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Quedlinburg's Rathaus, or townhall, constructed at the intersection of two trade routes, is one of the oldest in central Germany, dating to the 14th century.

Harz Mountain Quaintness: Exploring Germany's Hidden Gem

Story and Photography by Lisa K. Harris

We chugged up, up, up, into the Harz Mountains, northern Germany's highest range. The train's black, coal-powered engine, dating to the 1950s, billowed steam over its five cars, all blood-red and polished, with matching upholstered seats. Sitting in the first car, we watched pines click by.

There are two ways to reach the summit: via the narrow-gauge Brocken Railway (part of the Harzer Schmalspurbahnen network) or by the Harzer Hexenstieg, the Witches' Trail footpath. It was July 2019, and Germany was suffering a heat wave. With mercury hovering near the century mark, my teenage daughter, Ava, and I sought respite on the mountaintop and hopped on the train.

At one spot Ava pointed through a gap in the forest to the craggy summit and its jutting TV transmitting tower: the Brocken, where divided Germany's East met West, where witches flew.

The Soviets constructed a border outpost here, near the western boundary of the former East Germany, with

two powerful listening stations that eavesdropped on most of Western Europe's radio traffic. From the 1930s until the mid-1990s, when the last Soviet official left, following German unification, this portion of the country was off limits, with supplies and espionage personnel chugged up the mountain, on the same train we were riding.

Halfway between Cologne and Berlin, this region lured us to discover a place where time stands still, where

pristine forests grow, where villages preserve medieval half-timbered homes and cobbled streets, where train travel and walking flourish.

Rounding the last curve, we clickety-clacked into the Brocken station. We disembarked, wandered through a botanical garden of alpine plants, and trees slanted and stunted by storms. Winds whipped our hair helter-skelter, clouds cast shadows, and ahead, boxy buildings loomed. It was easy to imag-



The Harzer Hexen trail follows along the Bode River between Thale and Treseburg.

Far right: Remarkable medieval half-timbered buildings surround café diners in Quedlinburg.



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A section of Quedlinburg, Germany, is designated a UNESCO cultural heritage site partly because of its surviving medieval buildings.

white. Colorless. “Soviet,” I said.

We sat on the outside patio, tables close together. Everyone was speaking German. Except us and a swarm of nasty yellow jackets, which dive-

bombed our currywurst. There was no out-swatting the flying vespids, and they were everywhere. After gobbling our snack, we ran to the station and jumped aboard the train as it pulled away.

Returning to Quedlinburg—with its UNESCO-designated cultural world heritage site comprising the collegiate church, castle, and Old Town—we climbed the stairs to our fourth-floor room in a manor house turned hotel and hit a wall of heat halfway up. Inside our room, once servants’ quarters, I threw open windows, turned floor fans on full blast, and hoped the room would

ine witches about. Goethe wrote of the Brocken in *Faust*, “Now to the Brocken, the witches ride.” And Hexennacht, or Witches’ Night, April 30th, is a festival based on folklore that witches partied at the Brocken, celebrating the arrival of springtime.

But there were no witches this day, only hungry visitors making a beeline to the cafeteria. There, we grabbed a plastic tray and decided to split a currywurst, a pork sausage with a side of curry-seasoned ketchup.

Ava carried the goods to a table and asked, “What do they call this decorating style?”

Stark. Cement-block walls. Dingy

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Pictured left to right: Carlo Mercaldo, Linda McKenzie, Ron Mercaldo, Dan Shelton, Marco Mercaldo

GREAT ESCAPE continued



A Harzer Schmalspurbahnen 1950s-era steam train stands at the Brocken station.

cool off while we headed into town.

Narrow cobbled streets led us to the market square, past the stone Rathaus, or town hall, and past the Romanesque-style St. Benedict Church. It was Wednesday, and the choir was practicing. Their voices echoed within the canyon formed by the walls of 500-year-old half-timbered row houses.

