Ford, Huawei, Toyota, Mitsubishi and Vodafone. Recent newcomers include the U.S. hydrogen-technology specialist Plug Power, Indian information-technology giant Wipro and the pharmaceutical company Gan & Lee from China. International companies employ more than 1.3 million people in the state. Investors have chosen our state because of our unique strengths and technologies, skilled workforce, extraordinary infrastructure and we offer easy access to the European market. North Rhine-Westphalia is a hub for European-wide business as well as for world-class logistics. In fact, we house the world's biggest research center for logistics in Dortmund, which is one of the reasons why the iconic Levi's brand chose our state as the location for its European distribution center.

North Rhine-Westphalia has also attracted significant numbers of investors because we are specialists in organizing value chains and we are at the forefront of the fundamental transformation of these chains through digitalization. We have a strong technology network and invest substantially in competence centers and initiatives that enable our businesses to really benefit from new digital opportunities.

Today, many established companies and startups based in the state, supported by our universities and research labs, are using factory 4.0 technologies, 5G, blockchain, neuroscience, quantum computing and artificial intelligence to transition our energy-intense industries and SMEs to be at the cutting-edge of the new digital world. In addition, North Rhine-Westphalia is an ideal and easy place for businesses to scale up technologies and innovations for export to other markets in Europe and worldwide.



Andreas Pinkwart
State Minister of Economic Affairs, Innovation, Digitalization and Energy



Cologne is the fourth-largest city in Germany

How focused is the state on decarbonization and what is its strategy for reaching net zero in its energy sector?

We have one of the most ambitious climate goals in Europe. In 2019, we recorded the highest decrease in carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions of any industrial region on the continent. Between 1990 and 2020, we have reduced our CO₂ emissions by 45 percent in total—which means that we have lowered our output by more than the Netherlands and Belgium combined. However, last summer, we revised our targets and announced that the state will become climate neutral by 2045, which is a huge leap forward.

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We expect to be able to achieve this by continuing to transform our energy system to renewables and our industries to climate neutrality. The biggest enabler to increasing competitiveness is energy transformation and we are committed to radically transitioning our electricity system over the next eight years. Our strategy is to double the wind power in our energy mix by 2030 and, at the same time, to triple or even quadruple the solar-power capacity in our state. As part of our strategy, we are planning new power grids so that North Rhine-Westphalia can import electricity from offshore wind farms in the North Sea for our industries. We are also planning new hydrogen pipelines and have published a roadmap for hydrogen that provides a clear route to expanding production and imports of the gas. We want to phase out our coal power plants by 2030 and are moving ahead much faster than Germany's other coal regions. To support that, we expect to receive €15 billion in funding from the country's federal government, which will be invested in transitioning our coal-mining areas into climate-neutral and sustainable industrial regions.

Is North Rhine-Westphalia investing in new technologies to help develop its green economy?

Germany's federal government has decided to invest nearly €1 billion in our state on hydrogen, an area where we have strong capabili-



North Rhine-Westphalia lies at the heart of Europe

ties in basic and applied research, and it has also brought the national center for hydrogen mobility to North Rhine-Westphalia.

The German government is also investing heavily in a national battery research plant in Münster, a city located in the north of our state. Already, we have collaborations taking place there between scientists and private-sector players in the chemical, aluminum, automotive and other industries that have a strong established presence here. Hydrogen, batteries, the circular economy and the implementation of climate-neutral processes are the primary drivers of our future climate-neutral industries.

We are carrying out a lot of research in the fields of next-generation mobility, housing and industries, and directly transferring that knowledge to new companies or to transform existing businesses. In the Rhineland, for instance, we are transforming the largest active coal-mining area in Europe with the aim of making it the most successful economic transformation region on the continent. The transition project has been running for the last two years, we have already invested more than €300 million into it and we intend to have assigned more than €4 billion to specific projects in the region by the end of this year. This will also open up new opportunities for international companies that would like to participate in the area's transition process.

