

# ALONG THE MÄRCHENSTRASSE:

## Germany's Fairy-Tale Road

by Lucy Gordan

To see the places that inspired the Grimm Brothers' Fairy Tales, travel the Deutsche Märchenstrasse from Hanau near Frankfurt north some 400 miles to Bremen.

Once upon a time, in thickly forested central Germany, there lived two

“...Driving is the best way to soak up the countryside's magical atmosphere...”

brothers by the family name of Grimm. The elder, Jacob Ludwig Carl, was always serious beyond his years; the younger, Wilhelm Carl, although sickly, was out-going. From early childhood they both loved tales of enchantment about generous kings and good-hearted queens, golden-haired princesses saved from disaster by stalwart princes on hoof-pounding steeds, turreted castles and cozy cottages, wicked witches and cruel stepmothers, all with a supporting cast of goblins, fairies, wizards, and dwarfs.

Jacob was born in 1785, a year before Wilhelm, in Hanau, now a traffic-congested suburb east of Frankfurt. Their birthplace was destroyed in World War II, but in Neustädter Marktplatz a larger-than-life-size bronze statue of the dour-faced workaholic brothers, appropriately pondering a large book, marks the beginning of the *Deutsche Märchenstrasse*, the German Fairy Tale Road. Long before the route was officially established in 1975, I had yearned to visit these Old World settings that had inspired Jacob and Wilhelm, the fathers of the fairy tale. Last May, at the height of the *weisse*

*spargel* or white asparagus season, my wish came true!

### Don't Expect Disney World

Along the misty banks of the Fulda and Weser Rivers, the *Deutsche Märchenstrasse* wends its way north from Hanau through dark, gnarled oak forests, softly rolling hills, and flat yellow rapeseed fields some 400 miles to

Bremen. Although it's possible to visit many of the Road's 64 destinations by train or guided bus tours, driving is the best way to soak up the countryside's magical atmosphere and penetrate the German psyche. Two caveats: Don't expect to enter a Disney World or a gigantic theme park. And don't let guidebooks convince you that these destinations have historical documentation. Except for the Baron von Münchhausen — and, perhaps the Pied Piper — these claims are as make-believe as the fairy tales themselves. Moreover, with the exception of Hameln and Bremen, these tales don't refer to a specific landscape, town, or monument. The vast majority are timeless, placeless and universal. But these circumstances didn't dampen my enthusiasm or seemingly that of the other one million visitors a year.

### Their Happy Childhood in Steinau

My next stop after Hanau, on the old trade route from Frankfurt to Leipzig, was Steinau, which Jacob and Wilhelm's younger brother and illus-





A view of Steinau an der Strasse showing St. Catherine's Church from the tower of the schloss. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan

trator, Ludwig Emil, described as “the fairy land of my childhood dreams.” Here their father Philipp served as a local magistrate and Jacob and Wilhelm spent the few happy years of their childhood with their four younger siblings.

In this romantic medieval hamlet with its half-timbered houses and cobblestone streets, I spent the first of my six nights in the footsteps of the Grimm Brothers at the **Weisses Ross**, a simple inn where the brothers overnighted almost 200 years ago. Since innkeeper Alfred Bender only serves breakfast, he recommended dining at bustling **Brathähnchen Farm**. It's such a challenge to find, deep in the forest a few kilometers outside town, that its website <http://www.brathaehnchenfarm.de/> includes a map and directions in English. Well-worth the hunt, the recipes of mother Dorothea Grimm and Dortchen Wild, Wilhelm's wife, are to-die-for, especially the veal shank roasted on a spit over the open fire, not to mention the home-



made soups! Accommodations including breakfast are also available at 63 euros for doubles and 39 for singles.

The next morning I met Burkhard Kling, former actor and Frankfurt Opera House “extra,” now the curator of the **Brüder Grimm Haus**, the only Grimm family home still in existence. “First published in 1812, *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (Children's and Household Tales) is a gathering of 210 fairy tales, animal fables, rustic farces, and religious allegories. “Mind you, although only about 40 are well-known, this is the most edited book in the history of the world — more than the Holy Bible,” boomed Kling in an intimidat-

ing, baritone voice. “Millions of copies have been published in over 160 languages and dialects, from Inupiat in the Arctic to Swahili in Africa. In the United States there are 120 editions of *Grimms' Fairy Tales* to choose from.”

