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The Family Adventure Project's guide to

Castle Hostels of Germany

48 hours in Saxony's **Colditz** and **Leipzig**

Castle Hostels of Germany

How would you like to spend a night in a castle?

Or take a road trip combining castles, palaces and forts? There are more historic hilltop residences offering beds to travellers in Germany than you might imagine, thanks to the extensive network of **Jugendherberge** hostels. We had no idea when we set out on our road trip of German Castle Hostels how much choice we would have, how many faraway hills we would sleep on, and how magical the hostels would be – thanks in part to the number of Harry Potter conventions we ran into. Well, what better place than a castle?

For the last century the German Youth Hostel Association has been refurbishing former grand or royal buildings specifically for families and groups. We set out to explore five of them to produce this series of guides which we hope will help you to do the same. We chose a range of different locations with ideally no more than three hours drive between them. We stayed for 48 hours in each and explored as much of the area as we could. In the pages that follow we describe the unique character of the hostel, profile what there is to do and give you the low down on why we think each one is worth a visit.

From a peaceful weekend escape into a national park to an overnight in a notorious prison, this action packed road trip put us right at the heart of many local stories and histories. It also offered a great night's sleep and an action packed adventure for our family. Of course, we only sampled what's on offer and welcome your ideas and feedback. Share your thoughts on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram using the hashtag **#CastleHostels**.

Kirstie Pelling and Stuart Wickes, The Family Adventure Project



The Family Adventure Project *biography*

Kirstie Pelling and Stuart Wickes are co-founders of **The Family Adventure Project**, an award winning blog that's ten years into its mission to inspire others to get out, get active and adventure together. They work as a writer/journalist and photographer/videographer team to research and share ideas that encourage families to reap the benefits of doing something new and different together.

They have worked with dozens of leading travel brands all around the world. In 2016 the British Guild of Travel Writers recognised them as Travel Bloggers of the Year, commending their use of blogging, YouTube and social media as a "glorious celebration of adventurous life and the ups and downs of family travel."

You can follow their adventures on their blog at www.familyadventureproject.org or **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **Instagram** or **YouTube**.

Castle Hostels Road Trip



Thanks to **DJH**, **Leipzig Tourismus** and **DFDS Seaways** for support in the production of this ebook.

Welcome to Colditz

A great Saxony escape

“Welcome to Colditz.” This combination of words might once have terrified even the toughest of men. These days it’s a different story. The former military prison is now a youth hostel and museum, visited by people from all over the world, especially American and British tourists who were brought up watching the Colditz TV series and reading the escape stories. But these days the only escaping going on is to the surrounding countryside, or nearby German towns and cities.

Schloss Colditz is a beacon above the small town of Colditz in the region of Saxony in Eastern Germany. Part of the castle is now the **DJH Colditz Castle Hostel**. The pretty town is set in a river valley, surrounded by hills and farmland. The banks of Zwickauer Mulde river, a tributary of the river Elbe, offer lots of opportunities for walking and biking.

Colditz is only forty kilometres from Leipzig, home to some of the world’s greatest composers, and you can learn about them with an outdoor interactive music trail. Meanwhile the concert hall offers world class classical music, and there’s a thriving art and street art scene. The city also has a network of cycle paths and waterways; we did a three hour journey by canoe to the Cospudener See.

Schloss Colditz

The ultimate escape room

In the small town of Colditz, the early morning sunlight casts impressive golden shadows over a square filled with cheerful bars, bakery and restaurants. Above the town, the white and yellow Renaissance castle looks so peaceful and beautiful that it's hard to imagine the hardship endured within its locked gates when it was the military prison Oflag IVC.

The high security prison was just one chapter in the castle's thousand year history. In its time it has been a royal hunting lodge, a poorhouse and a psychiatric hospital. The hostel is in the administration wing of the former prison, with the small museum in the next courtyard, and tours taking place three times a day (offered in English French and German) around the interior and exterior of the building. The town itself provides a post-tour warm up and a place to think about everything you have seen.

Inside the Hostel



The Moat Bridge Gate to Colditz Castle. Cyclists welcome.

