



WANDERING EDUCATORS
A Global Community of Educators,
Sharing Travel Experiences



A Travel Library for People Curious About the World



You are here: [Home](#) [Best Of](#)

History Comes Alive in Frankfurt am Main

by Sandy Bornstein / May 14, 2019 /



We arrived in *Frankfurt* on a cold, rainy morning. Just a few hours before sunset the skies cleared as we walked to the [New Frankfurt Old Town](#). Listed as one of Frankfurt's top attractions, it is a perfect place to explore after a long overseas flight.



NEW FRANKFURT OLD TOWN

In the post-World War II era, the city's historic center had been the site of an unattractive administration building. Plans to destroy the building led to the development of a 7,000-square meter area adding new life to the **DomRomer Quarter**. This **revitalized city center, completed in 2017, offers a taste of old and new architecture for city residents and its guests and stands in sharp contrast to Frankfurt's downtown area with its modest skyline.**

Efforts were made to **reconstruct the structures destroyed during World War II by using original materials.** But many of the 35 buildings do not resemble the city's old town. Despite the lack of historical continuity, visitors sample parts of Frankfurt's history as they wander through the alleyways and courtyards that take them back in time. Strolling between the cathedral and the city hall, I imagined the coronation ceremonies for kings and emperors that followed the same route.

Visitors should keep in mind that on a Sunday most of the shops are closed, but many of the restaurants and cafes serve food and beverages. With a wide assortment of museums—history, religion, child-friendly, and art—it's easy to linger for hours. This area, along with the nearby sidewalks running adjacent to the Main River, offers plenty of photo opportunities.

During our walk, we discovered a museum showcasing archeological findings from earlier times. On subsequent days, we visited the Goethe House, the Museum Judengasse Frankfurt, and stopped for lunch one day to taste traditional foods at Dahim im Lorsbacher Thal.

KAISERPfalz Franconofurd and the Stadthaus

By happenstance, we stepped inside a facility where we examined **2,000 years of Frankfurt's history under one roof**. Remnants from excavations revealed different layers of the city's history, and signage in German and English explained the significance of each section of the site. Schematic drawings and images filled in some of the missing pieces to the story focusing on the Roman (72-260 C.E.), the Merovingian (500-750), the Carolingian (750-900), and the Late Middle Age (1200-1500) periods.

Frankfurt's cathedral hill was a flood-free elevation above the Main River offering strategic military and economic control over the region. In ancient times, the Romans understood the tactical importance of this higher ground position. Their army left behind bathhouses constructed around 75 C.E.

Using the existing ruins, an archaic heating system was reconstructed, revealing a Roman sauna. Hollow bricks diverted the smoky fumes from the chamber and also offered warmth. A small section of plaster illustrates how the room was painted.



Archeological Museum's partially reconstructed Roman Sauna

In another area, we viewed the remains of a Carolingian palace built in the 9th century. Using a century and a half of archeological research, the museum created a drawing depicting the details of the site—an administrative center of royal estates in the Lower Main surrounded by farms and manors.



Digital Reconstruction of Carolingian Pfalz Complex around 860 CE Based on 150 years of excavations

Frankfurt became the primary royal residence under the King of East Francia (843-876). The Pfalz on the "Ford of the Franks" eventually became Frankfurt am Main.

One section showcases the remains of a royal hall built in 822 by Emperor Louis the Pious. Even with clear diagrams and signage, visitors need to have a good imagination to see the relevance of the rubble and fragments displayed in this exhibit as well as in some of the others.

Vestiges of a stone vault cellar used during the Middle Ages were also on display. It is believed that the column and pillar were the supports used in a patrician's house.

This **free museum** is easy to navigate in less than an hour and offers a brief introduction to Frankfurt's early history.

THE GOETHE-HAUS (THE FRANKFURT-GOETHE MUSEUM)

Using the family's inventory ledgers, the **birthplace of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** (1749–1832) was rebuilt in

1951 to depict the family's lifestyle during Goethe's lifetime. Goethe grew up in this impressive home with his sister, Cornelia, and his parents, Catharina Elizabeth and the Imperial Councillor Johann Caspar Goethe.

Our guide, Wiebke Singer, mentioned that wallpaper scraps covering the family's books offered authentic samples to recreate the wall décor in the reconstructed home. A significant portion of the Goethe family's original furnishings, artwork, and books, which survived the war after being stored in other locations, are on display in this museum.

When considering the era in which this multi-story home was built, we immediately appreciated the family's immense wealth and social standing. Elegant finishes adorned the main floors where they entertained their guests.