Philipp Grimm died unexpectedly when Jacob was eleven and naturally his family had to move out of the official residence. This grand, turreted 16th-century *Amtshaus*, or courthouse, became a museum three years ago. Highlights of the exhibits here include early editions of their book, including the first with Emil's colored illustrations (1825, two years after Cruikshank's); sketches by Emil of his siblings, and his etchings of local people and of landscapes.

The *Schloss*, or impressive medieval castle nearby, also houses a Grimm Museum. It boasts the family's personal effects, including ancestral portraits, the family Bible, and an original copy of the Grimms' dictionary (the first in the German language). In the castle's former stables, for nearly 70 years now, the Magersuppe family's **Steinauer Marionettentheater** of over 200 Czech-made puppets performs the brothers' best-known tales at 3 p.m.



The Amsthaus in Steinau an der Strasse where the Grimm family lived from 1791-1796. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan



on summer Sunday afternoons.

After leaving Steinau the family fell on hard times, but a fairy godmother aunt sent Jacob and Wilhelm to school in Kassel and then on to the University of Marburg. Interested in medieval literature Jacob became a linguist, a philologist who formulated Grimm's Law, an explanation of how German, along with ancient Greek and Latin, evolved from an ancestral Indo-European language. Wilhelm became a literary scholar and critic.



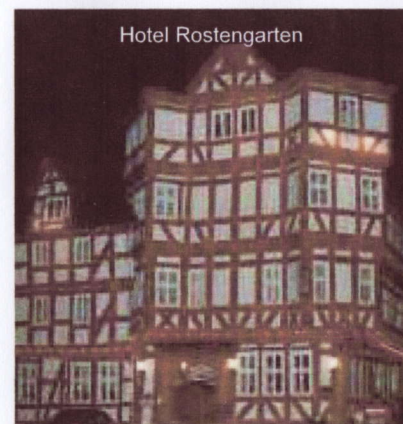
The Altes Rathaus (Old Town Hall), built in 1512, in Alsfield, notable for its medieval town center of beautifully-preserved half-timbered houses on narrow, winding cobbled streets. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan

### Their Gingerbread Towns

From Steinau the next major stop in the Grimms' biography should have been Kassel, but not being in a hurry I took a day to prowl around Lauterbach, Alsfield, and Schwalmstadt, a trio of small, charming medieval towns with half-timbered houses, castles, narrow lanes, and cobblestone squares. Lauterbach, a resort town with two castles **Riedesel** and **Eisenbach**, was the setting for "Little Scallywag," the well-known rhyme about the little boy who lost his sock. It's also the center of Germany's garden gnome production. The jewels of Alsfield are the sweets (*Alsfelder Pflastersteine* or praline "cobblestones" and *Alsfelder Küsschen* — chocolate kisses), sausages, and *Altes*

*Rathaus* (Old Town Hall). Its facade combines a ground floor of stone arcades and half-timbered upper reaches. Topped with a dizzyingly steep, heavy slate roof, with two pointed towers shaped like witches' hats, it would look right at home in Disney World.

After a short detour to the lively town of Marburg where the Grimms studied law and started their folklore research, I spent my second night at the



Hotel Rosengarten

atmospheric **Rosengarten Hotel**, in Schwalmstadt, the capital of "Little Red Riding Hood" territory, with its splendid museum of traditional and precious folk costumes. It's also the town where George III recruited his Hessian soldiers to fight in the American Revolution and where local girls still wear *betzeln* — a cap with a red topknot — on Sundays and holidays. Not surprisingly, the hotel had been built as the home for the garrison commander in 1620 and has been a hotel since 1876. [www.hotel-rosengarten.org/](http://www.hotel-rosengarten.org/)

### The Capital of the Märchenstrasse

In Kassel, the capital and half-way point of the *Märchenstrasse*, I felt like a hamster on a treadmill. Especially after a splendid meal (I recommend the North Hessian roast duck and the *hirsch* "Rapunzel" or wild deer) at the ratskeller, where two large rooms are dedicated to the Grimm brothers and others to cities Kassel's sister cities (Florence, Rovaniemi, Toulouse, Mulhouse, Västerås among others), one afternoon was definitely not enough time to visit the city's many cultural sights. For a few examples, surrounded by Europe's largest palace grounds, dramatically-landscaped with forests and fountains, the 18th-century grandiose **Schloss Wilhelmshöhe**, first home to Elector Wilhelm and later to Kaiser Wilhelm II, today houses an esteemed art collection which includes 11 Rembrandts and masterpieces by Rubens, Titian, Poussin, Hals, Van Dyck, Dürer, and Cranach. The **Deutsches Tapeten Museum** is the world's most comprehensive museum of wallpaper, and the unique **Death Museum** was designed to end the taboo of discussing death. I should have limited myself to "exclusively Grimm": the **Brüder Grimm Museum** and **Brauhaus Knallhütte**.

