

The Harz – Summer 2006

Originally, this was to be a trip with Karl, on the condition that he not smoke during the entire trip. Although he initially agreed, as the date approached, he decided he didn't want to stop smoking, even for a week. So, I am going alone.

I stay in a Hapimag apartment in Braunlage, in the middle of the Harz “mountains”. Braunlage is just on the western side of the old boundary between East and West Germany, although I hadn't looked that up before the trip. I have one share in Hapimag, which gives me one week's occupancy every two years, although I have to pay in addition a “use fee” to cover cleaning, parking garage, and local tourist taxes.

Saturday, 29 July. Since I couldn't get into the apartment before 4 pm, there was no need to leave early, it only being about a five hour drive. The weather forecast was that our long heat wave was about to end, and indeed, there were several short, but heavy, patches of rain during the trip, which did cool things off (a bit).

I drove the “Northern” route. I had checked a couple of the route planners on the web. The Michelin route went a bit south, through Duisburg, Dortmund, Kassel, Göttingen, while the ANWB (Dutch automobile club) gave pretty much that same route for the return trip, but advised a northern route to get there. It wasn't clear why, maybe something to do with road construction. Anyway, it provided a bit of variety. So, north to Appeldoorn, and then East past Deventer to Hannover and Braunschweig, then south. It was easy to tell when you entered Germany, despite the sameness of the expressway—suddenly there were windmills everywhere. The Germans clearly have larger subsidies and less administrative red tape than the Dutch. Apart from the rain, the drive was uneventful. Braunlage is a village mainly catering to tourists. In the winter there is skiing and in the summer hiking. It also seems to cater to the elderly with a spa and a nice park.

The Harz, besides being a vacation area, is famous for its witches. If you are lucky you might see one flying on her broomstick from the Brocken mountain to one of the other mountains. On the first night of May (Walpurgisnacht) witches gather from all around on the summit of Brocken to celebrate the Witches' Sabbath (described in Goethe's *Faust*). Consequently, stores sell lots of witch souvenirs, and witches make up the decor of many restaurants.

Unfortunately, the main street was all torn up—new sewers, I think, although it ended just before the Hapimag. At the edge of town was the usual cluster of grocery stores, just like over the border from Nijmegen in Kranenburg: Rewe, Penny Markt, and Aldi. So I could buy some things I had forgotten to bring with me.

I had reserved the apartment rather late, waiting as long as possible on Karl's decision. So the only 2-room apartment left was one equipped for wheelchair users. Consequently, the bathroom had all kinds of extra rails and hand-grips. But the parking place in the garage was the closest one to the elevator.

There was a microwave oven with a grill, toaster, coffee maker, hot water heater to make tea, refrigerator, dish washer. But the range was electric and the pans all much too big for one person. Despite that I cooked 4 of the 7 evenings, partially because of the lack of interesting looking restaurants in the town.

And despite the rain, it is still hot, which made eating on the balcony very pleasant.

Sunday, 30 July. Being Sunday, it seemed a good idea to visit a city, since there would be little traffic and no parking problems. So I retraced my route of the previous day toward Braunschweig as far as Wolfenbüttel, a pleasant small city with a nice Schloß, the second largest in Lower Saxony according to Michelin, which I did not bother to go into, the Herzog-August-Bibliothek, some churches, squares, and lots of nice half-timbered houses. I spent three hours or so wandering around town. It was very pleasant, but the heat wave is not over.

On the drive back to Braunlage, I had some extra time and so followed up on one of the informational signs along the expressway to visit the small town of Hornburg, which was supposed to have nice half-timbered houses. And it did—more than 300 according to the brochure available for the taking from a little box outside the Rathaus. The oldest, according to a plaque, was built in 1508 and was the only house to survive the town's fire in 1512.

Monday, 31 July. It seemed a bit cooler and did not look like rain. So I went for a hike to the town of Schierke, not far away, from which there are many paths. The main hiking goal is the top of the Brocken. I took a number of paths through the woods—ate some wild blueberries, as well as my sandwich—and ended up on the path toward the top. However, the last part was along an asphalt road, closed to non-official traffic, but crowded with lots of other hikers. I decided that I didn't really need that, and seeing a path back to town labeled with the interesting message that it was steep and difficult, but short, I took it. It was indeed steep, but not difficult, and tiring. The last part lead through a nice valley, the "Dal der Hexen" with a stream and nice trees.

Schierke seemed much less developed than Braunlage. It was also in the hills rather than a valley. There were a number of very large, old hotels. The age and style of the hotels made me think pre-war and East Germany, and checking an old map I find I was right.

It was still a bit early to call it a day. So I proceeded on to the town of Wernigerode. Although it was also in East Germany, that was less obvious. There is a nice Rathaus and some nice half-timbered houses.

Actually, I could have saved myself some driving and lots of walking by taking the train. There is a narrow-gauge railway with steam engines in the region. I could have taken it from Schierke to the top of Brocken as well as from Schierke to Wernigerode.

Tuesday, 1 August. I decided on a somewhat long drive, to Halle. There is a nice church on the Marktplatz, which was being reconstructed (the square, not the church). Unfortunately, I discovered when I got there that I had forgotten to take my camera with me. The Moritzburg National Gallery is housed in the Moritzburg, an old fortress (begun in 1484), and supposed to be the most significant art collection in Sachsen-Anhalt. Well, the fortress, first destroyed in the Thirty Years War, is being destroyed again. Or rather half of it has been and is being reconstructed. My impression is that that is the reason the museum seemed so small. Despite that there were some nice 19th and 20th century German paintings. I can't complain about the quality, but the quantity was less than expected. And I couldn't find the glassware and ceramics from the Middle Ages, which Michelin said were there.

