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Meeting Marzipan Men and Hanseatic Sailors in Lübeck, Germany

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Photos and Story by Katherine Rodeghier

It isn't often I encounter a man so sweet from head to toe.



Life-size figures made of marzipan are on display in the Marzipan Salon inside Café Niederegger. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

But what should I expect of one made of almond paste and sugar?

He's one of 12 life-size figures on display in the Marzipan Salon, the upstairs museum inside the Café Niederegger, famous throughout Germany for its marzipan confections.

The particular object of my interest is the figure of Thomas Mann seated, appropriately, with book in hand. The 1929 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature was born in Lübeck where his grandparents' house served as the setting for his novel, "Buddenbrooks."

The home still stands not far from the café and operates as a museum, as do museums devoted to two more Nobel laureates from Lübeck: Author Gunter Grass and former Chancellor Willy Brandt.

Lübeck reached prominence centuries before any of these three came along. Designated a free imperial city in 1226, it became the capital of the Hanseatic League, a powerful confederation of 200 city-states banded together against pirates and warring nations to protect their trade in the Baltic. Unlike sister Hanseatic city, Hamburg, some 40 miles away, many of Lübeck's medieval buildings still stand, earning the old city's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Don't miss:



A giant astronomical clock attracts visitors to St. Mary's Church. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

St. Mary's Church: Germany's third largest church was built to show off the power of the Hanseatic League. Begun around 1200 in Romanesque style, builders changed their minds, switching to the Gothic style of the massive limestone cathedrals then being built in France.

But Lübeck had no limestone. When it was completed in 1350, St. Mary's was the largest red-brick church on the continent and became a model for about 80 churches scattered through the Baltic region. Its middle nave remains the highest brickwork vault in the world.

Bombed by the British on the night before Palm Sunday in 1942, its roof burned and towers came down. Since restored, the bells that fell that night have been left embedded in the floor as a memorial to world peace.

Inside you'll also see a huge astronomical clock and the world's largest mechanical organ with 10,000 pipes, one more than 36 feet long. Outside the church, a bronze figure of a devil, with horns rubbed shiny by passers-by, should intrigue you.

Legend has it that when the church was being built the devil thought it was to be a wine cellar so he enthusiastically helped the builders. When he discovered a holy place instead, he fell into a rage, throwing boulders and creating all sorts of mayhem. City fathers appeased him by promising to construct a wine cellar next door in what is now the town hall.

Dining at the Schiffergesellschaft:

Saying it is a mouthful, for sure, but dining here is a pleasure for the mouth and a feast for the eyes.

Since 1535, this house built in Renaissance style with stepped gables has served as the meeting house of the skippers' and sailmakers' guild. Now leased as a restaurant, it serves traditional German fare, but be prepared to share a communal table unless you can snag a seat at individual tables along the wall.

Order the duck breast with apples and red cabbage or the wiener schnitzel with fried potatoes. While you wait for your meal, look around at the wooden beams, the huge chandelier, ship models, the long oak tables and benches ending in posts decorated with the coats of arms of captains who commandeered the Hanseatic League's ships.

Members of the guild still meet here on Tuesdays for informal chitchat.



The fortified Holsten Gate stands at the entrance to the old city.
Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

Holsten Gate:

You can't miss it; the turreted red brick fortified gate, now tipped slightly forward, sits as a landmark at the main entrance to the old town. Built in the 15th century with red brick, black glazed tiles and a terracotta frieze, it was meant to both intimidate visitors and repel intruders.

Inside you'll find a museum devoted to the history of Lübeck with a scale model of the town in the Middle Ages and exhibits describing the Hanseatic League. The gate was once equipped with 30

cannon, none of which ever fired a shot. Check out the turret with fireplace where tar was heated to be poured down a pipe onto enemies below. One room devoted to medieval instruments of torture just might give your nightmares.

Panorama from St. Peter's Tower: Built as a church in the 13th century and enlarged in the 16th century, this building now serves as a gallery and coffee shop.

What makes it special, though, is the view from the top of the tower. Walk up or pay a few euros to ride the elevator for a panorama of green-clad belfries, red-brick buildings and red-tile roofs. From this perspective you'll see that the Altstadt, the old town, is built on an island, the better to protect it from invaders.

The Trave River and canal completely surround the medieval city.



The Rathaus and Marketplace are at the heart of Lübeck's old town. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

Town Hall and Marketplace:

Lübeck's Rathaus, one of the oldest town halls in Germany, was built as a hall for trading cloth.

Begun around 1230 with the erection of a large wall with three towers and two wind holes, it was added onto several times, including a sandstone front section put up in 1570. Lübeck's Senate still convenes in the council chamber.

The Marketplace on the plaza in front of the town hall is a good place to sit on a nice day, enjoying a coffee or a beer and watching the world go by.

Marzipan at Café Niederegger:

Lübeck is so famous for its brand of marzipan that any confection of almonds and sugar marked “Lübecker Marzipan” is protected by law as an authentic product of this city. Several big companies ship it around the world.

The most well-known, though, is Niederegger founded in 1806. It operates a store, café and museum just a few steps from the Town Hall. Walk into the first floor stop and you’re greeted by a riot of confections, including 300 varieties of marzipan as well as pralines, nougats, cakes and other pastries, many beautifully wrapped.

Upstairs, the café serves breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and early supper. Whatever the time of day, be sure to order a steaming cup of fresh-brewed coffee and a slice of the house specialty: a nut torte.

Another flight of stairs (or elevator ride) leads to the museum with its 12 life-size figures, mostly notables from local history. You’ll also find Faberge-style eggs three feet tall and a model of a ship that took marzipan chefs 350 hours to create. A video explains how marzipan is made and exhibits in a hallway are devoted to the history of marzipan, which dates back to Persia in the 10th century. In Europe it was packaged in little boxes called mataban, from which the candy took its name. Knights carried the boxes of treats from the Middle East home during the Crusades.