As we climbed each flight of dramatic stairs, Singer pointed out noticeable changes in the staircase and the surrounding décor. The variations reflected a simpler lifestyle that was not available to guests' eyes when the family resided in the home. The public areas were more grandiose and ostentatious.

On the ground floor, I paused in the kitchen. Modern cooks will appreciate their own appliances when they gaze at the replica of a simple 18th-century kitchen. The original water pump is connected to a well in the cellar. This was a rare feature for this period, when nearby homes obtained their water from public wells. Food was cooked over embers on an open fire. At night, residents of Frankfurt would use lanterns like the one sitting atop the kitchen cupboard to find their way in the dark streets.



Goethe House Open fire oven



Goethe House Water Pump

Near the staircase on the second floor, a crowd gathered around an 18th-century astronomical clock designed by Court Councillor Wilhelm Friedrich Hüsgen. Dials above the clock's face show the date, the time, the phase of the moon, and the sun's position with the signs of the zodiac. Another remarkable feature is a dancing bear character who changes positions over time. By following the bear's movement, the family was aware of when it was time to rewind the manual clock.



Goethe House 18th century astronomical clock

Walking from room to room, I imagined Goethe's quality of life and realized how this affluent environment influenced his prolific writings. Oversized rooms with high-coffered ceilings could easily handle social gatherings of the elite members of Frankfurt's society. A simple room with a small writing desk was identified as the place where Goethe created his first literary works. A puppet theater showcased Goethe's introduction to drama. To this day, Goethe is considered the most remarkable German literary personality of the modern era.



Goethe House Dining Room

MUSEUM JUDENGASSE FRANKFURT

Records indicate that in the 12th century, a small number of Jews lived in the center of Frankfurt and freely intermingled with their non-Jewish neighbors, just steps away from the cathedral where kings and emperors frequented.

By the middle of the 15th century, the Jews were mandated to move to a designated street called the **Judengasse** (the Jewish Lane or Jewish Quarter), near the outer perimeter of the city. A wall with gates kept the Jews confined at night, on Sundays, and on Christian holidays. While many sources point to the 16th century Venice ghetto as the first ghetto in Europe, **this community predates Venice's Jewish quarter.**



Judengasse Museum main floor

Frankfurt's diverse community of Jews occupied these homes from generation to generation. They followed Jewish traditions and customs and simultaneously interacted with Christians living outside the ghetto wall. Their residences reveal the disparity between the wealthy and the less fortunate. The Judengasse was eventually destroyed between 1867 and 1882. After that, little remained of this once vibrant community. The emancipated Jews who remained in that area built the Bornplatz Synagogue as their house of worship.

In November 1938, the Bornplatz Synagogue was set on fire during the Night of the Broken Glass (Kristallnacht). I stopped to look at a plaque that reminds pedestrians of the synagogue. More than 1,400 synagogues were obliterated during the November 9-10, 1938 pogrom while neighbors stood passively and watched the structures burn.

During World War II, about two thirds of the gravestones at the adjacent cemetery, dating back to the Middle Ages, were smashed. A once vibrant Jewish community was encased in additional layers of debris during World War II bombings and lay dormant for decades.



Old Jewish Cemetery

In 1987, a portion of this Jewish settlement was unearthed while excavating for a government building. In the wake of the Holocaust, many opposing views were discussed regarding the future of this archeological site.

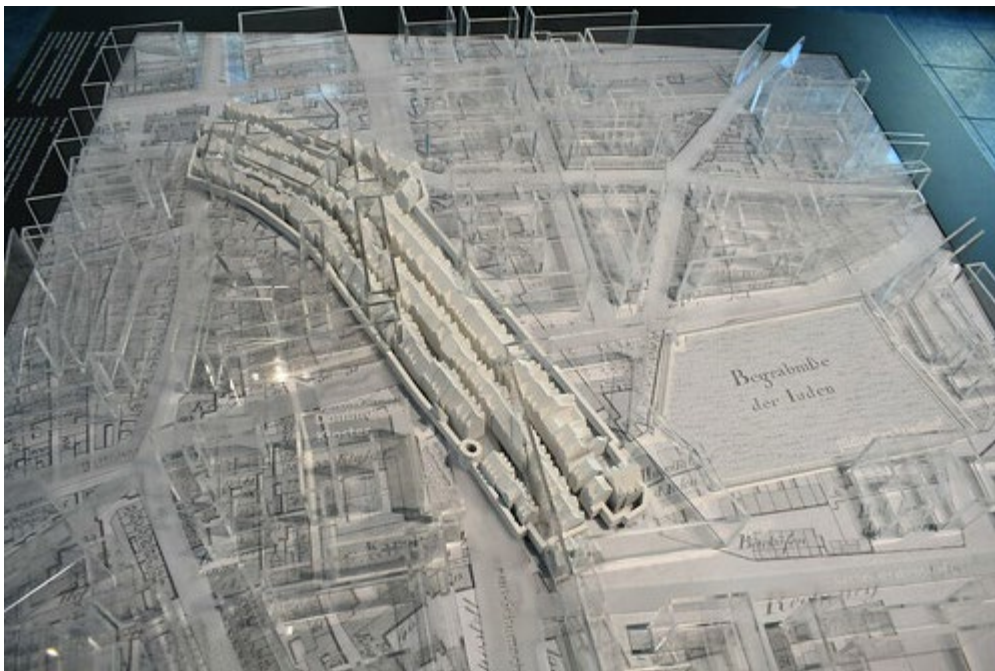
Today, [the museum built on this site](#) showcases a small portion of the foundations that were discovered, and modern display cases recall Frankfurt's Jewish traditions and history. This museum focuses on the early years of Jewish history.

