

Germany's Romantic Road to Rothenburg



Germany - Images by Lee Foster

by Lee Foster

Germany's Romantic Road between Augsburg and Wurzburg, including the preserved medieval town of Rothenburg, has an aura of antiquity that delights travelers. The town of Augsburg was founded along this Roman road, called the Via Claudia, more than 2000 years ago.

The evidence of history, both Roman and medieval German, is one of the main pleasures of travel here. The region is in southern Germany, northwest of Munich. Consider a trip that starts in Augsburg and ends in Wurzburg, putting most of your

time into the small towns in between, especially Rothenburg, but with stops in Nordlingen and Dinkelsbuhl. For a central location and some days of rest in the region, you could choose Rothenburg.

The Romantic Road

The phrase “Romantic Road” is a German creation, originally formulated in the 1950s by the tourism director of Augsburg. To the Germans, Romantic Road means a serene historic road far from the strife of modern life. The Romantic Road is meant to be gentle and restful, allowing you to commune with the rustic countryside and immerse yourself in historic art and architecture.

Since the Roman era this road has been a major and prosperous trade route. In medieval times these towns accumulated substantial wealth as trading and fair centers. The Fuggers of Augsburg were the financiers of empires, especially the Hapsburgs. The bleakest period in the region was the 30 Years War (1618-1648), when the German population dropped from 18 million to 6 million and many towns were devastated by chaotic waves of armies marching back and forth.

In Augsburg, the Three Moors (Drei Mohren) hotel is a suitable central downtown location. Nearby, at the Welser Kuche, you can partake of a medieval banquet that is an evening’s entertainment in itself. While in Augsburg, be sure to see two famous paintings. In the St. Anne’s Church you’ll find Lucius Cranach the Elders’ “Martin Luther.” In 1518, a year after posting his theses, Martin Luther was summoned to Augsburg by the authorities to consider his ideas. In the City Fine Arts Museum you’ll see Albrecht Durer’s “Portrait of Jakob Fugger the Rich,” an incisive portrait. In the 15th century this Fugger was reputed to be the richest man in Europe. The Fuggers established a social welfare housing complex in Augsburg, called the Fuggerei, that still flourishes today and is a major tourism stop. Apartments there rent for \$1 per year, if you qualify as a low income person, but with the added stipulation that you pray for the souls of the Fuggers.

Roman Augsburg

Even in Roman times Augsburg was highly thought of among the three first Roman towns, Augsburg, Trier, and Cologne. Tacitus wrote that Augsburg was “the most outstanding colony in the province of Rhaetia.” At the center of Augsburg lies a square with a statue of Augustus.

The crowning restoration in Augsburg to celebrate the 2000th anniversary was the rebuilt City Hall, first constructed by Elias Holl in 1615, but badly damaged in World War II bombings. In its day the huge room was an architectural masterpiece, partly because it spanned at dizzying height such a large area without any support beams. The detail wood, painting, and gold leaf work of the room is exquisite.

North to Nordlingen

The major pleasures of this region are the small towns, so leave Augsburg and head north to Nordlingen, which was also established in Roman times. The region around Nordlingen, the Ries basin, is unusual because a massive meteorite fell here some 15 million years ago, covering 300 square miles of the landscape. In 1970 American Apollo astronauts came here to do training exercises in remote moonscape locations. Most of the countryside is inviting, with some of the richest farmlands in Germany. Nordlingen is special because all of its town wall from the medieval period continues to exist. You can make an interesting walk around the city on the wall.

Within Nordlingen, climb the 30-meter church tower, a staircase of 365 steps, and view the countryside. On the climb up you see the 15th century cast bells. At the top you’ll meet the watchman. The watchman post has been manned continuously since the 14th century. From the top of the tower you get a sweeping view of the entire countryside, which has a saucer-shape appearance because of the meteor. You can see clearly the walls of the city. Looking south, you view the plain where the Catholics decisively defeated the Swede-Protestant forces in the climax battle of the 30 Years War. Looking down into the town, you’ll note the numerous squares. They are relics of the medieval period, when Nordlingen had one of the major annual trade fairs in Germany.

When you pause from travel for culinary pleasures in this region, try the white sausages (composed of veal, lemon, and parsley), pretzels (filled with cream cheese), and Franconian wine or local beer.