You won't want to escape

Although Schloss Colditz was built in 1578, it only became a **Jugendherberge Youth Hostel** in 2007. There's no grandeur about this castle; rooms are en-suite and simply furnished, and the dining room and the food are similarly basic. But individual features are impressive; we enjoyed the colourful flags in the corridors, the heavy gates gave us a shiver every time we passed through them and the courtyards are a delight to sit in and wander through.

We had fun in the games room with table tennis, and the terrace came into its own in the early evening as the sun went down. Later on, we bought cold drinks at reception and sat on sofas chatting with the friendly staff while playing board games. One evening, we set up our portable projector in our bedroom, played the 1955 film **'The Colditz Story'** (bought from the museum) and watched the locations we explored in the tour come to life on film.



Watch the video - click to play



Colditz town and castle



Rooms with views



Simple, modern facilities



The large hostel courtyard is great to play or relax

Schloss Colditz Tour

The escape academy

It came as a real surprise to us that most Germans have never heard of Colditz. For Brits of a certain age it was part of the fabric of childhood due to the wealth of books, TV programmes and movies about the daring escapes.

By the end of war in 1945 over 300 escape attempts were made by the Allied Prisoners of War from many nationalities. The **Schloss Colditz Castle Tour** of the former military prison is a guided walk of nooks and crannies that you'll be amazed a human can squeeze into or out of. You get a glimpse of dark tunnels lit by light bulbs. You see for yourself the steep drops. You are invited to imagine how you'd escape if you were locked up in the prison. "This was history's biggest game of cat and mouse. Officers had to earn their stay by escaping from other prisons so it was full of the most ingenious brains," our guide Steffi Schubert explained.

Her tour of the castle took over two hours but that was short compared to the full day tour. Steffi had a twinkle in her eye as she showed us from room to room and around the grounds of the building. "The prisoner went down the cliff. You may want to walk down the steps."



Meet the characters



See the tunnels



Could you escape?

TIP

If Steffi invites you to squeeze backwards through the potato ventilation shaft give it a go. The prisoners would have done this naked, fearing being caught at any time. It'll give you a feel for how difficult their escapes were.

Schloss Colditz Museum

The escape academy

In the small museum at the end of the tour you can see escape artefacts and uniforms produced by the Allied POWs imprisoned from 1940 to 1945. And there's a small shop where you can buy books and pamphlets that outline extraordinary stories.

Prisoners leap frogged over fences, they dug tunnels, they built a full size glider in the attic which you can see on the two hour tour. They hauled building materials up in the shaft of the clock tower. They dressed as officers, navigated dog kennels and hid down wells. They cut bars from windows and packed themselves into mattress consignments. They made pistols from papier-mache and smuggled a radio into the prison in 72 pieces.

The British were right in the thick of it, organising teams to assault the 'escape-proof building. "One quality that set the British apart was imagination," says Steffi as we climbed endless stairs to the loft area where they built a glider, using porridge to glue it together.

TIP

Look out for the old man in the house opposite the castle who waves to people on the tour every day. It's thought he was living there as a child when it was a prison. Another curiosity to look out for is the graffiti on the walls up to the former prison cells.



The original radio set



Hear the stories



See the glider in the attic

Cultural Leipzig

Art trails

The city of Leipzig is about 40km from Colditz. It has reinvented itself in recent years from an industrial city to a cultural hub of art and music. If you like street art you just have to step outside Leipzig central station for a quick fix of a mural depicting the days of the Berlin Wall. There's also a piece of the Berlin Wall lurking in a nearby car park. If you prefer more conventional settings, head over to over to the **Spinnerai Art Collective** and galleries to see a range of art and crafts. Or check out Leipzig's **Museum of Fine Arts MdbK**, which has one of the largest collections of art in Germany.