Later this year or the beginning of next year, the renovated **Judisches Museum Frankfurt** will reopen along with a secondary building. The collections displayed in these buildings will focus on the post ghetto era and will include both permanent and temporary exhibits. One area will house the Frank Family Centre, a permanent exhibit chronicling the story of Anne Frank's family.



Inside the museum

Walking to the Museum Judengasse entrance our guide, Moritz Bauerfeind, pointed to a few names etched into the pavement to recall buildings that previously stood in the Jewish Quarter. This should not be confused with the controversial square, bronze-colored plaques called Stumbling Stones or Stolpersteine that are embedded in the sidewalks throughout Germany memorializing the victims of the Holocaust. Inside the museum, a model of the ghetto and the surrounding area offer a visual representation of a community that no longer exists.



Judengasse Museum's model of the ghetto inside the city

The main exhibit hall was divided into two upper rooms connected by a long bridge over a lower area that could be accessed by walking down a flight of stairs. At first glance, the lower level resembled a maze constructed out of stone.

After descending the staircase, it was evident that the rocks formed the foundations for a handful of large and small ghetto homes that previously nurtured life in the ghetto. Each of these homes once had entryways with names (animals, flowers, or objects) and, at a later date, symbols were added. Reddish colored mortar showed evidence of recent intervention.

Walking from room to room, I considered the limitations of pre-modern life and visualized the density of the Jewish ghetto. A sewage canal offered a stark reminder of the lack of sanitation. To reach a private mikvah (ritual bath), we climbed down very steep steps. This was considered a luxury since most Jews went to a public facility.



Judengasse Museum's sewage canal

Throughout the exhibit, bits and pieces of Jewish life were protected by glass cabinetry. Some were intact while others were small shards. Child-friendly, hands-on mini-exhibits offer age-appropriate activities for school-aged children. Even though the Jews lived separate from their Christian neighbors, numerous exhibits showed the positive interaction between the Jews and Christians.

After visiting the museum, I walked solemnly to the adjacent cemetery as I occasionally glanced at a select number of the 1,200 plaques attached in alphabetic order to the exterior wall of the cemetery. **Each represents a Frankfurt Jew who was a victim of the Holocaust.**

Inside the walls, I witnessed a graveyard that will forever bear the scars of World War II. Gravestones overflowing with Hebrew words and sentences and decorated with family symbols are left randomly with total disregard for their sanctity.

After paying our respects at this cemetery with gravestones dating to the late 13th century, we walked a short distance to the **Borneplatz Memorial Site**, where stones from the destroyed Jewish community remain the focal point. We silently recalled the unimaginable horrors.



Borneplatz Memorial Site

TRADITIONAL LUNCH AT DAHEIM IM LORSBACHER THAL

Traditional foods are intertwined with the history of a region. We were introduced to a sampling of Frankfurt's favorites at [Daheim im Lorsbacher Thal](#). This **apple wine tavern** has a history that goes back to the beginning of the 19th century. Apple wine has been poured from Bembels, a grey stoneware jar with a blue design, for more than two centuries in Old Sachsenhausen, an Apple Wine District, as well as in the rest of the city.



Inside Daheim im Lorsbacher Thal Bembels can be seen on the shelving

We were warmly welcomed into a dining room. We sat on benches covered with square seat pads next to wooden tables partially covered with red runners lying lengthwise across the top.

