



24 Hours in Rothenburg ob der Tauber



How do you take in an historic and stunning destination in just 24 hours? With a helpful agenda that hit the heights, writer Sandy Bornstein and her husband, Ira, experienced as much as they could in Rothenburg ob der Tauber.



One of many arches and clocktowers.

Rothenburg ob der Tauber: A Medieval German Adventure

Just a couple of hours drive from both Munich and Frankfurt, Rothenburg ob der Tauber stands out as a prime example of a surviving medieval European town. The city, frequently referred to as the “Red Fort on the River Tauber,” is surrounded by stonewalls with 42 towers and a plethora of structures that date back to the Middle Ages.

When my husband Ira and I drove through the arched entryway, we immediately felt as if we were going back in time. The narrow cobblestone streets were lined with half-timbered houses covered with red-tiled roofs and with sturdier limestone buildings. Each tower we passed ignited our imaginations. We could easily have wandered for

hours simply enjoying our personal journey back to the Middle Ages. With a limit of 24-hours, we didn't have the luxury to be carefree.

Robert Nehr from the Rothenburg Tourismus Service had put together an itinerary capitalizing on Rothenburg ob der Tauber's history and culture. We were up for the challenge to experience as much as we could within our allotted time.

Tour of the Town

Nehr joined us in the lobby of the [BurgGartenpalais](#). From this centrally located hotel, we followed him to the 15th-century Castle Gate, which led into the place where many feel the Hohenstaufen Castle was destroyed by a 14th-century earthquake. On a pathway inside the Castle Garden, we stopped by the Blasius Chapel to look at a memorial recalling the memory of more than 400 Jews who were murdered in a vicious pogrom in 1298.



A Jewish memorial in the Palace Garden.

While the word pogrom was first used to describe the 19th and 20th centuries' attacks on Jews in the Russian Empire, the word is now associated with the massacres that occurred in Jewish communities during the Middle Ages.

Next, Nehr directed us to the perimeter of the mature garden where we had terrific views of the Tauber Valley and part of the town's wall. As we returned to the Castle Gate, we paused at the town's highest gate tower. It didn't take long to agree with just about everyone online that this is a fantastic place to take photos.

A nearby sign in English identified vital facts about our location, showed our spot on a small map, and listed 22 points of interest along the outer ring of the wall. In retrospect, we wish our visit had been a bit longer. We would have taken the two-hour

self-guided [Tower Trail tour](#) and trekked into the adjacent countryside. The 60-page Rothenburg Tower Trail booklet is an excellent resource for visitors wanting detailed information about this unique walk and the surrounding area.

On our way to the popular tourist attractions, the Town Hall and the Market Square area, we passed an assortment of manor houses and small shops. Unfortunately, time didn't permit a visit to the 52-meter high Town Hall Tower, where many visitors enjoy a panoramic view of the surrounding area.

Nehr insisted that we pose at another famous spot, the [Plönlein at the end of Schmiedgasse](#). At this place, one can see the Sieber's Tower to the left and the road to the Koblzeller Gate to the right. An online search revealed an abundance of images taken at this spot.



Plönlein at Schmiedgasse.

Medieval Crime and Justice Museum

Inside this 2,500 square meter [museum](#), we received a crash course in 1,000 years of German legal history. The museum's comprehensive collection covers apparatuses used for judgment, torture, and punishment. My mouth dropped open as I gazed at torture instruments, shame punishments, and devices used to enact corporal punishment and death penalties. Rare artifacts, photos, and documents rounded out the collection.

While some of the descriptions were gruesome others offered a tinge of humor. In the Middle Ages, a man's home could be unroofed as punishment for allowing his wife to beat him. It was believed that "a man who could not defend himself against his wife was not worthy of the protection from the weather and wind."

I was surprised to learn that aside from pogroms and wars, the execution of witches resulted in the highest number of mass executions of humans, approximately 50,000 deaths between the 15th and 18th centuries.

Until the end of the 18th century, a pillory was in the Rothenburg Market Place that we had visited earlier in the day. Offenders, frequently quarrelsome women, would be subjected to public abuse in a moveable cage that could be turned by people in the square. Women were also forced to carry heavy stones through the town as a punishment for breaking one of the town's moral codes.

Town drunks were required to wear a heavy barrel with weights that slipped over the man's head and rested on his shoulders.

Crimes punishable by death included murder, manslaughter, arson, theft over five guildens, counterfeiting, witchery, high treason, unnatural sex acts, incest, bigamy, blasphemy, and heresy.

Judicial practices have certainly changed over time.



These neck violins were used to punish “bad” women.

Snowballs at the Bakery Striffler

Since 1925, three generations of the Striffler family have been operating this [bakery](#). Like other bakeries in town, they showcased the family’s version of a local favorite, a snowball, made from strips of dough (plum liquor, eggs, and flour) formed into a ball, and then fried in fat and covered with powdered sugar. This popular treat has an extremely long shelf life of a few weeks.

We preferred another regional item, a hutzelbrot. This densely packed treat is made from flour, sugar, plums, pears, raisins, apple juice, raisins, hazelnuts, and walnuts.