Another exciting development is that we are seeing many new green investments from international businesses, especially from the U.S. A key illustration is Plug Power, which has opened its European headquarter at Duisburg harbor, the world's largest inland port that handles almost 110 million metric tons of freight a year. That is indic-

A European powerhouse



18m inhabitants



21% of Germany's GDP



160m consumers within 500km of Düsseldorf



4.5% of the European Union's GDP

ative of how attractive our state is as a place where new technologies can be developed, implemented and new markets can be opened.

What other initiatives has the region taken toward the decarbonization of its energy-intensive industries?

We support companies to convert their processes to hydrogen—for example, thyssenkrupp, the global leader in industrial engineering, is based in our region and is on its way to producing green steel with hydrogen. Four years ago, we also started our IN4climate.NRW initiative, a unique, innovative working platform through which large industrial companies, scientists and the government are collaborating together on solutions for the climate-neutral transformation of industry. Essential, practical aspects of industrial transition are examined and evaluated in key areas that include hydrogen, process heat, the circular and carbon economies, as well as supply and infrastructure. In addition, the state government is supporting a large number of industrial transformation projects as part of the initiative, such as testing climate-neutral processes for the manufacture of high-quality glass products, the use of hydrogen in the steel industry and investigations into climate-neutral and flexible aluminum production.

We are also collaborating with energy giants like BP and Shell on a new approach to carbon management—because climate neutrality is not only about decarbonization, as some industries will have to use carbon to an extent in the future, possibly combined with other

elements such as hydrogen or synthetic materials. As well as powerful industrial supply chains, there is a great deal of interconnectivity between industries in North Rhine-Westphalia that is proving to be a strength in the new world of climate neutrality. We are creating a network whereby our industries can use each other’s resources; we all know we need new materials to substitute fossil fuels and the state has a growing bioeconomy investigating these new resources.

To give you an idea of what industrial transformation looks like in North Rhine-Westphalia, Siemens Energy, which is located in the Ruhr area, is an excellent case study.

In the past, it produced technologies for gas, coal and nuclear power plants. Now, it produces electrolyzers and other technologies for the climate-neutral hydrogen world. Another of our companies is MAN, which has manufactured compressors for natural gas that have been used over decades in the industries of the past. It is now making compressors to turn hydrogen gas into a liquid or to separate out CO₂ in the cement-manufacturing process. In short, our machinery industries are transforming into enablers for our energy-intensive industries, which are in turn transforming themselves. It is a big challenge, but also a huge opportunity.

Can you tell us about the importance of business tourism and the meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions industry for the region?

With four major exhibition sites in Cologne, Düsseldorf, Essen and Dortmund, North Rhine-Westphalia is one of the world’s largest and most important trade fair centers. In 2019, we had around 50 million overnight visitor stays, among which were many business tourists. However, visitors to our numerous trade fairs as well as leisure tourists can also enjoy a multitude of cultural activities, opera houses and museums in our bustling cities that are surrounded by the fantastic and incredibly beautiful landscapes of our more hidden regions. These offer great opportunities for activities such as skiing, water sports, cycling and hiking.

“Investors have chosen our state because of our unique strengths and technologies, skilled workforce, extraordinary infrastructure and we offer easy access to the European market.”

Andreas Pinkwart, State Minister of Economic Affairs, Innovation, Digitalization and Energy

Aside from large investors, how appealing is the region for international entrepreneurs and startups?

The urban part of North Rhine-Westphalia extends from the Ruhr and Düsseldorf to Cologne. It is a metropolitan area that is not only an attractive city break destination, it is also a great place to live, work and set up a new business in. Here you have the infrastructure and, I believe, even more possibilities than you will find in places like London or Paris. We want to be among the ten most attractive regions for startups and creative people in Europe. Those that chose to come here will find everything they need within a small radius: an internationalized society, outstanding facilities, the right industrial mix, a remarkably highly ranked cultural scene and a myriad of opportunities.

North Rhine-Westphalia in numbers



67 universities, plus over 110 technology centers and research institutes



In excess of **770,000 students** study in the state every year



A highly skilled workforce of around 9.6m people



2 major airports, expansive expressway and rail networks, plus 120 inland ports



Foreign direct investment stood at **€162.5bn** at the end of 2019



More than **20,000 international companies** have invested in the state

Germany’s top investment destination

Felix Neugart, CEO, NRW.Global Business, reveals why the state is an ideal base for investors in future-oriented technologies

NRW.Global Business is the state of North Rhine-Westphalia’s trade and investment agency. Could you summarize the agency’s activities?