Singer suggested a local apple wine to try along with two regional dishes. My vegetarian choice was a traditional green sauce with hard-boiled eggs and boiled potatoes. Ira tasted a regional veal schnitzel prepared with homemade breadcrumbs and organic eggs with a side of green sauce and roasted potatoes. Both entrees were considerably larger than American portions.



Chicken schnitzel with green sauce at Daheim im Lorsbacher Thal

My understanding of German food was enhanced when our guide told us that seven specific herbs—borage, chervil, garden cress, parsley, salad burnet, sorrel, and chives—are combined to create a smooth sauce. While I was a bit skeptical at first, I'm glad that I tried this simple dish. The green sauce matched up perfectly with the potatoes and eggs. Ira also felt that the green sauce was a nice compliment to his veal schnitzel.



Eggs and potatoes (separate plate) with traditional green sauce at Daheim im Lorsbacher Thal

REFLECTION ON MY VISIT

A mixture of conflicting feelings overshadowed my first visit to Frankfurt. I took note of the abbreviated skyline gracing the financial hub. I strolled through the revitalized Old Town with its assortment of museums introducing visitors to German culture. Along the way, I passed a plethora of crowded restaurants, cafes, and bars serving traditional foods and beverages. **Each added another layer of historical significance.**

However, my husband and I only encountered a handful of other people inside the Museum Judengasse. We were the only people in the cemetery and at the memorial.

Perhaps the stigma of German Jewish history or lingering anti-Semitism dissuades people from exploring a troubling past. I must admit that what I experienced at some of Frankfurt's Jewish sites was unsettling. Even though I have studied Jewish history and the Holocaust in depth, **I walked away from these Jewish sites with more questions than answers.** Tears trickled down my cheek on more than one occasion.

If visitors to a destination choose not to engage with disturbing parts of history, they will be left with a superficial understanding of the world and join the alarming number of Americans, Canadians, and Europeans who are unable to respond correctly to basic questions asked in surveys about the Holocaust and history in general. By selecting a balanced itinerary with a cross section of attractions, I was able to gain a more complete picture of the city. As I explored the city, history came alive in Frankfurt am Main.



Frankfurt skyline

Sandy Bornstein, the *History Comes Alive Through Travel* Editor for Wandering Educators, has visited more than 40 countries and lived as an international teacher in Bangalore, India. Sandy's award-winning book, [May This Be the Best Year of Your Life](#), is a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. [Sandy](#) writes about Jewish culture and history, historical sites, family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences.

All photos courtesy and copyright Sandy Bornstein.

Disclosure: Sandy and Ira received a complimentary 3-night stay with breakfast at the 25Hours Hotel The Trip Hotel and a complimentary dinner at the Bar Shuka restaurant. The Frankfurt Tourismus + Congress GmbH arranged the daily tours and lunch meals.

 Share / Save

 ...

0 Comments

Sort by

Oldest

 Facebook Comments Plugin

Tags:

