



Carol Kubicki finds an unusual route...

...through the heart of
Germany



Walking in the heartland of Germany



After a couple of weeks of adventure in Hungary and the Slovak and Czech Republics, I was in search of roads without potholes, campsite showers with doors, road signs I could understand, and a route that took the two of us and our blue bus across Germany in the general direction of Zeebrugge, avoiding the often congested German autobahns.

Gazing at the map, I discovered that we could take an almost straight line from our current position in the Czech Republic to Bitburg, where we could pick up the usually quiet E42 towards Liege and Zeebrugge. We are generally not straight-down-the-middle travellers but this 400-mile route would give us a continuous path of exploration; Saxony and Thuringia are two German regions we had not visited before and we could enjoy some walking and cycling en route, taking a straight and narrow path between the crowded autobahns of Frankfurt and Cologne.

Our first stop was a site near Geyer, south of Chemnitz and overlooking a reservoir; an ACSI low season discount and walking to the Greifensteine tempted us in. If walking and cycling are holiday priorities for you, then it is difficult to beat Germany. At this campsite €3 (£2.55) bought a 1:25000 map centred on Geyer, which showed an overabundance of marked routes and made planning a day out easy.

To orientate ourselves and stretch our legs, we cycled into Geyer; while only 1.5 miles from the site, this does involve cycling uphill past the swimming baths and then very steeply downhill through pretty lanes into Geyer; a lovely small town with, as I came to find, the ubiquitous cobbled streets, so picturesque but so uncomfortable for cyclists.

There are a number of crags in Germany with the name Greifensteine; stein means rock and greifen means to grab or grip and Greifensteine are usually rocks you can climb. This Greifensteine is a short forest walk uphill from the campsite and is a collection of rocky outcrops, surrounded by places to eat and drink, a few small shops selling locally made wooden Christmas decorations and an open-air stage. Surrounded by trees, the only way to get a view is to pay €1 (85p) and climb the steps up one of the rocky outcrops; we decided to save our money.

The footpaths are well marked and colour-coded, so route finding



The town hall and market square with colourful flower stalls and cobbles in Weimar



The Ilm Park in Weimar

is easy and you can make your own route to suit your ability. We continued on the 'green-line' path across meadows and skirted the woodland to Thum, a neat village that provided a bench by a stream for a picnic lunch, with excellent bread bought fresh in the campsite bakery that morning. We followed a track across the fields to the edges of Auerbach and through sun-dappled woodland back to the campsite. Near the youth hostel we passed the Autokino, or drive-in movie theatre; open from March to November, you can watch films on a 7m x 17m screen from the comfort of your vehicle, with sound through your stereo. I thought a campervan would have to be on the back row, so as not to spoil the view for everyone else!

Continuing as the crow flies, our next port of call was Jena in Thuringia; a bustling university city on the River Saale. It seems that every river in Germany has an adjacent cycle route and as Jena is on the River Saale we were confident we would find some cycling opportunities. In the early evening we joined the local cyclists and cycled the short distance into town to enjoy a beer in an attractive square. Jena has an industrial history and is where Carl Zeiss opened his optics workshop in 1846 and the Zeiss Planetarium in 1926; the town still produces the high quality lenses.

When we were there, Germany was still drying out after the storms in May and the site at Jena had been flooded; two weeks later a few pitches were still too damp to use and the WiFi remained kaput. The owner of the first-rate campsite spoke excellent English and helped us plan our day's cycling. He recommended avoiding the river Saale route, as this was still muddy and suggested the east-west route to either Weimar or Eisenberg. Weimar was 15 miles one-way, an achievable distance, with the option of a return by train. From the city centre, the route to Weimar is uphill at a manageable gradient, shaded by trees and on a cycle path next to the busy main road; not a pastoral setting and so we were astonished to see four men and two dogs, stopping the traffic and crossing with a small flock of sheep, which they took into the woodland alongside us.

