



## **A River Beyond the Rhine**

**By JOHN DORNBERG;**

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WHEN you think of Germany's rivers, plenty come to mind: the Rhine, naturally, the Danube, the Moselle, the Elbe -- picturesque routes past castle ruins perched on craggy promontories, Gothic cathedrals, storybook half-timbered villages and dazzling Baroque palaces. But there is one less touristed river, within an hour's drive of Frankfurt, that may be even more idyllic than the rest. It is the Lahn, a scant 150 twisting miles from its source in the bucolic Rothaar Mountains of northern Hesse to where it joins the Rhine south of Koblenz. But those are magnificent miles through some of Germany's loveliest countryside.

The queen of cities on the Lahn is Marburg, just 58 miles north of Frankfurt-am-Main, a matchless jewel of Gothic and Renaissance architecture, situated on a steep hill overlooking the river, crowned by a perfectly preserved medieval castle, and site of a 467-year-old university. "It is not just a city but a medieval fairy tale," exclaimed Boris Pasternak, who studied at the university in 1912. "It is hard to imagine a place that looks as much like a painting as Marburg."

The university's roster of students and professors over the centuries includes some of the world's greatest figures of science and literature. Among them were six Nobel Prize laureates -- in addition to Pasternak, T. S. Eliot, Emil von Behring, Carl Braun, Otto Hahn and Albrecht Kossel -- as well as the 18th-century Russian scientist Mikhail Lomonosov, the 19th-century German chemist and physicist Robert Bunsen, the 20th-century Spanish writer and philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset and the Brothers Grimm, the collectors of German fairy tales and compilers of dictionaries.

Students and faculty members account for more than a quarter of Marburg's population of 75,000 and imbue the narrow cobblestone streets with a refreshingly vibrant atmosphere of round-the-clock life and intellectual ferment.

On balmy days you can hardly find an empty table at the dozens of sidewalk cafes, and at night the movable and very liquid feast heads inside to the scores of quaint pubs and taverns in the old quarter. It seems always to have been that way. Otto Hahn, who with Lise Meitner is credited with first splitting the uranium atom and discovering nuclear fission, recalled that he was frequently "swept from under the tables along with the empty beer mugs" during his first year or so at the university.

Marburg suffered almost no damage during World War II. Initial postwar

attempts at "urban renewal" were mercifully halted as early as 1971 when town planners banned the tearing down of centuries-old half-timbered houses in the center and, instead, subsidized modernizing their interiors while preserving their facades. The result is a unique ensemble of a town that looks almost the way it did hundreds of years ago.

To really see and experience this town, be prepared to walk. Most of the Oberstadt, the old upper city, is closed to automobile traffic. Where it isn't, the narrow streets climb, twist and curve perilously, and parking is virtually impossible. Moreover, given Marburg's hilly topography, be sure to come with stamina and sturdy legs. The altitude difference between the Lahn River embankment and the castle is 330 feet.

There is, however, one bus line that makes the rounds from the river to the market square, and on the street named Pilgrimstein, on the Lahn's right bank, there is an elevator that will whisk you to Reitgasse and Wettergasse, the main shopping streets of the Oberstadt.

The place to start a tour is at the bottom, at St. Elizabeth Church, the magnificent basilica built in the 13th century over the grave of St. Elizabeth, whose canonization established Marburg's fame and made the town, then only about 100 years old and a frontier outpost of the landgraves, or counts, of Thuringia, a center of pilgrimages from all over Europe.

Elizabeth, daughter of Hungary's King Andrew II, was married in 1221 at age 14 to Landgrave Ludwig IV of Thuringia, then 17 years old, with whom she lived in Wartburg Castle, above Eisenach. She bore Ludwig three children and devoted herself mainly to charity, in emulation of her idol and contemporary Francis of Assisi, though much to the consternation of her young husband and his relatives.

After Ludwig's death in 1227 Elizabeth was denied the regency of Thuringia by her in-laws. She and her children fled to Marburg on the Thuringian frontier. There she renounced all claims to power and inheritance, moved into a cottage near a recently founded refuge of the Knights Hospitalers, and spent the next three years nursing the sick, until she died at age 24 in 1231. She was canonized in 1235. The cornerstone for the church, over her grave, was laid that year.

The vast, cathedral-like structure, completed in less than 50 years (a rarity for the Middle Ages) and consecrated in 1283, helped put Marburg on the map. The church is Germany's oldest in pure Gothic style, a treasure trove of ecclesiastical art, and virtually unchanged in more than 700 years except for damage done by iconoclasts after the Reformation. It is open daily and admission to its three naves free. There is a nominal charge for the transept, choir and sacristy, where the greatest artworks are shown. A tour, using a leaflet available in English, may keep you busy for a couple of hours.

