

HOME & AWAY

Martin Luther's Germany

A visit to key towns on the Protestant Reformation's 500th anniversary follows his footsteps.

By Richard Varr

His eyes glimmer in the spotlight, his shiny, sallow countenance creating an eerie specter. Below the wax face sit two casts of his hands placed at arms' length—all so lifelike it seems he's sitting across the room looking out from an enclosed glass case.

"You can imagine this is how he looked when he died at age 62," said tour guide Hans-Joachim Kres while describing the death mask of Martin Luther, the feisty German monk whose bold rebellion against the Roman Catholic Church launched the Protestant Reformation. "He drank a lot of wine and always had good food. You can see his double chin."

"Luther is watching us," Kres mused. "You can say this is a holy place of the Reformation."

The darkened yellow face mold cast just after Luther's death in 1546 is indeed one of the most sensational exhibits as Germany celebrates the Reformation's 500th anniversary in 2017. On display in the city of Halle's four-towered Market Church, it brings back a semblance of the man who

dared to confront the Catholic Church's medieval practice of selling tickets for forgiveness of sins known as indulgences—something Luther opposed as simply the church's greed.

Luther not only sparked the Protestant movement, but his translating the Bible from Latin and Greek helped develop the modern German language. "It wasn't his intention to create a new religion," said Kres. "He wanted to change the Catholic Church, but the church couldn't be changed. And that's why he had to create a new religion."



The landmark Castle Church tower looms over the town of Wittenberg.

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This year, key German towns with significant Luther history, particularly in the states of Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt, are retracing his footsteps to meet the summer's expected tourist rush. Highlights include, for example, Luther singing in an Eisenach boys' choir and later entering an Erfurt monastery, where he preached his first sermon. Both his birth house and death house are attractions in Eisleben. Wartburg Castle, with its central tower offering panoramic views of hilly countryside, is where Luther holed up when the church declared him an outlaw.

Exhibits have been restored and expanded in many of the original homes, churches and castles where Luther lived and visited, all within less than a couple of hours drive from each other.

Birth of the Reformation

It's believed a few blows with a hammer started the Reformation in 1517 when Luther, as the story goes, nailed his 95 Theses protesting indulgences on the door of Wittenberg's landmark Castle Church. The actual door is long gone, replaced in recent years with a bronze door engraved with each thesis. One in particular sets the tone of how Luther believed money can't buy God's forgiveness. It reads: "They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory."

Recently refurbished for the anniversary, the church is the final resting place of Luther and the Reformation's other prominent figure, Philipp Melancthon, their tombs on opposite sides of the nave. A short walk from the church along a cobbled pedestrian street leads to Wittenberg's Market Square, centered by the whitewashed, 16th-century Town Hall with its late Gothic-style windows. In front stand larger-than-life statues of Luther and Melancthon attired in robes.

From the square, it's easy to spot the twin steeples of the Town Church of St. Mary, where Luther married runaway nun Katharina von Bora in 1525 and where he preached more than 2,000 times. The reformers are featured in the church's multipaneled altarpiece painting depicting the Lord's Supper, baptism and confession, created by the Cranach workshop—namely, Lucas Cranach the Elder and the Younger, the town's other favorite sons.

St. Mary's pulpit, from which Luther preached, is on display in the four-story Luther House, now the world's largest Reformation Museum. A life-size statue of Katharina flanks the museum's quiet courtyard, while Luther's desk, teaching robe and books are displayed inside. Luther lived in the building, a former Augustinian monastery, for 35 years. A block away is Melancthon's 16th-century home, with its stucco-like facade outside and half-timbered ceilings inside.

New this year for the anniversary is the fully rounded Asisi Panorama, emblazoned with a three- and four-story high cityscape painting of Luther's Wittenberg. In May, the town opens its Gates of Freedom project, including the rectangular-shaped Welcome Gate as a lookout tower, reminiscent of the Luther Bible. "People can exchange ideas about the Reformation—what it meant 500 years ago, what it means now and what will come of it

500 years from now,” said the project's marketing director, Cathrine Schweikardt.

Early Years and Spiritual Calling

At the foot of the Harz Mountains, the small countryside town of Eisleben is where Luther spent his first and final hours—the sites of his birth in 1483 and death in 1546 just a few blocks apart. Housed in a reconstruction of the original house where he was born, the Luther Birthplace Museum features exhibits of his early childhood and his father’s copper-mining businesses.