North from Nordlingen is Dinkelsbuhl, another picturesque town. A gabled wood-beam house from 1470 (now the Deutsches Haus, a recommended lodging) is the most interesting secular architectural legacy in the town. Near the house is St. George Church, a pure hall-type late Gothic structure from the 15th century. The church was built so swiftly, within only a 50-year period, that its architectural purity was assured. The fan vault ceiling is elegant in its simplicity.

Rothenburg: Gem of Germany

Unquestionably, the gem of the region is the small town called Rothenburg ob den Tauber. Rothenburg is the setting at which to spend the largest available block of time on your trip.

The main pleasure of Rothenburg is the town as a whole. The village is a 13th century walled town that never became wealthy enough, after the 16th century, to “improve” itself or to attract modern industry. It is preserved intact, therefore, rather than restored. No single structure in the town is of overwhelming importance, although the City Hall is impressive. Climb to the top of the City Hall tower for a view of the town. In Rothenburg, you must walk around, simply being there, perhaps including a walk along the fortifications, to get a feel for an earlier period. The history of the region gradually seeps into your being as you meditate over the old buildings.

Be sure to stop in at the St. Jacob’s church to see the superb woodcarving of Tilman Riemenschneider, titled Altar of the Holy Blood, from 1504. His work is free of ornamentation, concentrating solely on the face, body, and clothes of the character to convey emotion. This work is one of the celebrated examples of the woodcarver’s art. Throughout southern Germany, wood carving was, and is, a major art form.

At different times of the day, especially between 8-9 in the morning and toward sunset, the views of the red tile roofs of the town from various vantage points are

appealing. For one sunset, be sure to view the southern walled part of the town from the City Gardens. A walk along the outside of the walls near the tower at the end of Galgengasse street is recommended in the morning light. All modern alterations in the town must conform to strict codes. For example, guild signs of wrought iron, rather than neon lights, announce the shops.

Within Rothenburg there are modest inns, such as the Hotel Garni, or luxury accommodations, such as the Eisenhut (The Iron Hat), which also has one of the town's premier restaurants. Try their homemade pasta, fillet of beef in cream sauce, and hazelnut desserts.

One of the stories associated with Rothenburg suggests the caprice of the Thirty Year's War. When the imperial commander, Tilly, threatened to destroy the town, the mayor went out to him with a cup of the region's finest wine. Tilly appreciated the wine and said that he would spare the town if someone notable would drink a bumper, about a gallon, of that wine in one draught. Mayor Nusch performed this feat, Tilly spared the city, the mayor slept for three days, and each year the citizens gather at the town hall on the second Sunday of September, all in fancy dress, to recall this dramatic quaffing of wine.

Wurzburg's Residence

North from Rothenburg lies Wurzburg, a city with many attractions. Make your main stop the Residence of the Prince-Bishop of Wurzburg. This sprawling structure, built 1650 to 1750, is sometimes called the palace of palaces, so superb is its rococo detail work. The guiding hand behind this work was one Balthazar Neumann. The grand staircase, imperial hall, and church all warrant close attention. Fresco paintings of the four continents, the vaulted self-supporting ceilings, and the trompe l'oeil stucco work are noteworthy. Mozart concerts play here in summer.

After a look around Wurzburg, pause for a glass of Franconian wine at one of the city's many noted wine taverns. Wurzburg citizens pass their time in these establishments, sipping wines from the Sylvaner, Muller Thurgau, and Riesling grapes planted in the area. The grapes grow on a chalk soil here, rather than the slate soil of the Mosel and Rhine. Franconian wine is characteristically drier and the

Mosel-Rhine wines are sweeter. Franconian wine is sometimes sold in heart-shaped bottles (bocksbeutel).

One of the famous wine taverns is the Burgerspital, from 1319, which also has a fine restaurant. Adjacent to the wine tavern is the Burgerspital retirement home where the residents, for the past 600 years, have received a quarter liter of wine per day, except for Sunday, when the ration is a half liter.

Germany's Romantic Road, with primary emphasis on Rothenburg, is a classic travel destination at any time, preserving the enduring Roman and German heritage.

German's Romantic Road: If You Go

For more information contact the German National Tourist Board, www.germany.travel.