Among the highlights are stunning 13th-century stained glass windows with scenes from the lives of Elizabeth and Francis of Assisi, and her shrine, a masterpiece of 13th-century goldsmith work, in which Elizabeth's remains were kept until that iconoclasts' storming in 1539. Equally important are the finely carved canopy and base of her mausoleum; the remnants of a stone lattice-work rood screen; exquisitely sculptured tombs of the landgraves of Thuringia-Hesse, and Ernst Barlach's poignantly simple bronze crucifix on the high altar. The Expressionist sculptor and graphic artist, imprisoned

by the Nazis, completed it in 1931. Barlach's crucifix almost met the fate of 341 of his other works, which were confiscated, and for the most part destroyed, during the Third Reich campaign against "degenerate art."

Fortunately it was hidden by anti-Nazi clergymen in Marburg.

It is an irony of history that the church also houses the sarcophaguses of Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the World War I hero and Weimar Republic president who helped Adolf Hitler to power in 1933, and his wife. Their remains got there by a fluke.

Both were originally interred in East Prussia. In 1944 Wehrmacht troops, retreating from the advancing Soviet Army, took the remains first to Potsdam and from there, along with the coffins of the Prussian kings Frederick William I and his son Frederick the Great, to a salt mine in Thuringia. They were found there by American troops in April 1945 and removed to a collecting point for culturally important and politically sensitive objects in Marburg's castle. The American military government, eager to get rid of objects representing Prussian and German militarism, dumped the coffins and sarcophaguses in St. Elizabeth's Church in 1946. The coffins of Frederick the Great and his "Soldier King" father were spirited away by the Hohenzollern family to the ancestral castle in southern Germany in 1952, but the Hindenburgs, a continuing matter of controversy between conservative German nationalists and liberals, remain in St. Elizabeth's just left of the main entrance.

A walk from St. Elizabeth's up into the Oberstadt will take you to St. Mary's (Marienkirche) parish church above the market square. The 13th- to 14th-century Gothic structure contains some finely sculptured epitaphs and tombs of the Hessian landgraves, for whom it became the court church after the division of Thuringia and Hesse, an early 17th-century high altar carved out of a block of alabaster, and a beautiful Baroque organ with 3,500 pipes and 51 registers. Free organ recitals are given at 6:30 P.M. every Saturday from October through June.

The nearby Kugel -- or Dome -- church, named for the oddly shaped hoods worn by the friars who founded it in the 15th century, is notable for the elaborate net vaulting of its ceiling and for some exceptionally fine late Gothic polychrome altarpieces. In 1527, after the Reformation, it was secularized and became the lecture hall of the university's theology department. It was reconstructed for Marburg's large French Huguenot congregation in the 17th century and has been the city's principal Catholic church since 1823.

The Universitätskirche -- University Church -- adjacent to the main university building, is Marburg's most unusual ecclesiastical structure. It was started on a cliff overlooking the Lahn in the late 13th century as the abbey church of a Dominican monastery, but never completed because the monks ran out of money. This explains why the chancel is more than twice as high as its two naves. After the Protestant Reformation it was secularized and became the main granary of the landgraves. In the 17th century it became a church again for Protestant university students.

The original monastery buildings were replaced by the neo-Gothic central university complex, with its large library, in the 1870's. The church itself was completely redecorated in the 1920's for the university's 400th anniversary celebration. Wilhelm Lemke, an Expressionist sculptor, was

commissioned to do the huge rood screen, depicting scenes from the life of Jesus. The altar crucifix is a contemporary work by Franz Rickert, a Munich goldsmith.

Secular art abounds at the Museum of Visual Arts, a gallery building on Biegenstrasse, close to the river bank and near the public elevator that connects the upper and lower city. This collection, started in 1924, is small but has some gems of 18th-century painting, including Johann Tischbein's "Aeneas at Dido's Throne," 19th-century genre pictures, such as Carl Spitzweg's "The Postman in Rosenthal," and a fine selection of modern works by Klee, Kandinsky, Aleksei von Jawlensky, Ernst Wilhelm Nay and some of the German Expressionists.

Marburg's biggest and most interesting museum, covering everything from Celtic archeological finds to armor, tapestries, faiences, porcelain, furnishing, folk costumes and handicrafts from the 13th through 19th centuries, is in the castle, a stiff climb. The curving cobblestone streets leading up to it (there is also a road for cars) are lined by some of the town's oldest and most photo genic half-timbered houses.