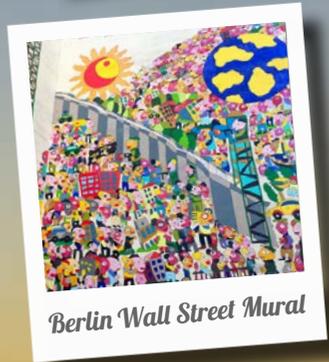
Berlin wall in Leipzig



Streets of Leipzig



Leipzig Music Trail



Berlin Wall Street Mural



Gewandhaus Hall



Mendeburgen fountain

Musical trails

Leipzig has a rich musical heritage; Wagner, Bach, Schumann and Mendelssohn all left their mark here and you can explore their stories and music on a 5km walk along the city's famous music trail, the **Leipziger Notenspur**. If you have kids, you'll find the **Little Leipzig Music Trail** designed to engage them. If you're feeling energetic, try renting bikes and follow the **Leipzig Notenrad**, a 40km musical bike route around the city. If you prefer to just listen, check out what's on at the **Gewandhaus Concert Hall** which has an internationally famous conductor, a varied classical music programme and great acoustics.

TIP If you go in the winter be sure to visit the famous Christmas Market which stretches throughout the city centre. It has a giant Christmas tree, a Ferris wheel and, **on our visit**, a singing Santa in a Finnish village.

From City to Country by Canoe

Paddling the waterways

It may sound strange to suggest taking to the water in a busy city in Eastern Germany, but locals and tourists regularly use the canals and rivers for exercise and entertainment. There's a network of waterways accessible from Leipzig city and on a canal spur at the **Stadthafen** you can book a boat trip or hire canoes, kayaks or stand up paddleboards.

You don't have to go far but if you have three or four hours to spare paddle out to the **Cospudener See**. It's a gentle and relaxing journey, with just a couple of locks to negotiate. You go under bridges and pass festivals and picnicking families, and then the banks close in and it's just you and the river and the bluest of dragonflies buzzing by.

As you leave the sheltered river and enter the open lake have your paddles ready, it can be windy!



From Stadthafen, Leipzig



Along rivers and through locks



To the Cospudener See



If you've time, arrange for a hire company to provide bikes at the other end and pedal back along the river into town.

Kingdom of Belantis

An adventure kingdom

Belantis Adventure Kingdom is an adventure themed amusement park in Zwenkau, 57km from Colditz and 18km from Leipzig. You can plunge, dive and soar your way around on coasters and water rides in Pharaoh's Valley, Land of the Counts and more. The main attraction is Huracan, one of the world's top ten steepest roller-coasters. This Euro-Fighter coaster falls at an angle of 97 degrees (yes, that's more than vertical) and has five inversions. You should also check out the water ride that pushes you out of a Pyramid.



Don't Miss The mini versions of all the big rides if you have young kids. I also liked the more traditional play spaces including trees, tipis, and bouncy castles.



More Things to Do



Morning coffee at the bakery on the square in Colditz town

Coffee in Colditz

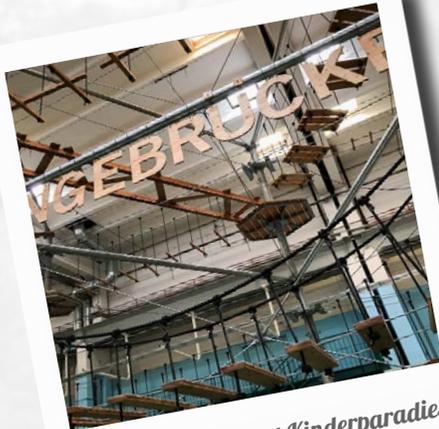
For morning coffee, take the steps down from Schloss Colditz into Colditz Town. You can wander streets studded with fine old buildings. The bakery on the square serves great coffee and you can sit and watch the town going about its business.

Strawberry pizza

The Schlosscafe **Eis Cafe Venezia** on the square does a mean strawberry pizza. Not your bread and cheese version but a sweet and sticky substitute. Along with some cheese toasties it does the job nicely for lunch.



Colditz Town is nice to wander



Indoor Climbing at Kinderparadies

Climbing the walls

Ever seen an indoor high ropes course? We hadn't, so we had to stop at **Kinderparadies** in Grimma, halfway between Colditz and Leipzig. This converted warehouse is an unusually active fun factory for kids with climbing, go karts and many other challenges. Just next door there's a beach volleyball court that had a championship event when we visited. Not far from Kinderparadies **Paintball Arena Leipzig** offers special paintball sessions for kids.