Café tables spilled over onto the plaza, and the restaurants were packed, although the hour was well past our American dinnertime. We found an open table under a linden tree, whose

star-shaped yellow flowers littered the starched white tablecloth and scented the air with their honey-like fragrance. Waiting for our grilled salmon and schnitzel, I admired the homes: windows trimmed with lace curtains and flower boxes overflowing with Valentine-red geraniums.

"I know what you're thinking," Ava said between sips of rhubarb soda, "but the old-fashioned Euro-look won't work with our Southwestern decorating scheme."

Pondering how to bring Quedlinburg's quaintness home, I sipped wine made from locally grown Silvaner grapes as temperatures settled into a comfortable zone.

It was cooler in the morning as we headed to Thale, another charming village, in our rented MINI Cooper. We parked adjacent to the Bode River and soon found a sign—a witch on a broomstick—marking the Harzer Hexenstieg. The trail followed the narrow river, and for the first kilometer we walked along

a one-lane road to a small guesthouse tucked among stately trees, with a courtyard overlooking the water. Past the hotel, the trail narrowed and turned rocky. We switchbacked up the ravine to a ledge and hiked within a gorge above the rapids and pools of the swift-moving Bode. A canopy of lush maples and oaks shaded us, and yellow-blossomed jewelweed speckled the path.

Three hours later we arrived in Treseburg, a riverside village, where we stopped and lunched on pan-seared Bode River trout. As in Quedlinburg, the half-timbered homes boasted abundant geraniums, and teacups lined some of the windowsills. An old hiking boot filled with succulents adorned a porch. This idea I could take home. Sharing a massive chocolate ice-cream sundae, I inhaled the honey-scented linden blooms and hoped the coolness would last into tomorrow.

DL

Lisa K. Harris is a local freelance writer. Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.

THIS SPACE AVAILABLE continued

smug expression on her face.

I discovered yet another must-have gadget while visiting our daughter in California, where we stayed at a Holiday Inn Express. The breakfast bar had one of those waffle makers into which you pour batter, flip it once, and in 2 minutes you have a sumptuous golden-brown waffle. After three days of flipping waffles each morning, I was an expert.

Soon after our return home we were the proud parents of a slightly used single-flip waffle maker (just like the one at the motel). I cleared away space on the

kitchen counter and set it up, stirred up a batch of waffle batter, and put it in the fridge. The next morning we had delicious waffles in minutes. By day 5, plain waffles were boring, so we topped them with chocolate chips, bananas, maple syrup, and whipped cream. By the end of two weeks we were trashing the kitchen each morning to make a breakfast that probably clocked in at around 1,000 calories per plate. Boy, I really miss that waffle maker.

With Father's Day right around the corner, it's time for all wives and children to fondly remember their devoted

husbands and supportive fathers who work tirelessly to provide a safe and secure home that could easily be filled with time- and labor-saving devices. These devices might be the perfect way to say thank you for all the hard work they do. What better way to say thank you on the occasion than with a combination minidonut maker, cake baker, and milkshake blender for only \$39.99, plus shipping and handling.

DL

David Kleinman is a local freelance writer. Comments for publication should be addressed to letters@desertleaf.com.

CICADAS ARISE AND SING continued

to see how they're doing. Just imagine life without the periodical cicada. ... It would be kind of a bummer."

Indeed, our 17th wedding anniversary might have passed without special recognition were it not for these noisy bugs—a point of reference that Kritsky mentioned when I first emailed him 18 years ago, when I was worried a June

outdoor wedding in Cincinnati would have loud and unwanted guests of the insect variety.

In 1987 the last cicada was heard on June 30, he told me in 2003. "Yours is not the only wedding/reunion that I have had a 'cicada' hand in planning," he wrote in his email. "Nobody ever thinks of the 17th anniversary as anything special, and

a cicada wedding will make that anniversary very special indeed. But then I have a strange liking for these insects."

My fiancé and I decided to marry in the heat and humidity of July. It rained, but there were no cicadas.

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