At NRW.Global Business, we offer tailor-made services for local companies that are looking to develop growth markets abroad and we provide end-to-end support for international investment projects in North Rhine-Westphalia. We have quite a substantial international footprint, with 17 offices in all the major business locations across the world. Our activities tend to be focused on future-oriented technologies that are key to the state’s ongoing economic development and in which North Rhine-Westphalia is already very strong. These include hydrogen as an energy source, electric mobility, digital products, with cybersecurity at the fore, and industry 4.0.

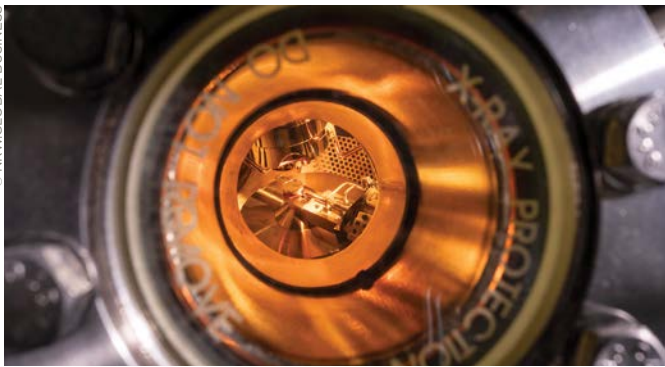
How and why does North Rhine-Westphalia stand out as a future-oriented business and investment location?

We are not only Germany’s largest state in terms of population, but we are also significantly larger than the others in terms of gross domestic product, contributing about 21 percent of the country’s overall GDP and 4.5 percent of the European Union’s GDP. We also have a very attractive combination of types of business in our region. On the one hand, we were the cradle of the German industrial revolution in the 19th century and are still the country’s industrial heartland, so we have many large, globally prominent companies in industry, energy and other sectors. In fact, 19 of the 50 highest-grossing German enterprises are based in North Rhine-Westphalia.

Moreover, we have over 700,000 small to medium-sized businesses, with many of the most interesting ones being our so-called hidden champions. They may not be well known by the public, but they are extremely active internationally and are market leaders in their niche areas. Almost one-third of all the hidden champions in Germany are located in our state. Last but not least, we have a very large number of small, innovative startups, many of which focus on digital services and have grown impressively in the last couple of years. One-third of all German revenues in information, communication and digital technologies are generated in North Rhine-Westphalia, which is a very



Felix Neugart
CEO
NRW.Global Business



Münster is the center of e-battery research

impressive statistic. One of the secrets of the global success of the German model is that many of these companies are actually not located in our bigger cities but are based in clusters in our rural regions. For instance, in Eastern Westphalia there is a cluster of 200 companies called “it’s OWL” that is focused on industry 4.0 technologies.

North Rhine-Westphalia also has the densest research and development network in Europe. We have 67 universities—that is more than Île-de-France or Greater London—and more than 110 technology centers and non-university research institutes, including various standalone institutions like Forschungszentrum Jülich, one of Europe’s most important interdisciplinary research centers; the German Aerospace Center in Cologne; 14 Fraunhofer Institutes, which make up an internationally renowned network of applied science institutes; as well as 10 institutes of the Leibniz Association that are concerned with general research topics.

NRW.Global Business aims to work closely with the research and development institutions in North Rhine-Westphalia, including the ones that are dedicated to some of our focus areas. For instance, we have institutes in Bochum and Bonn that specialize in cybersecurity, there is a new center for hydrogen being established in Duisburg and there is also a new research production facility for electric-mobility battery technology in the city of Münster.

There are numerous initiatives in North Rhine-Westphalia which promote collaboration between the private sector, researchers and other stakeholders. For instance, there is an initiative called Circular Valley, a platform that employs the principles of the circular economy and that combines the efforts of established companies, startups, scientists and society.