A short time after Luther’s birth, his family moved to nearby Mansfeld, where their original brick home still stands as a museum, one of its stone walls part of the original town wall. An exhibition hall displays artifacts—coins, colored window glass, hair needles and marbles, for example—offering a glimpse into the family’s life when Luther lived there from 1484 to 1497. They were discovered during from a recent archaeological excavation on the property. The only existing full-length painting of Luther is in St. George’s Church, just up the road.



Luther’s 95 Theses are etched on Castle Church’s bronze door, which replaced the original door upon which Luther supposedly nailed the theses.

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As a young man, Luther came to the riverside town of Erfurt as a law student but left as a monk, changing his mind after fearing for his life. Trapped and terrified in nearby fields during a raging thunderstorm, he vowed to dedicate his life to the church if he survived. He did and soon entered Erfurt’s Augustinian Monastery. A granite pillar, the Luther Stone, just outside of town marks the spot of his epiphany.

Now a Protestant conference center, the former monastery has a small museum with a library, artifacts and original prayer cells. The stone altar where Luther preached his first sermon sits within the spacious nave of St. Augustine Church, with its stained-glass windows dating to the 14th century.

“He wanted to find God, but what he found in the monastery was a Bible that he read for the first time,” explained city guide Sabine Hahnel. “Reading the Old and New Testaments, he recognized very, very fast that there was a big gap between what the church taught at that time and what he read in the Bible. So we say the Reformation began here because he started thinking about

these questions.”

Today, the spires of Erfurt’s colossal side-by-side churches, St. Mary’s Cathedral and the Church of St. Severus, separated by a giant stairwell on central Domplatz—and landmarks Luther might recognize today—add to Erfurt’s medieval skyline. Dating to 1325, Erfurt’s most unique structure is the stone Merchants’ Bridge, the longest in Europe, lined with houses, storefront cafes and shops that remain in use.

The Rebellion Intensifies

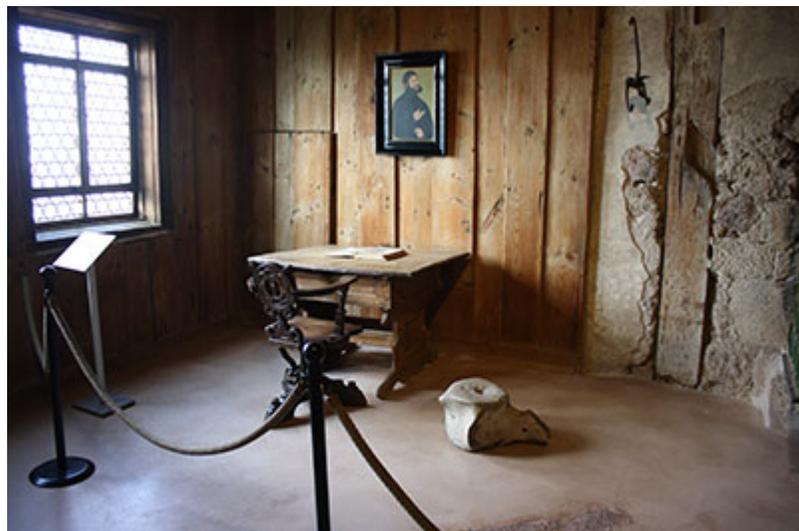
As his protests grew stronger, the Catholic Church declared Luther an outlaw. But Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony took sides with the reformer’s ideas. He sent masked men on horseback to kidnap Luther at night and bring him to safe refuge within Eisenach’s Wartburg Castle, a medieval hilltop fortress, its white stone walls topped with half-timbered dwellings.

Luther grew a beard and hid in the fortress for 10 months under the guise of Knight George. It’s what he did there in 10 or 11 weeks, however, that helped shape the Reformation—he stole away into a small wood-paneled room to translate the Bible’s New Testament into German. Maybe it was the isolation, but one legend has him throwing an inkwell at Satan, leaving dark splatters on the walls that, despite some insisting they can still be seen behind the stove, have long been removed—if they were ever there from such an incident in the first place.

Luther’s 1537 visit to Schmalkalden at the foot of the Thuringian Forest was another milestone for his cause. He addressed the most important meeting of the Schmalkaldic League, composed of Protestant princes and delegates from free Lutheran cities, which endorsed and defended Luther’s newly founded religion.

