

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/travel/touring-nuremberg-germany-a-city-devoted-to-its-past/2013/12/05/55cb5c90-45a9-11e3-b6f8-3782ff6cb769\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/travel/touring-nuremberg-germany-a-city-devoted-to-its-past/2013/12/05/55cb5c90-45a9-11e3-b6f8-3782ff6cb769_story.html)

# Touring Nuremberg, Germany, a city devoted to its past

Published in The Washington Post, Travel Section, on Dec. 6, 2013



[View Photo Gallery](#) — [Touring the markets and architecture of Nuremberg: The southern Germany city is famous for its holiday markets, and its devotion to history.](#)

**By Will Hawkes**

I am, my map tells me, standing on the meat bridge. It's not nearly as exciting an experience as that name suggests. Actually, the gently arched late-Renaissance Fleischbrücke — one of many bridges that cross the Pegnitz River in Nuremberg — is made of stone, not flesh; its name derives from the meat market that once stood nearby.

My disappointment subsiding, I stroll toward the nearby Hauptmarkt, the city's main square. It's here that the Christmas Market — probably Germany's most famous holiday market, with roots stretching back to the 16th century — is held. This year's Christkindlesmarkt (the event is traditionally opened by a young woman dressed as the Christkind, the Christmas gift-bringer) opened on Nov. 29, filling this large cobblestone plaza with stalls selling traditional Franconian products: wooden Christmas decorations, gingerbread, mulled wine, bratwurst.



Gene Thorp/The Washington Post



But during my visit, the square is mostly empty, give or take a few fruit and vegetable vendors, so I continue walking up the hill toward the Imperial Castle, which has loomed over the city since the Middle Ages. Reminders of Nuremberg’s golden age in the 15th and 16th centuries, when it was one of Europe’s most important trading centers and the heart of the Holy Roman Empire, are everywhere.

I pass the medieval St. Sebaldus Church, one of the city’s most significant places of worship, and the Bratwursthäusle (a restaurant serving the local specialty, Nürnberger Rostbratwurst, in the time-honored fashion, cooked over a wood-fired grill) before I reach my destination: the Stadtmuseum Fembohaus, the city museum, which is housed in the only remaining large late-Renaissance merchant’s house.

I buy a ticket and take the elevator to the top floor. The door opens and there it is, right in front of me, the thing I’d come to see: a wooden model of the city’s medieval center, built in the 1930s by four master craftsmen, on a scale of 1:500. The attention to detail is astounding: The Church of St. Lorenz’s Gothic facade and flying buttresses, for example, have been recreated in painstaking fashion. It’s a remarkable piece of work.

You might also call it propaganda. One of the city's most significant prewar buildings is missing, despite being well-known enough to feature on Weimar-era postcards: Nuremberg's magnificent domed synagogue, inaugurated in 1874 and torn down in 1938 on the orders of local thug and Nazi kingpin Julius Streicher.

Much of the rest of Nuremberg followed soon after. The model was completed in 1939; six years later, on the night of Jan. 2, 1945, a huge chunk of Nuremberg's historic center was obliterated in an Allied air raid. The area around St. Sebaldus Church, one local tells me, came to be known as St. Sebaldus's Desert, such was the devastation.

### **Holding on to the past**

If you stroll around the city, you'll see that what could be repaired was repaired, but much of the medieval character that once defined Nuremberg is gone. Perhaps this is why Nuremberg seems so devoted to its past. You only have to look at the wide variety of museums (not only those devoted to the city, Nazism and arts and crafts, but also to hats, trams, pencils and wheat-beer glasses, and that's only touching the surface) to see that. And it's not just museums. It seems that Nuremberg lost so much so quickly that it refuses to let anything else go.

That hadn't been obvious on my first day in the city. After arriving at the airport and taking the fast modern subway to the central station (a bewildering, cramped mixture of fast-food outlets and huge news agents, which appear to be a German specialty), I walked the short distance to my minimalist hotel. So far, so modern Germany, I thought.

It took 10 minutes on the S-Bahn from Nuremberg's central station to the neighborhood of Dutzendteich in the south to bring me face to face with Nuremberg's darkest hour. I was on my way to the site of the former Nazi parade grounds, where Adolf Hitler spoke before huge, adoring crowds and where Leni Riefenstahl shot her infamous film, "Triumph of the Will," in 1934.

The day I visited, families were streaming off trains and trams toward an area slightly to the north of the parade grounds, where a fair was taking place. The shrill, tinny sound of automated music was just about audible, and over a large fence I spotted a Ferris wheel and other stomach-churning carnival rides.

As the crowd passed the Documentation Center Nazi Party Rally Grounds, I peeled off and followed a large group of German teenagers inside, glad to have the music out of earshot. Here, the Nazi period is recorded in forensic detail. Even those who believe that they've seen and heard it all about that dismal era will find something to surprise and shock them: footage of Nazi soldiers marching through the center of Nuremberg, perhaps, or a grotesque black marble representation of Hitler.