The Gasthof Karl August is a handy refreshment stop near the site of the Prussian-Napoleonic battle of Jena in 1806; here the cycle route



Cycling through meadows to Weimar

turns off the main road and follows tracks through an idyll of meadows and family vegetable gardens and up to the attractive village of Großschwabhausen. Just past the pond, where we sat and watched house martins swooping and catching flies, there is a spot for contemplation; a plaque memorialises the 13,000 prisoners who died on the 'Death March' from Buchenwald in April 1945, when 28,500 prisoners were evacuated from the concentration camp, days before the Allied forces arrived.

The route follows cycle lanes and country roads to Lehnstedt, whose church had unusual opposing covered steps above the door and then on to Mellingen, where we rested by the river, watching a

Dipper bobbing from rock to rock. Good tarmac paths provided enjoyable cycling through a nature reserve, passing the bee museum to arrive in Weimar through the landscaped Ilm Park; a lovely mixture of meadows, formal gardens and residences.

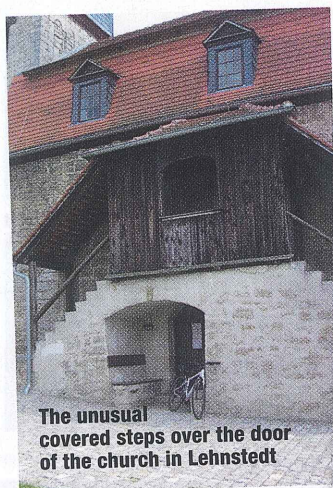
Weimar is the Stratford-upon-Avon of Germany with knobs on, having so many cultural connections for the Germans and considered the heart of Germany. Weimar's former residents are a who's who of German culture and includes the poet Goethe, whose garden house is a very popular attraction in the Ilm Park, Johann Sebastian Bach, Franz Liszt, Martin Luther, Friedrich Nietzsche, Richard Wagner, Rudolf Steiner and many others. Following World War I, the Weimar Republic emerged after a national assembly convened in the town and wrote a

new German constitution. History is around every picturesque corner and it is no surprise it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site; for all this it is a compact town that is easy to get around.

Despite being immersed in so much culture, after cycling 15 miles we can be forgiven for having a quick look at the City Palace and the Herder Church and bouncing over the pervasive cobbles to a café where we could admire the splendid town hall and the flower market while enjoying refreshing ice creams. Revived, we explored more corners of Weimar, only really touching the surface and opted to cycle back to the campsite – confident that we would return to Weimar one day.

Travelling 150 miles as the crow flies and crossing the former East/West German border into the Hesse region we reached Marburg, north of Frankfurt. The campsite at Jena is a tough act to follow and Camping Lahnaue would never match up, being next to a dual carriageway. However, it is a convenient walking distance from the medieval centre and a green space by the river Lahn, with the swimming pool and sports complex next door.

Our wedding anniversary was enough of an excuse to treat ourselves to a meal out so we spruced up and strolled fifteen minutes along the river to the town. Medieval Marburg is the town's gem and you need to gain height to reach the attractive cobbled (of course!) streets; if you don't want to walk there are



The unusual covered steps over the door of the church in Lehnstedt





Pretty timber-framed houses in Roth near Marburg

free lifts. The brown and white wooden framed buildings of the medieval town transported me back to childhood favourites such as *Hansel and Gretel* and *Rapunzel* and it was no surprise to find a plaque on the building the Grimm brothers lived in as students. Marburg was a hospital site during the Second World War and escaped bombing, leaving the medieval town undamaged. We enjoyed Italian food in the romantic setting of the Wettergasse and toasted 29 years of camping bliss (mostly!)