The **Brüder Grimm Museum** is appropriately housed in the Palais Bellevue where the brothers lived and worked from 1837-41. On display is a rich collection of hand-written notes regarding their research in all subjects,





Kassel's Palais Bellevue, where the brothers once lived and wrote and today is the Brüder Grimm Museum. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan

records of their strong political commitment, their passports, manuscripts of their publications, numerous German editions of the *Children's and Household Tales* and its translations as well as their furniture, glassware, porcelain, and silver. The museum's most valuable possession is a personal copy of the *Children's and Household Tales* with hand-written marginal notes by the brothers, an essential source for those

interested in the origins and development of the *Tales*, which they constantly reworked and revised (during their lifetime, the Grimms published seven editions of their collected stories, the last in 1847). Scholars are welcome to visit the Museum's library and archive located at the **Murhardsche Bibliothek**, Brüder Grimm-Platz 4A, 34117 Kassel, tel. 011-49-561-103235 or -787-4064; FAX 011-49-561-713299; e-mail: [grimm-museum@t-online.de](mailto:grimm-museum@t-online.de).

"Although it is not common knowledge, it must be well understood that the Grimms did not invent their tales," Kling had explained to me forthrightly in Steinau. "They were not writers of children's stories. These stories were in the public domain."

The brothers gathered their material from more than 50 contributors — mostly friends and neighbors. An important source was the innkeeper's daughter and tailor's wife, Dorothea Viehmann, who recounted *Aschenputtel* or *Cinderella* and 20 other tales she'd heard from traveling merchants and coachmen — guests at her father's inn.

Although Dorothea was no longer there to greet me at the **Brauhaus Knallhütte**, this brewery-cum-coaching-inn, where she was born in the village of Baunatal just outside Kassel, has once again become a beer-and-grill stop. Established three years before her birth in 1752, it reopened after extensive renovation on July 21, 2001. Beds have replaced straw for overnight guests, but nonetheless there are many reminders of the tavern's history, starting with

its name: the crack of the whip (*knall*) sounded the arrival of horse-drawn carriages struggling up the hill.

I spent the next night at Sababurg in the depths of the densely wooded **Reinhardswald**, still inhabited by deer and wild boar, in one of the towers of **Dornröschenschloss**, as Sleeping Beauty's Castle is called (*Dornröschen*, the German name of the fairy-tale princess, means "little, thorny rose"). This castle, built of grey sandstone in 1334, was to protect pilgrims traveling to the neighboring village



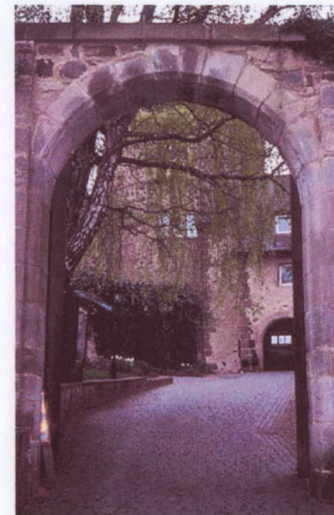
Dornröschenschloss

of Göttsbüren, where supposedly some remains of Jesus had been found. Over the centuries, the fortress had repeatedly suffered from war dam-

age and neglect until the Koseck family restored it during the 1960s, opening it as a very comfortable hotel with fine cuisine. The menu at the wood-paneled restaurant, with a sweeping view of the rolling countryside dotted with 800-year-old oaks, changes daily and according to season. Enjoy the haunch of venison in autumn and fresh trout in spring.

Today its historic rose garden attracts 45,000 visitors between Easter and October, and every year some 250 couples exchange vows in its 16th-century nuptial chamber. For an additional \$84, Sleeping Beauty and her prince will greet you and recite their fairy tale as well as a brief history of the castle in English.