After Halle, I headed for Naumburg, which has a nice cathedral, It is sort of a double church—an altar and choir at each end. Of the two, the western end is the

most interesting with its rood screen and statues of the cathedral's benefactors, all by the same "Master of Naumburg". It was worth the €4 admission (yes, you had to pay to sightsee in the church—there was a sign explaining why this unusual practice was necessary (for expenses and restoration)).

Wednesday, 2 August. The heat wave seems to be over, and it looks like there will be some heavy showers today, but probably of short duration. So, I pretend it will be nice and head for Goslar. I am getting adept at parking on the edge of town, where you don't have to pay. It is just as convenient—if I parked in the center of town, I would still walk to about where the car was parked anyway in order to see the towers remaining from the old fortifications. Goslar has a nice Marktplatz, Rathaus, and half-timbered houses. It is beginning to sound monotonous, but they are all different. There were also a couple of churches, convenient during rain showers. Unfortunately the Huldigungssaal of the Rathaus was closed for the day—something special going on. It is supposed to be very nice.

After Goslar, I wanted to see the Grauhofer Kirche a few kilometers outside of town. Without a detailed map it was a bit difficult to find, and having finally found it, it turned out to be closed.

So, I headed for Clausthal to try my luck with another church, one of the largest wooden churches in Europe. It too was closed, whether because it was being restored or because it was getting rather late was not clear. But I could at least admire its vastness from outside.

Thursday, 3 August. First stop today was Halberstadt, whose apartment buildings, parks, and general state of reconstruction clearly marked it as having been in East Germany. The center of Halberstadt was pretty much destroyed by bombs near the end of the war and is new, but a bit away from the center are lots of old half-timbered houses. However not many have been restored yet. The top of the hill near the center of town has two nice churches. The cathedral is Gothic, rather like Gothic cathedrals in France from the period, started in 1240 and completed around 1500. It took a few bombs—there were photos on display showing all the damage. More interesting to me was the older church, Liebfrauenkirche http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Liebfrauenkirche_Halberstadt.jpg, at the other end of the hill-top, a 12th century Romanesque basilica. I went first into a side chapel. I was almost immediately joined by a young man who was apparently the guardian. He started telling me about the chapel, which parts were the oldest and which were added later, all in German, of course, of which I understood most. Then he asked a question, and I had difficulty answering—half Dutch, half German. He was afraid I hadn't understood much, but I said I could understand it pretty well, since I spoke Dutch. Then he started asking about old churches in The Netherlands, most answers to which I did not know and had to use my American origins as excuse. His English was about on the level of my German, but it prompted him to go back to his desk and dig out a sheet explaining, in English, the church's history and most interesting features, which he let me use. Eventually I got to the choir, and most of the interesting features of the church were there, but it was roped off. As I was trying to see things from afar, he returned to tell me that to enter that part of the church you were expected to make a donation. I agreed, and he let me in. The nicest feature was the 12th century high relief statues of Mary, Jesus, and apostles on the choir screen

(the wall separating the choir from the ambulatory). On one side a young woman was at work restoring the statues—adding some paint, since they had lost much of their paint. When I was about ready to leave he came and said that he had to talk to the woman doing the restoring, but that I should put my contribution in the box at the door, which I did.

From Halberstadt I drove to Quedlinburg. Again, a nice old town with oodles of half-timbered houses. Although also in East Germany, the restoration here is much further along than in Halberstadt. In fact, it seemed essentially complete, except that on the edge of town there were still some houses being worked on. And there were a couple of offices I saw of firms that specialized in restoring half-timbered houses. So maybe there was another section of town I didn't see still waiting to be restored. On the hill (with the 'original' name of Schloßberg) there was an old castle and the Stiftskirche St. Servatius. Restoration there was still in progress. So part of it was closed, including the crypt (which Michelin rates ★★). This church too charged admission, which considering the closed crypt was rather steep. But the treasury contained some interesting pieces. Further, the only important parts of the Schloß, which is now a museum, namely the Abbess' reception room, the throne room, and the Princes' hall were closed because of some "colloquium", apparently for a group of senior citizens—I felt positively juvenile as they walked past, about half of them with some kind of walking support.

After Quedlinburg I went to nearby Gernrode, to see a church there, which turned out not to be so easy to find, and by the time I did find it, it was closed. This was reminiscent of the church outside of Goslar.

Nevertheless, Halberstadt and Quedlinburg (apart from the Schloßberg) had made it a nice day.

Friday, 4 August. My last day was again, primarily, a hiking day. The Bodetal has rather high cliffs on both sides. The famous point is the Roßtrappe high on one side where a horse carrying a princess escaping from some evil people, leaped the gorge with such force that he left a hoof mark in the rock. And there was an old man there in traditional peasant dress selling drawings of the princess and horse making the leap. Actually, you can drive up there and just walk for about 10 minutes from the parking lot, but it is more fun to walk up from Thale, the town below, which is what I did. Then I descended, by a different route and took a path along the river until I had had enough and turned around and followed the river back to Thale.

Saturday, 5 August. The drive home was uneventful. I made it in just about the 5 hours which the route planners said it would take.