Ice cream sundae

Swim and spa

If you fancy a swim, try the **Waterpark Riff** in Bad Lausick, an aqua centre with indoor and outdoor pools and some fun slides for kids. There's a powerful crazy river and a rather more relaxing lazy river. For keen divers in the family there's also a large diving pool with 3m and 5m diving platforms for thrill seekers.



Beach volleyball at Kinderparadies

Our Awards

On our Castle Hostel tour we've been awarding shields for excellence. Here's how Colditz fared in the battle of the Castle Hostels. Shield scores out of 5.

Escape artist inspiration



Bringing history to life - informative castle tours



Friendly welcome from all staff



Accessibility, lift and on site parking



Our German Castle Hostel Guides

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Bilstein

Burg Bilstein - The Character Castle

Burg Bilstein is set on a hill above the town of Lennestadt. There are plenty of walks from the door or you can take off in many different directions enjoying what the region has to offer. Western Germany's Sauerland is liberally populated by hills, forests and valleys. Hikers and bikers alike come to enjoy the scenery. We loved messing about by the water at the Bigge dam and reservoir, where we hired a pedalo and played mini golf. We also enjoyed visiting the ski resort of Winterberg where there's tobogganing, barefoot walking and one of the best bike parks around. But the real fun began back at the imaginative youth hostel where you're as likely to bump into a knight as kiss a frog. Read more in our [Burg Bilstein blog post](#).



Blankenheim

Burg Blankenheim - An Old World Escape

Burg Blankenheim is located in Germany's Eifel, a national park in western Germany near the border with Belgium. Don't come looking for night life - you're more likely to find bird life, country life and a quiet life. The baroque castle was built as a display of wealth rather than a defence and is thought to date back as far as Roman times. There are five apartments for families in the bastionhaus and simple pleasures on the doorstep range from hiring a bike (or e-bike) and pedalling around the Eifel to eating After Eight ice cream in a family run gelato shop and then visiting Roman ruins. If it's all too slow you can head to the infamous Nürburgring for motor racing action. Read more in our [Burg Blankenheim blog post](#).



Stahleck

Burg Stahleck - The Fairytale on the River

Bacharach hostel, known as **Burg Stahleck**, is all about location, location, location. Set on a hill on a bend of the middle Rhine, the view is either sparkling in the sunlight or moody in the mist. There's nothing as pleasurable as enjoying board games and a drink on the terrace at sunset, especially if you are one of the lucky families to be returning to a castle themed bedroom. There are dozens of castles packed into a small section of river here including a floating one. Check it out on the way to the famous Lorelei rock with its summer toboggan run. Further afield, Koblenz provides a fortress tour, city attractions and opportunities for tea on the palace lawn. Read more in our [Burg Stahleck blog post](#).



Nuremberg

Nuremberg - A Modern City Break

The modern city hostel in **Nuremberg** is situated in the old stables of Imperial Castle of Nuremberg and one of the joys is being so close to the old town action. Any tour surely starts on the doorstep where you can view the gardens and palace, gaze down into the darkness of the well or climb the circular Sinwell tower and see for miles. But there's a lot to do in Nuremberg that doesn't involve royalty. Turn the bronze ring in the famous fountain, visit the delightful toy museum, sample the famous sausages and see how they make the gingerbread that goes down a storm at the Christmas markets. Read more in our [Nuremberg City Hostel blog post](#).



Colditz

Schloss Colditz - The Prison Hostel

People don't come to **Schloss Colditz** for the hospitality. They come for the escape stories, the museum and the TV and film nostalgia. But within the imposing looking gates, you will find a comfortable, simply furnished hostel. The real treat comes in the morning with a tour. There are different lengths of tour - long and even longer- but our guide kept the whole family captivated. After all that information about how to escape, you'll want to head off and enjoy the surrounding area. We had strawberry pizza in the Colditz village centre, visited an aquapark with crazy and lazy rivers and then took a canoeing day trip in nearby Leipzig. Read more in our [Schloss Colditz blog post](#).