At the foot of the castle grounds, the Koseck's guests can enjoy the **Tierpark Sababurg**, a 309-acre wildlife refuge, one of Europe's oldest, founded in 1571. Today roughly 450 animals of 80 species indigenous to the woods of middle Europe live here: red deer, reindeer, wild boar, mules, bison, lynx, and the Przewalski horse, a species that, without **Tierpark's** help, would have long since died out.



Dornröschenschloss Sababurg, the medieval fortress thought to have been the inspiration for the Grimm brothers' tale of The Sleeping Beauty. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan





A short distance from Dornröschenschloss Sababurg is another hilltop castle hotel, Trendelburg. According to legend, this tower is the one in which the wicked witch imprisoned Rapunzel. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan.

The next morning I visited another hilltop hotel in Trendelburg, where, according to legend, a wicked witch imprisoned Rapunzel in its tower. Next I stopped at Höxter, supposedly the setting of *Snow White* and *Hansel and Gretel*, and then Bodenwerder, before reaching Hameln for the night.

### Bodenwerder: The Lying Baron's Town

After *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Rapunzel*, and *Cinderella* at nearby Polle, it's time to give the men a word in edgewise.

Across the Weser from Höxter is the library of the Imperial Abbey of Corvey, founded by the Benedictines in 822 A.D. Here the Grimms gathered material for the story about the legendary

Lügenbaron (Lying Baron) von Münchhausen (1720-97). Famous for his outrageous exploits and tales, the Baron really did come from nearby

Founded in 822 A.D. by the Benedictines, the Reichsabtei Corvey or Imperial Abbey of Corvey, 2 miles east of Höxter, the town of Hansel and Gretel and Snow White. The 1,100-year history of the abbey is closely tied with the early development of the German nation. Optimistically described by some as the "Rome of the North", it hosted several sessions of the imperial council in the 12th century and provided lodging for several Holy Roman Emperors. In the 16th century the first six volumes of the Roman historian Tacitus's annals were discovered in its vast library. Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben (1798-1874), author of the poem "Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles" worked here as librarian in the 1820s. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan



Bodenwerder, another charming town with 114 half-timbered houses. The *Münchhausen-Erinnerungszimmer* (Münchhausen Memorial Room) in the imposing family home in which the Baron grew up (now the *Rathaus*) is crammed with mementos of his adventurous life including his cannonball.

### Stroll with the Pied Piper

Further north on the banks of the Weser, Hameln (or Hamelin in English) is the "home" to the Grimm story of the gaudily attired Pied Piper (*Der Rattenfänger*). According to legend, though there may be some historical content to it, he rid the town of rats by playing seductive melodies on his flute. The rodents supposedly followed him willingly, waltzing their way blindly into the Weser. However, when the town defaulted on its contract and refused to pay the piper, perhaps on June 26, 1284, he settled the score by playing his same merry tune to lead 130 of Hameln's children into the river.

I met the contemporary American-born piper in front of his home, the *Rattenfängerhaus* (Rat Catcher's House), Hameln's most famous and ornate Weser Renaissance building. Today it's an elegant restaurant with a generous selection of "rat" dishes on its menu; "rat-tail flambé" being the house specialty (see recipe). By the way, rat-shaped pastries (*Hameln Ratten Brot*), not all edible, are on sale in Hameln's many bakeries; some are coated with a special glaze for longevity as souvenirs. Another good gift is a small bottle of *Ratten Killer*, the local schnapps.

"The origin of my story is lost in the mists of time," the enthusiastic Pied Piper told me over a

*Rattenfänger Ice* at the Café Mosena, "but the best guess is that it is associated with the forced resettlement of young people to the sparsely populated eastern territories. Also, during the 13th century, an inordinate number of Hameln's young men were conscripted to fight in an unpopular war in Bohemia and Moravia."



The facade of the Rattenfängerhaus in Hameln. Photo credit: Courtesy of the Rattenfängerhaus.



On our walk around town, well-marked by bronze rats in the pavement, we also visited the **Leisthaus**, now a museum with exhibits about the town's history and, of course, about its most famous citizen. Every Sunday at noon, from mid-May to mid-September, the story of the Pied Piper is performed for free by local actors and children, on a nearby terrace. Its *Rattenfänger Glockenspiel* plays a "Pied Piper song" every day at 9:35 and 11:35 a.m.; and mechanical figures enact the story at 1:05, 3:35, and 5:35 p.m. daily.