Snowballs baked up at Bakery Striffler.

Käthe Wohlfahrt

Christmas is celebrated year-round in Rothenberg. I have yet to experience such an assortment of decorations anywhere else in the world. The Christmas Village is an impressive animated Franconian Village. The moving characters mesmerized both children and adults.

This [family-run business](#), operating for more than five decades, sells thousands of Christmas ornaments and gift ideas. The items are handmade in Germany and can be ordered online. One doesn't have to celebrate Christmas to appreciate the craftsmanship of the items sold in the store.



Shop for Christmas decorations at Kathe Wohlfahrt in Rothenburg ob der Tauber.

Tour of Jewish Rothenburg

Posted signs memorialize each [historic site](#) along the route. Independent travelers can rely on a self-guided walking tour booklet, *An Invitation to Take a Walk: Jewish Rothenburg ob der Tauber*, written by Oliver Gussmann, the pastor at the St. James church. The book has been translated into multiple languages, including English and Hebrew.

We had the pleasure of being escorted by both Nehr and Lothar Schmidt, a local expert on Jewish history. During our private tour, we were shown bits and pieces of

Jewish history dating back to the First Jewish Quarter at Kapellenplatz (ca. 1180-1350). Efforts are being made to restore the oldest mikveh (ritual bath) in Germany. A tentative completion date is in 2021.

The Jews residing in the First Jewish Quarter suffered from a series of anti-Semitic attacks that eventually led to a period of time (1520-1870) when Jews were forbidden to live in the town. Between the 13th and 16th centuries, Jews were expelled from many European countries. Jewish emancipation gradually occurred in Europe between the late 18th century and the early 20th century.

While a small number of Jews returned after they were given equal citizenship in 1871, the National Socialists removed all of the remaining Jews from the town in 1938.

Schmidt, Gussmann, and others are making notable efforts to keep the memory of Jewish life alive despite the fact that Jewish community has not existed in Rothenburg since the 1930s.

Rothenburg Museum

During our 24-hour stay, the [museum](#) was officially closed. Nehr, however, graciously arranged a short visit to this historical museum located in a former 13th-century Dominican convent.

Jewish gravestones taken from a medieval cemetery that is now a parking lot are arranged in rows. Ceremonial objects and books highlighting Rabbi Meir's life and famous writings are also on display. Rabbi Meir is considered to be a recognized authority on commentaries on the Talmud and a liturgical poet whose poems were included in medieval Jewish prayer books.

Nehr took us inside the former convent's kitchen, the oldest kitchen in Germany, to learn about culinary customs in the Middle Ages. He opened a cabinet door to reveal a wooden barrel, with a door, that smoothly revolved in a circle resembling a modern Lazy Susan. Inside the barrel were a mug and plate. Centuries ago, the nuns used this apparatus to feed the poor outside the convent without being seen.

Rudimentary cooking utensils and equipment reinforced my belief that my husband and I are fortunate to live in the 21st century.



Medieval Kitchen at Rothenburg Museum.

Night Watchman Tour

A small crowd gathered in front of a [bearded man](#) with long hair garbed in a long cloak and a hat from a long-gone era. He carried a halberd, a medieval weapon, and a rectangular lantern. Within seconds of speaking, the actor captured the audience's attention. While examining the intricate design of his halberd, he let everyone know that with a swift stroke, the blade could cut through a medieval helmet.

In the starlit streets, participants followed the night watchman as he periodically stopped to utter a witty remark or a tidbit of history about life in the middle ages or his role as a night watchman. At one location, he blew a horn. While gravediggers and executioners had the same clients and were considered to be at the bottom of the social scale, the night watchman was also not a highly regarded occupation.

He made comments about life during the religious wars when mercenaries plundered

the town. During the Nazi's era, nationalist sentiments were at an all-time high and Rothenburg was considered "the most German of German towns." In other words, it was a Nazi hangout.

About 40% of the city was destroyed by World War II bombings. The city center and remainder of the town remained intact. Military orders called for the destruction of the walled city by artillery. Intervention by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State John J. McCloy saved the village from destruction. His sentimental recollection of his mother's painting of this historic town caused him to dispatch American negotiators to convince the Germans to declare defeat. The acting German commander agreed to surrender even though, in doing so, he was going against a direct order from Hitler. Today, McCloy's actions are commemorated on the wall, along with others who have contributed to the restoration process.



Scenes from the Night Watchman Tour at Rothenburg.

When our 24-hour visit came to an end, we were left with mixed feelings. Undoubtedly, the community had a troubling past filled with violent pogroms, Antisemitism, and was a recognized haven for Nazis. But at the same time, efforts have been made to restore its historical charm including a walking tour that focuses on the less than favorable treatment of its former Jewish population. Along with admiring the town's remarkable architecture, visitors can enjoy an assortment of shops, restaurants, and historic accommodations.