He preached in the Gothic-style church and was known to say, “Get up smartly, open your mouth and shut up

soon” to long-winded clergymen. “Luther preached in the church only twice because he was ill with kidney stones and bladder problems,” noted tour guide Bertl Werner. “And it was cold visiting in February.” He slept at the now-restored Luther House in second-floor rooms, holding sermons there when he was too sick to leave.



The Luther Room at Wartburg Castle is where the theologian translated the New Testament into German.

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Schmalkalden's half-timbered architecture and cobbled courtyards create an ideal scene for a picture postcard. Climbing 158 steps up the narrow stairwell of St. George's Town Church tower leads to expansive views of the central square and rows of homes with their red-tile roofs and facades crisscrossed with wooden beams.

Final Days

Although gravely ill, Luther traveled in brazenly cold temperatures during the 1546 winter to spend the last three weeks of his life in his hometown. He preached in Eisenach's St. Andrew's Church from the original pulpit, which remains today. "Luther held sermons on this pulpit two days before his death," explained tour guide Klaus Musielak. "But he was so weak that he had to finish early. People had to help him down and bring him into the house where he later died."

Today, the Death House Museum flanks Eisleben's central square—again a reconstruction and hardly a block away from where the original house was torn down 50 years after his death. Inside, his original pall, although dramatically faded, drapes over a makeshift coffin. Paintings depict his final moments on his deathbed, alongside exhibits explaining his heart disease and kidney stone ailments.

His body was returned to Wittenberg, after a stop at Halle's Market Church, where today his wax death mask offers a lifelike glimpse into the past. Accounts of making the mask differ as to whether it was lifted directly from his face in Halle, as it remains at the church today, or cast from a plaster mask made on his deathbed in Eisleben. In any case, the mask was eventually altered over the years, with glass eyeballs added.

Market Church's library, the Marienbibliothek, is one Germany's oldest and holds one of the most extensive church library collections. Included is a 1534 first edition of Luther's translated Bible. "Luther used a common German language, and because of that, we can say that he invented the modern German language because of his translation of the Bible," explained Kres.

Luther's handwriting is on yet another Bible, which he gave to a noble family as a gift. There's also a shoe presumed to belong to Philipp Melancthon and a mention of the 1685 baptism of one of the city's favorite sons, composer Georg Frideric Handel, written in a church log. The baptismal font used for that occasion sits within the Market Church's nave. The composer was born in the residence that now houses the Handel Museum.

The Bach/Luther Legacy

Luther's legacy in Leipzig can be seen today in the Museum of City History's exhibit featuring Luther's portrait, some of his writings, one of his goblets and Katharina's wedding ring. In 1539, Luther introduced the Reformation here by preaching at St. Thomas church to a packed congregation—so crowded that some parishioners had to listen from outside through cracked windows.

"The people wanted to hear him; they wanted to see him," said Leipzig city tour guide

Franziska Mauersberger. “In front of the facade, they placed painting ladders to stand there to look inside. People were leaning against the windows, and there must have been windows that broke.”

St. Thomas was also where Johann Sebastian Bach served as music director for 27 years. Luther’s teachings strongly influenced Bach when composing choral music, including such renowned works as *St. Matthew Passion*, *Mass in B minor* and *Cantata No. 80*, to name a few.

Luther and Bach also had a connection in Eisenach, Bach’s hometown. Luther lived there as a youth from 1498 to 1501, boarding with a town councilman’s family in their half-timbered home, now the Luther House Museum. The nearby renovated Bach House, with exhibits of the composer’s life and musical performances, was the first Bach Museum, thought to be on the actual site of the house where he was born in 1685.

Although living two centuries apart, they both attended the same school, were both choir members, and Bach was baptized where Luther preached, at St. George’s Church in the town’s central square. “Luther learned to love music here,” pointed out Eisenach tour guide Cornelia Hartleb. “Luther was the initiator of Lutheran church music. Bach realized the ideas of Luther for his own music.”

“Without Luther,” she concluded, “we wouldn’t have the music of Bach.”

Planning Your Trip

For more information, go to visit-luther.com and germany.travel. Contact your AAA Travel agent or visit AAA.com/travel for vacation-planning assistance.

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