### Last Stop Bremen

My last stop on the *Märchenstrasse* was Bremen, Germany's oldest and second-largest port after Hamburg and home to the first US consulate ever, established in 1798. A member of the Hanseatic League during the Middle Ages and a free city since 1646, Bremen is also central to "Bremen Town Musicians." According to the fable, a rooster, cat, dog, and donkey quartet came to Bremen to seek their fortune, but their music and singing was so bad that it caused a band of robbers to flee in terror, thus saving the town. Every Sunday from May to October, at noon and 1:30 p.m., the fable is performed for free in the **Marktplatz**, one of Europe's most impressive market squares.

Also here, by the northwest corner of the ancient *Rathaus*, is the famous bronze statue of the four Bremen Town Musicians, one atop the other in a sort of pyramid. In the *Rathaus's* basement is the *Ratskeller*, said to be Germany's oldest and most renown town-hall restaurant. Shortly after it opened in 1408, the city fathers decreed that only wine could be served here, and the ban on beer still exists. Not to worry because the wine list has 600 labels — all German — to choose from.

Another well-known statue on the square is that of Roland, who served his uncle Charlemagne as a knight. Three times larger than life (10 meters tall), the statue, erected in 1404, serves as Bremen's good-luck piece and symbol of freedom and independence since

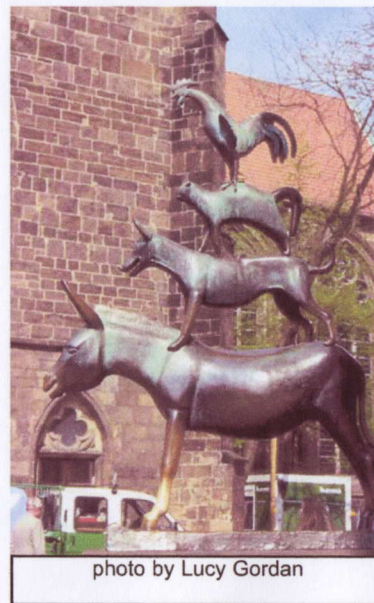
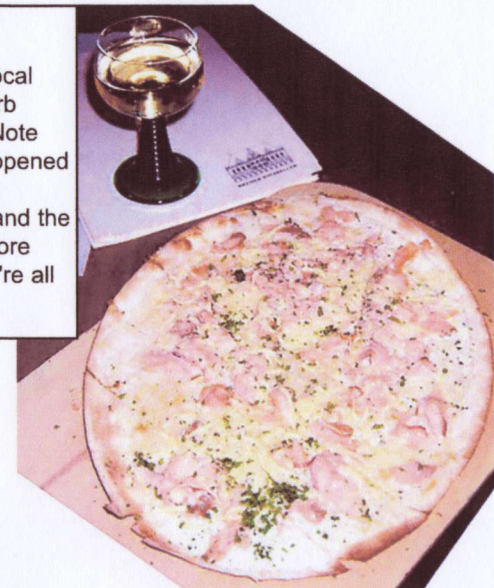


photo by Lucy Gordan

"Pfälzer Flammkuchen" mit Lachsstreifen, Kräuterschmand und geriebenem Käse, or a local pizza, cooked in a wood-oven with salmon, herb cream and cheese in the Bremer *Ratskeller*. Note the glass of wine. Shortly after this *ratskeller* opened between the *Rathaus* in 1408, the city fathers decreed that only wine could be served here, and the ban on beer still exists. Connoisseurs have more than 600 wine labels to choose from--and they're all German. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan.



the Middle Ages "Bremen's Statue of Liberty." Roland's stony stare is directed toward the cathedral, the residence of the bishop, who frequently sought to restrict the town's autonomy. It must not be forgotten that in 1837 the Grimm brothers were expelled from teaching at the University of Göttingen for standing up to the local elector in the name of academic freedom. You could say Roland's statue encompasses the Grimm brothers' ideals: the promotion of Germany's folk history and traditions as well as freedom of thought. Almost certainly this stone statue inspired Wilhelm Grimm's *Ruolandslied*.

For more information on the German Fairy-Tale Road, contact: *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutsche Märchenstrasse*, Königsplatz 53, D-34117, Kassel, tel. -49-561-70707; FAX -49-561-7077200; e-mail: [ksg@kassel.de](mailto:ksg@kassel.de), website: <http://www.germany-tourism.de/e/2954.html>



The Gothic Rathaus in Bremen, Germany's oldest and second-largest port, acquired its Weser Renaissance facade during the early 17th century. Photo credit: Lucy Gordan