- travel
- history
- Germany
- Frankfurt
- holocaust
- international education

Popular Tags

#DetourNebraska

#InternAbroadBecause

#LoveFromTurkey

#NPS100

#OneOrlando

#orlandostrong #artmatters

#ownvoices

#studyabroadbecause

#TeachAbroadBecause

#VolunteerAbroadBecause

#weneeddiversebooks

#WidenYourWorld

#withMalala

1926

3D modeling

9/11

Aboriginal communities

Abroad Academy

academic

Acadian coast

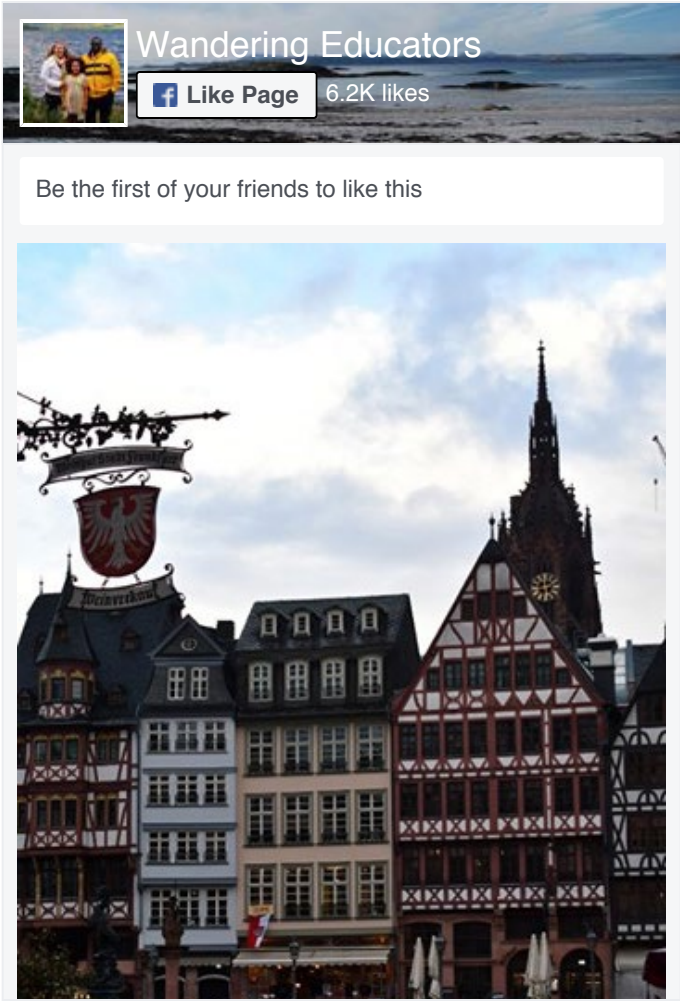
Acadian history

Acadians

acceptance

accessible travel

accommodation



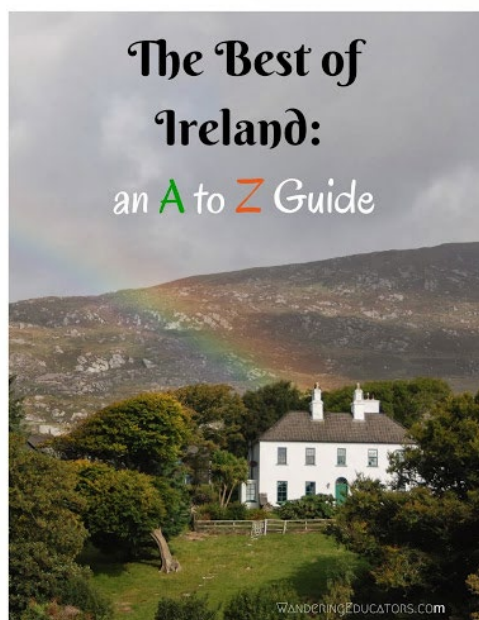
I'm a White House Travel Blogger



The Best of Turkey: An A-Z Guide



The Best of Ireland: An A-Z Guide

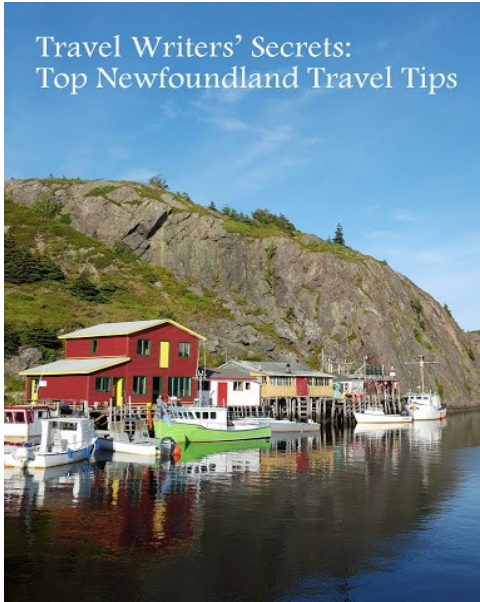


Generation Study Abroad Commitment Partner



Travel Writers' Secrets: Top Newfoundland Travel Tips

Travel Writers' Secrets: Top Newfoundland Travel Tips



The Complete Guide to Kalamazoo Coffee Shops



The Complete Guide
to Kalamazoo
Coffee Shops



Accommodations

Artisans

Best Of

Books & Film

Contests

Events

Food

Global Citizenship

Humor

Intercultural Education

Language

Marketplace

Opportunities

Outdoor Adventures

Performing Arts

Southeast Asia

Special Interest

Transportation

Travel Planning

Travel Tips

Recent posts

History Comes Alive in Frank...

Best Of Traveling

Mobile applications that can...

“Josh Recommends” for the We...

Through the Eyes of an Educa...

Best Of Stories

“Josh Recommends” for the We...



User login

Username *

Password *

[Request new password](#)

CAPTCHA

This question is for testing whether or not you are a human visitor and to prevent automated spam submissions.

Math question * $8 + 4 =$

Solve this simple math problem and enter the result. E.g. for $1+3$, enter 4.

[Community Guidelines](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Press Page](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [FTC](#)

[Disclaimer](#) |

Copyright 2007-2018 - Wandering Educators