An increasingly important factor for international companies is the highly qualified talent pool available in the state, which is a huge advantage that we offer to investors that are desperately looking for talent and skilled employees. There is a density of 43 students per thousand inhabitants in North Rhine-Westphalia and we have a total workforce that amounts to almost 10 million employees. In addition, that talent pool is rapidly expanding in both our workforce and our broad university landscape.

Finally, of course, we are in an extremely attractive location at the heart of Western Europe and in one of the continent’s most densely populated and richest regions—within a radius of 500 kilometers of our capital Düsseldorf, you have 160 million consumers, which represents almost a third of the total European Union population, in

addition to the well over 20 percent of Germany’s purchasing power which is concentrated in the state. There is no other place in Europe from which so many people with such a high purchasing power can be reached within such a short distance.

Our strategically important location is also the reason we have an extremely highly developed logistics industry and that one-quarter of all the logistics companies in Germany are in North Rhine-Westphalia. Just as our campaign slogan “Europe’s Heartbeat” claims, you can reach all of the continent very conveniently from here and, in addition, we embody many of the excellent qualities that Europe as an investment destination offers.

North Rhine-Westphalia is known as one of the most popular investment locations for international companies in Europe. How robust is investment into North Rhine-Westphalia at the moment?

We are the largest investment location in Germany, with more than 20,000 international companies currently active in North Rhine-Westphalia. Inward investment into the state has been relatively crisis proof—in 2020, in the middle of a pandemic, we increased our share of foreign investments in comparison to other regions in Germany and in Western Europe. Although there was a slight dip relative

“Hydrogen is already important to our region as a fuel and as a technology for transporting and storing energy, but we want to build our capacity in this sector.”

Felix Neugart, CEO, NRW.Global Business

to previous years, it was much smaller than other places experienced. However in 2021, North Rhine-Westphalia has achieved a clear turnaround with a growth rate of 12 percent compared to the previous year. We welcomed 458 new settlement and expansion projects that created an estimated 14,000 new jobs, which is a new record. Our state has actually recovered more strongly than the average German and global growth rates.

North Rhine-Westphalia is at the forefront of the development of hydrogen technologies, which the government believes are key elements for achieving its climate-neutrality goals for the state’s energy, industrial and transportation sectors. Significant investment is currently being pumped into hydrogen by the public sector and the state is home to a wide variety of component and system manufacturers that are working in the field of hydrogen technologies. Has the international private sector also been encouraged to invest in hydrogen?

A major study has suggested that the Ruhr area of North Rhine-Westphalia is the place in Germany that has the most to offer investors in hydrogen technologies. Hydrogen is already important to our region as a fuel and as a technology for transporting and storing energy, but we want to build our capacity in this sector. North Rhine-Westphalia, and especially the industrialized Ruhr area, has many of the prerequisites for this field, such as companies specifically focused on it with a pipeline network in place as well as research capabilities.

One example of a recent international investment into the sector



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North Rhine-Westphalia has the densest R&D network in Europe

is the U.S. hydrogen and fuel-cell specialist Plug Power, which chose Duisburg for its European headquarters and innovation center. A second illustration is another U.S. company, Cummins, an expert on zero-emissions technology that has also recently established itself in North Rhine-Westphalia. It is opening a production research center in the city of Herten for fuel-cell technologies connected to mobility applications of hydrogen. Another inward investor in hydrogen is Enapter, a company that was founded by a German but is headquartered in Thailand. It is focused on the development of electrolyzers, which are used to produce hydrogen, and it has decided to invest in Saerbeck, a small community in the north of our state that is very focused on green technologies.

Outside of hydrogen, could you name some of the most important future-oriented investments that have been made into North Rhine-Westphalia in the last few years?

One particularly interesting example of a new investment relates to electromobility: Marelli, a Japanese-Italian company, has established a production plant in Cologne, very close to an existing large Ford facility, that is concentrating primarily on the transition from fossil-fuel motors to electric motors. North Rhine-Westphalia is home to the largest number of companies that supply the automotive industry in Germany, which makes it an ideal base for enterprises involved in electric mobility. Then we also have Zoom’s German headquarters here in Cologne—the list just goes on and on.