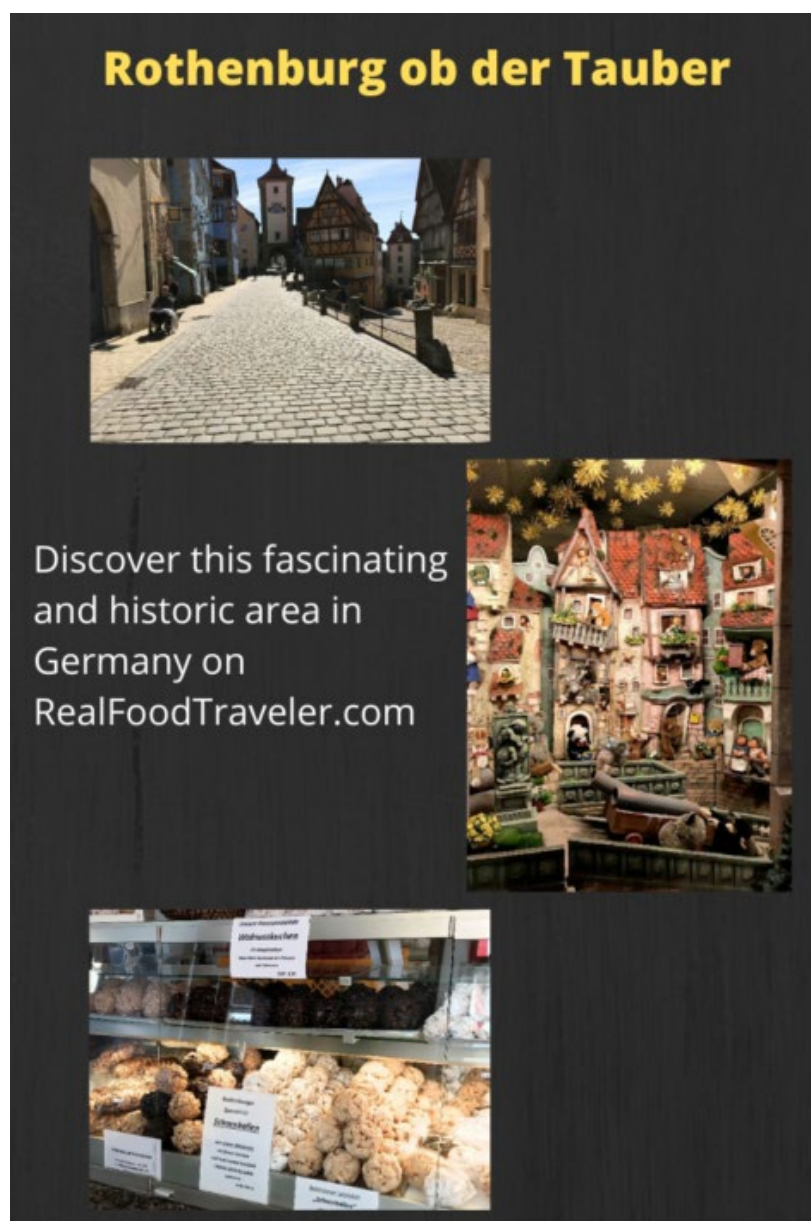
Rothenburg Tourismus Service hosted the Traveling Bornsteins and provided lodging and meals at the BurgGartenpalais. All of the opinions expressed in this story are

based on the author's experiences.

— *Story by Sandy Bornstein. Photos by The Traveling Bornsteins*

Hungry for more? Discover the Israeli cuisine Sandy and Ira found in *Frankfurt*. And discover other things to do in Frankfurt and surrounding areas in *this article*.

Pin it so you don't forget where to go on your 24 hours in Rothenburg ob der Tauber.



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Sandy 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 food, family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences, historical sites, and Jewish culture and history. You can follow Sandy on Facebook and Instagram.

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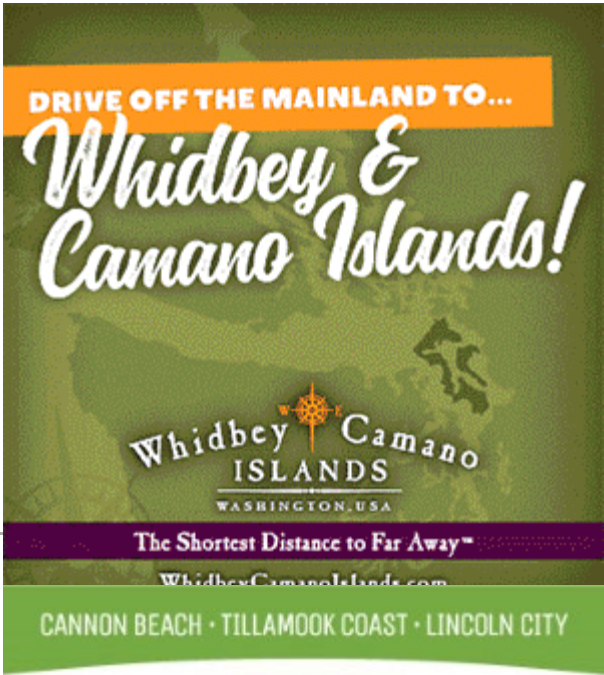
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