The exhibition is housed in the unfinished Congress Hall, which was designed to accommodate 50,000 people. At the end of the tour, I got a glimpse of the huge hall itself, in its much reduced, somewhat shabby state, open to the elements and with trees and shrubs springing up here and there. Part of the site is now used as a parking garage, an amusingly mundane purpose for such a grandiose structure.

A short walk away are the Rally Grounds themselves, whose future seems assured after the current Nuremberg mayor, Ulrich Maly, recently announced that 70 million euros, or about \$95 million, would be invested in renovating the complex and preserving it for future generations. It should be money well spent: There are few better ways to appreciate what happened in Germany during the 1930s than by taking in the full magnitude of this space. It's also a potent example of the city's desire to hold on to its past, the bad as well as the good.

### **Crafts and brats**

A rather Disneyfied version of the good part of Nuremberg's past can be found at the Handwerkerhof Nürnberg, the craftsman's courtyard on the south bank of the Pegnitz. Surrounded by city walls and overseen by the impressive circular stone tower, the courtyard is a year-round version of the Christmas Market; there are half-timbered workshops producing dolls, glass, Christmas trinkets and many other items.

There's also a baker producing Nuremberg's traditional [Lebkuchen](#), a spicy, moist gingerbread. But the food that most interests me (and the one that locals seem most attached to) is bratwurst. Walking into the courtyard, I'm met by a vision of perfect Bavarian kitsch — the steep-roofed Bratwurstglöcklein. The restaurant is significant because the original, prewar Bratwurstglöcklein, which stood propped up by the Chapel of St. Moritz, was the first of Nuremberg's famous Bratwurst-Küchen, the dining halls where sausages and gentle bonhomie are the order of the day.

As I enter the restaurant, there's a peal of laughter. To my left is a group of retirement-age men, joking and working their way through tin plates of bratwurst and bottles of wheat beer. I take a seat at the back. If this Bratwurstglöcklein is a bit of a cheat, the interior doesn't let on: The furniture is solid and comfortable, an open grill stands in full public view, and the dark wood walls are adorned with various locally significant items. The waitresses are even wearing dirndls, the traditional German folk dress.

My bratwursts — all 10 of them — come served on a bell-shaped tin plate, with sauerkraut on the side. The beer, a bready, somewhat spicy dark brew made by Tucher, the last big brewery in town, is decent but not great. (Nuremberg is fairly unique in the province of Franconia in that the beer just isn't that good.)

What's most interesting are the rituals that go with eating these small but delicious marjoram-flavored sausages. According to the Society for the Protection of Nuremberg Bratwurst, they must be between 7 and 9 centimeters ( $2\frac{3}{4}$  to  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches) in length and can weigh no more than 25 grams (about 0.9 ounces). Good luck, too, to anyone who tries to order anything other than 6, 8, 10 or 12.

Similar rules dictate what you can eat in the street. After lunch, I forgo any of the traditional arts and crafts and head for Karolinen Strasse, a shopping street perhaps five minutes' walk away. I'm expecting to find modern Germany here, and indeed there are plenty of shops selling athletic shoes and mobile phones, but there's also more bratwurst. About every 500 yards or so, it seems, there's a booth selling "Drei im Weckla": three Nuremberg bratwursts in a crusty white roll.

I sit and watch one of the stalls, named Morawski, as customer after customer approaches and orders. Some go for a spicy Thüringer Bratwurst, but the vast majority go off to window-shop clutching a Drei im Weckla. Clearly, bratwursts are a big deal in Nuremberg; the Fembohaus will host an exhibition all about them next year, to celebrate their 700th anniversary. They are, any Nuremberger worth his or her salt will tell you, Germany's original sausage, having been mentioned in a city ordinance of 1313.

### **Art and beauty**

It's apt, given all this history, that the largest museum of cultural history in the German-speaking world should be found in Nuremberg. The Germanisches National Museum is a marvel, containing everything from historical musical instruments to 16th-century weapons, from Bauhaus furniture to a 15th-century globe.

I'm most taken by the section dealing with German art and culture in the 20th century. The contrast between the progressive art that flourished during the ill-fated Weimar Republic, such as Hannah Höch's self-consciously modernist 1921 piece, "Man and Machine," and some of the stuff that was produced in the 1930s — a vanilla-bland depiction of Aryan youth at harvest time, another that shows scheming Jewish financiers tricking an old German couple — could not be greater.

Downstairs, meanwhile, I find it hard to miss a reminder of some more recent history: Raffael Rheinsberg's "Capital City," a collage of old street signs from East Berlin, collected as East Germany fell apart in 1989. It towers over the central atrium, a forceful reminder that for all Nuremberg's historical significance, the real action in Germany takes place elsewhere now.

I'm still pondering that thought as, on my way back to the hotel, I'm stopped by a young woman selling credit cards. After I establish that I'm neither German nor interested in a credit card, we talk briefly about the city. She's from another part of the country, but she enthuses about Nuremberg. "I think it's the most beautiful German city I've visited," she tells me, smiling. I don't disagree.

Despite the trauma of 1945, Nuremberg is beautiful — and likely to stay that way.

*Hawkes is a freelance writer based in London.*