The next day we followed the River Lahn cycle route, which starts in Marburg and follows the river for 155 miles to the Rhine. A leaflet provided details of circular routes from Marburg and a 13-mile route was chosen which followed the river on cycle paths through fields; very pleasant and carefree cycling. From our Marburg base, the route also followed the Planet Route, built by the University, with models of all the planets in our solar system, placed along the path. Both the size of the model planets and the distance between them is to the scale one-to-one-billion, meaning that in just one metre you could travel the equivalent of one million kilometres in the solar system; I felt I was rocketing along, passing firstly Pluto and after some distance Neptune, then Uranus. Once at Mars, the models of Earth, Venus and Mercury zoomed by. The path finishes with the sun; the large yellow scale model gives you a good sense of its enormity in comparison to our small planet.

The cycle routes are well signed with distances given. A commonly seen sign on country lanes in Germany is a white rectangle with a drawing of a bicycle (sometimes with a moped) and the words 'Frei' underneath; this confuses many English cyclists and does not mean, as you might think, that the route is bicycle-free, it means it is free for bicycles to use.

We cycled through Argenstein and Roth and took photographs of pretty timber-framed houses, some painted in bright colours but most in the traditional brown and white. In Roth the tiny church is crowded in among the houses and there is a former synagogue. Here, our path left the river and turned right towards Niederwalgern where the route back to Marburg is less idyllic, being mostly by the main road; anyone who enjoys peaceful cycling might want to return the way they had come, as it was lovely enough to cycle twice.

Our date with a ferry was looming, so we moved the blue bus another 150 miles to the hillside village of Kyllburg, near Bitburg, with an agreeable stop at the remarkable Maria Laach Abbey and Laachsee, west of Koblenz, where the monks have developed a flourishing tourist honeypot with a shop selling their produce, a garden centre, various eating options and in the midst of it all the imposing abbey, entered through the cloisters with a incongruous lion fountain in the centre.

Kyllburg saw the end of our wonderful straight(ish) line across four German regions and we reluctantly headed for Zeebrugge. ■

Where to stay

Recommended campsites in the area

▲ Campingpark Greifensteine

Thumer Straße 65, 09468 Geyer
Tel: 0049-3734-61303 Web: www.greifenbachstauweiher.de Open: All year
Charges (2014): Motorhome + 2 adults with hook-up €18 (£15.25)

▲ Camping Lahnaue

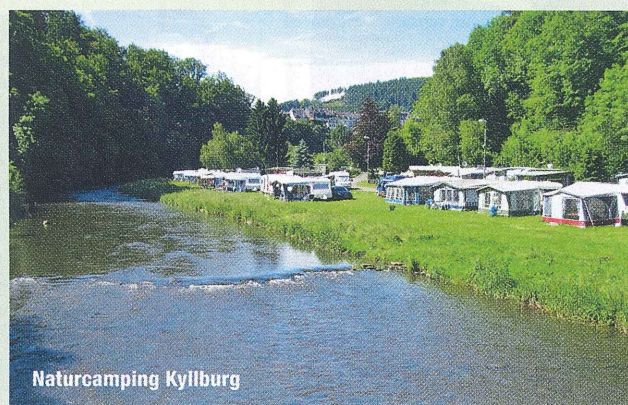
Trojedam 47, 35037 Marburg
Tel: 0049-6421-21131 Web: www.lahnaue.de Open: All year (winter stellplatz)
Charges (2014): Motorhome + 2 adults with hook-up €18 (£15.25);
stellplatz winter €12 (£10.15)

▲ Campingplatz Jena

Am Erlkönig 3 07749 Jena
Tel: 0049-3641-666688 Web: www.jenacamping.de Open: All year
Charges (2014): Motorhome + 2 adults with hook-up €10 (£8.50)

▲ Naturcamping Kyllburg

Karl-Kaufmann-Weg 5 D-54655 Kyllburg
Tel: 0049-6563-8133 Web: www.campingkyllburg.de Open: All year
Charges (2013): Motorhome + 2 adults €6.50 (£5.50). Electric hook-up charged at €0.55 (45p) per kW



Naturcamping Kyllburg



Subscribe to MMM for great savings on ferry crossings