Over 60 technology and business incubation centers have been established in the state to promote innovative startups, spin-offs and the settlement of high-tech companies. How dynamic is North Rhine-Westphalia’s entrepreneurial ecosystem overall and can you describe a few of the support mechanisms that are empowering the development and growth of startups in the region?

We have a higher number of startups than most states in Germany with around 20 percent of the country’s total being based in our region and, even during the pandemic, the number has been growing. Financing for entrepreneurs in North Rhine-Westphalia is also rising: in 2021, capital for startups was three times as much as it had been in 2020. One example of an area in which our young businesses are doing quite well is ecommerce, with the number of startups in this sub-sector



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The state is one of the world’s most important hubs for trade fairs

increasing from 39 in 2019 to 64 in 2020.

Startup growth in North Rhine-Westphalia is supported by various state government initiatives. For example, the Excellence Start-up Center.NRW program has been established at universities to assist emerging companies. Essentially, these are centers of excellence designed to help young innovative people from universities to set up their own businesses. Via the centers, they can access support mechanisms such as founder stipends, which are special programs geared to financially supporting startup founders through subsidies for a certain period of time.

Another program is called Scale-up.NRW and that focuses, not on startups and seed-phase businesses, but on companies which have already taken their first steps or collected their first round of capital and are now looking to expand their businesses internationally.

Additionally, we have a substantial wider ecosystem for entrepreneurs in North Rhine-Westphalia that includes a number of Digital Hubs in different parts of the state. These are incubators where startups can find a support network, potential customers and highly experienced mentors. This system is also supported by the state government, as well as by institutions that are focused directly on startups. Another example of the emerging startup ecosystem is the new Global Entrepreneurship Centre in the city of Meerbusch, close to Düsseldorf, which has taken an interesting approach to supporting entrepreneurs working with sustainable technologies. On the one hand, it is financing startups from within the region, but on the other, it is also looking to attract international startups.

NRW.Global Business operates subsidiaries in Japan and the U.S., plus offices in China, the U.K., India, Israel, South Korea, Poland and Turkey. Through these, it provides potential inward investors with support and advice at every stage of their investment journeys and it also facilitates growth and networking opportunities for North Rhine-Westphalian companies. Last year, NRW.Global Business expanded its network by opening an additional office in Atlanta. What potential does the agency see for building new international partnerships in the U.S. or other global regions?

There are certain regions on our radar that we think are extremely attractive. Atlanta in the U.S. is a very interesting partner, both as a source of investment for North Rhine-Westphalia, but also as a target



The region is strong in technologies connected to smart industry

location for our domestic companies. NRW.Global Business already had offices in Chicago and in Silicon Valley, but we want to increase our footprint in the southern states of the U.S. as well.

In addition, we have plans to intensify our activities in India, where we recently opened a new office in Bangalore. It is a huge country with a growing number of middle-income consumers and it is steadily becoming a source of investment for North Rhine-Westphalia. Large information technology companies such as Wipro and Infosys have already invested in our state and we want to grow our partnerships there. In addition, we will increase our activities in Southeast Asia which is a very attractive region in terms of market potential and changing global supply chains.

“One-third of all German revenues in information, communication and digital technologies are generated in North Rhine-Westphalia.”

Felix Neugart, CEO, NRW.Global Business

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is also an interesting market for us, especially in terms of hydrogen and potentially finding partners for German businesses’ needs. Finally, we are looking at sub-Saharan Africa, another area where we have been limited in our activities in the past. We believe there is potential there and are developing an approach to address that.

Whilst we are aiming to expand our international footprint and network of partners, that does not mean that we intend to reduce our activities in places where we are already established. What we will continue to highlight is that North Rhine-Westphalia is a highly attractive investment location that is focused on the future-oriented technologies that are the keys to success in facing the global challenges of sustainability and digitalization.

NRW.Global Business will also continue to develop targeted instruments to promote the state and our companies. Investment and export promotion do not need to clash—there is substantial overlap, which can be exploited for everyone’s benefit, and North Rhine-Westphalia has a lot to offer to both potential investors as well as to export-oriented companies.