Although the castle has origins going back earlier, it did not enter into written history until the early 12th century, when it became property of the Thuringian landgraves. Most of the buildings in the huge complex, from whose bastions and fortifications you have a grand view of the wooded hills of the Lahn valley, date from the 13th through 15th centuries. It was in the cavernous 110-by-47-foot Hall of the Princes, which dates from the 14th century and is nowadays used for concerts and repertory productions of Marburg's Municipal Theater, that Martin Luther and the Swiss church reformer Ulrich Zwingli met in 1529. Their talks and a debate there failed to bridge the doctrinal gap between them and led to fundamental divisions in Protestantism.

The University Museum itself is in the late Gothic 15th-century annex, called the Wilhelm Building. The collections cover practically anything one might want to know about the history, culture, art, crafts and life of northern Hesse and eastern Thuringia. Among the showpieces are intricately embossed gold coins taken from the burial mound of an eighth-century B.C. Celtic chieftain, beautifully carved and inlaid Renaissance furnishings, armor of Thuringian and Hessian landgraves, and a 15th-century tapestry, originally in St. Elizabeth's Church, depicting the story of the Prodigal Son, which is a bit like a medieval comic book. The only drawback is that identifications and explanations of exhibits are in German only.

A visitor to Marburg can enjoy the colorful open air markets on Wednesdays and Saturdays on the square in front of the city hall. It's also worth making the rounds of student hangouts. Favorite haunts are the Destille, an old schnapps distillery on Neustadt street;

Cavette, on Steinweg, a jazz cellar with live music nightly; the Gartenlaube, also on Steinweg and Hinkelstein, in a vaulted cellar on the Markt, the market square. When there's nothing else left to see, park yourself in a sidewalk cafe on the Markt, look up at the tower of the Rathaus, and watch and listen when its 470-year-old clock strikes the hour. The metal rooster atop the gable flaps its wings and crows; a trumpeter starts to blow, and the figure of death turns his hourglass.

A visitor's guide to Marburg Getting There

From Frankfurt by car take the A-5 autobahn north in the direction of

Giessen, at Reiskirchen go west on the A-480 to next exit, marked Giessen Nordkreuz, there follow signs to Marburg. The route continues on federal highway B-3 north along the Lahn. The distance from the center of Frankfurt is about 58 miles, driving time under normal traffic conditions about one hour. There are rail connections from Frankfurt in direction of Giessen and Kassel about every two hours. Getting Around

Walking is best, and practically the only way to get around in the Oberstadt, the old town. There is a parking garage on Pilgrimstein Street, with an elevator that goes up to the Oberstadt.

The main Tourist Office (Verkehrsamt) is at the Rudolfsplatz nearby the elevator to the old part of Marburg.

From May to October there are free guided walking tours of the old quarter, in German, starting at 3 P.M. every Saturday, with departure from the main portal of St. Elizabeth's Church, duration about two hours.

For English-language tours, costing \$34 to \$60, depending on length and places to be visited, contact the tourist office or the hotels.

#### Accommodations

Hotel Waldecker Hof, close to the railway station and some walking distance from the sights, 23 Bahnhofstrasse, D-35037 Marburg; (49) (6421) 60090, fax (49) (6421) 600959. Forty-five rooms, doubles \$110 to \$185. Prices include breakfast, taxes and service. [www.waldecker-hof-marburg.de](http://www.waldecker-hof-marburg.de)

#### Sightseeing

Elisabethkirche (St. Elizabeth's Church), open weekdays 9 A.M. to 6 P.M.

April to September, until 5 P.M. in October, from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M.

November to March, and Sundays starting at 11 A.M. Admission to the naves is free, to transept, ambulatory and sacristy \$1.33.

Universitätsmuseum für Bildende Kunst (Museum of Visual Arts), 11

Biegenstrasse, open daily except Monday 11 A.M. to 1 P.M. and 2 to 5 P.M.

Admission free.

Mineralogisches Museum (Mineralogical Museum), in the 16th-century bakehouse of the Order of Teutonic Knights, Firmaneiplatz, open Wednesday 10 A.M. to 1 P.M. and 3 to 6 P.M.; Thursday and Friday 10 A.M. to 3 P.M., Saturday and Sunday 11 A.M. to 3 P.M. Admission free.

Volkerkundliche Sammlung (Ethnological Collection), 10 Kugelgasse, open Monday to Thursday 10 A.M. to noon, Wednesday also 2 to 4 P.M. Admission free.

Ausstellungshaus Bruder Grimm Stube (Grimm Brothers Exhibition House), 23

Markt, rotating shows, open daily except Monday 11 A.M. to 1 P.M. and 3 to 6 P.M. Admission free.

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