Perfect blend of urban culture and rural nature

North Rhine-Westphalia is lauded as one of the most exciting and sustainable tourist destinations in the world

Contributing around 4.8 percent of its gross domestic product, tourism has been one of North Rhine-Westphalia’s economic drivers in recent years. Between 2009 and 2019, the number of overnight stays visitors made in the state grew by 33 percent to reach 53.3 million, making it the third-most popular tourism location in Germany. Despite that, it remains relatively underexplored by international tourists and only about one-fifth of its guests came from outside of the country in 2019.

That seems set to change, with the region now gaining attention from the likes of National Geographic, which named the state’s Ruhr area as one of the world’s seven most exciting and sustainable destinations to visit in 2022. Heike Döll-König, managing director of the state’s tourism agency Tourismus NRW, summarizes North Rhine-Westphalia’s overall appeal: “Our great cities offer a fantastic melting pot of cultural events, creativity, architecture and a vast range

“If you combine all of our metropolises, the richness of their cultural landscapes can be compared to London or Paris—it’s quite unique.”
Heike Döll-König, Managing Director, Tourismus NRW

of museums. If you combine all of our metropolises, the richness of their cultural landscapes can be compared to London or Paris—it’s quite unique. At the same time, the natural green environment that surrounds our cities is highly attractive as well and it’s easy to combine city trips with rural experiences. At any time of year and whatever the weather is like, North Rhine-Westphalia is a perfect destination for a short break or a longer family vacation.”

Döll-König isn’t exaggerating about the scale of the region’s offering. For example, it boasts more than 1,000 museums, 130 theaters and numerous prestigious venues for classical and contemporary music, dance, ballet and other performing arts. It is also home to six UNESCO World Heritage Sites: the cathedrals of Aachen and Cologne; the breathtaking Baroque palaces of Brühl; the Benedictine abbey of Corvey; 220 kilometres of the Lower Germanic Limes that marked the border of the Roman empire in Germany for about 450 years and which contain many remains from that time; and, as a testament to the exceptional way in which the state has embraced its industrial heritage, the former coal mine of Zeche Zollverein in Essen.



Half-timbered houses in Freudenberg Siegen-Wittgenstein

At the heart of North Rhine-Westphalia is an area the locals call Urbanana, a banana-shaped, polycentric urban space that extends from Cologne and Düsseldorf in the south to the Ruhr area in the north, which has become a hotbed for creative industries and digital startups, says Döll-König. “A wide variety of dynamic, multicultural, open-minded and creative people live, work and spend their leisure time in Urbanana. There are, for instance, lots of artists, music makers and fashion developers that have created their own scenes and their own district quarters in every city in the area—it’s those people who are responsible for the extraordinary and striking atmosphere that visitors can experience and be a part of.”

Thrillingly creative and diverse cities
Each city in Urbanana and, indeed, the state as a whole, has its own distinct environment and allure. At the top of many tourists’ must-visit lists is Cologne, North Rhine-Westphalia’s most populous metropolis that is considered to be among the country’s most beautiful cities and which has a history going back over 2,000 years, when it was known as the Roman city of Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium. It is still a magnet for foreign visitors and its preeminent landmark, Cologne Cathedral, is Germany’s leading tourist attraction, receiving 6 million visitors in an average year.

Beneath the cathedral’s huge Gothic spires lies a creative, friendly city with many neighborhoods to explore, riverbanks to stroll, 13 of North Rhine-Westphalia’s 54 Michelin-starred restaurants to savor, plus cultural draws as diverse as the outstanding contemporary art collection of the Museum Ludwig and the Schokoladenmuseum that celebrates the delectable world of chocolate.

The state capital Düsseldorf is another exhilarating city that has successfully combined tradition with cutting-edge cultural and architectural modernity. The capital is the gateway to the region for most international visitors, with around 25.5 million passengers a year using Düsseldorf Airport, one of two major international air transportation hubs in North Rhine-Westphalia, the other being Cologne Bonn Airport. That easy accessibility has helped make Düsseldorf the cosmopolitan city it is today—for instance, it hosts Europe’s third-largest Japanese community. Among the capital’s other claims to fame are its arts scene, elegant shopping streets and the hundreds of bars and pubs in its old town that merge together to form the world’s longest bar counter. This is an ideal place to sample some of the multitude of specialty beers that are lovingly created by the state’s numerous breweries.



View of the Rur valley from Eugenienstein in Nideggen

Within the last few decades, many of the industrial facilities that were so crucial to North Rhine-Westphalia’s economy in the past have been reimagined by top architects, such as Frank Gehry and Rem Koolhaas, who have converted them into vital spaces for today and the future. An outstanding illustration of this is the immense Zeche Zollverein complex in the Ruhr. Until 1986, Zeche Zollverein was the largest coal mine in the world and an icon of industrial architecture, states Döll-König. “Now, it’s among the most important centers for design, art, culture and creative industries that also hosts large-scale international events and festivals. It’s a vibrant mix of our industrial heritage and the contemporary world.”

Toward the edges and outside the Urbanana region are other engaging metropolises to uncover. These include Bonn, a picturesque baroque city on the banks of the River Rhine, which was once the state capital and was the birthplace of Beethoven. Münster, on the

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Heike Döll-König, Managing Director, Tourismus NRW

other hand, is a laid-back student city that has been hailed as “The World’s Most Liveable City” by the United Nations Environment Programme in the past, while tranquil and historic Aachen provided the setting for the imperial court of the first Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne, who is buried in its stunning cathedral.

Magnificent natural environment
“Before COVID-19, our cities always had the majority share of tourism in the state. However, that has shifted toward our more rural regions since the pandemic started,” Döll-König reveals. That’s no surprise, as North Rhine-Westphalia’s natural environment holds much to divert tourists looking for relaxation and retreat from the stresses of daily life. Overall, a quarter of the state’s land mass is occupied by green spaces such as ancient forests, meadows, mountains, parks and gardens. It contains 12 unspoilt nature preserves, a national park, 226 kilometers of the River Rhine, more than 200 lakes and dams and its spectacular countryside is peppered with hundreds of traditional half-timbered villages and romantic, fairy-tale castles. An extensive



Contemporary culture is thriving in North Rhine-Westphalia

variety of first-class leisure and sporting infrastructure exists to enable visitors to enjoy North Rhine-Westphalia’s outdoor pleasures to the maximum, including 30,000 kilometers of cycle paths, in excess of 50,000 kilometers of hiking trails and over 160 golf courses, while Winterberg, on the eastern side of the state, is the largest region for skiing and other winter sports north of the Alps.

As well as catering to leisure tourists, state-of-the-art trade fair centers have made the state a leading global hub for meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE). That sector came to an abrupt halt during the COVID-19 crisis and, while it has now started up again, Döll-König believes there are new opportunities for business tourism in the post-pandemic world. “People have learned that we don’t necessarily need to come together physically—we can talk over Zoom—but some MICE activities just can’t be done digitally. Team building, for example, is a segment that will grow, as more people are working from home but they still need to meet in order to foster a team spirit. North Rhine-Westphalia is a genuinely outstanding destination for that, because we have such a wide range of astonishing locations including castles and repurposed industrial buildings that are fully equipped with technical infrastructure. There’s a great mixture of best-in-class service and hospitality, the finest locations and optimal natural and cultural surroundings here.” Those benefits have hit the radar of digital nomads and entrepreneurs from across the world, she adds. “The creative atmosphere and stimulating lifestyle offered by, for example, our Urbanana region is certainly inviting to creative, young, digital and international people, who are realizing there are so many reasons to live here.”

International leisure tourism also fell heavily during the pandemic, although North Rhine-Westphalia became an even more popular place to visit for people from other states within Germany. However, visitor numbers are now increasing again and Döll-König is optimistic about the future. “We are reconnecting with our biggest foreign markets, which are currently the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Switzerland. Then, together with our partners, especially airlines and airports, we are working to reconquer our longer-distance markets. We particularly want to reinforce and rebuild our customer bases in countries such as the U.S. and China, and we’re confident that we will attract them again due to the rich offering we have for tourists. I would say to anyone considering a visit to North Rhine-Westphalia: come and discover one of the most exciting cultural hotspots in the world.”



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