

TRAVEL | GENEALOGY



Katherine Rodeghier/Special Contributor
The German Emigration Center in Bremerhaven is Europe's largest museum devoted to emigration.

Finding your roots in Germany

Firms combine
cultural tourism,
genealogy

By **KATHERINE RODEGHIER**
Special Contributor

BREMERHAVEN, Germany —
“Dear Mother, come live with us in
Texas.”

So reads a letter in the German Emigration Center. Written to Justina Tubbe in 1855 by her middle son living in Nacogdoches, it prompted Justina to make the eight-week voyage at what was then considered the ripe old age of 60.

She was one of millions of Germans who migrated to America in the 19th century, so many that census figures

now show Americans of German descent form our nation's largest ethnic group by far, some 43 million. In Texas, nearly 10 percent of the population is German-American, second only to those of Mexican ancestry.

As interest in genealogy grows, particularly among baby boomers, the desire to travel abroad to discover roots puts ancestral travel in the top 10 vacation trends today. If your family has German ancestors you'd like to know more about, here's how to track them down.

First, do your homework

Dig into family records and ask relatives about your German ancestors, and then get on the Internet. Ancestry.com can help find census figures and other data for a fee. Have your ancestors' correct dates of birth and spellings of first and last names; some people Americanized their names once they landed, or agents spelled their names phonetically on arrival forms.

Search through public records in the place your ancestors settled in the U.S. Look for marriage and death certificates and property records. Most 19th-century German immigrants were either Catholic or Lutheran, so track down church records for baptism, confirmation, marriage and funeral information.

If you're lucky, you'll be able to find the names of your ancestors on passenger manifests from the ships they sailed on, and perhaps even the region in Germany from which they emigrated.

Genealogy, cultural tourism mix in finding German roots

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Bring in a professional

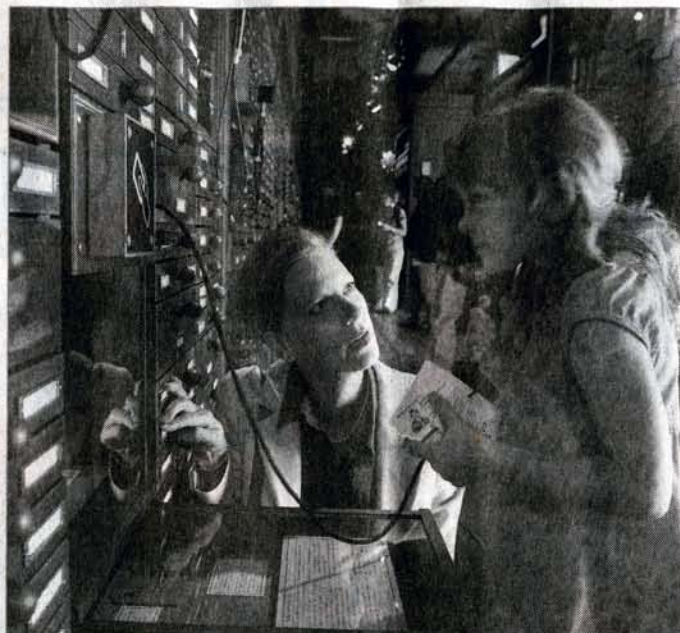
To take your quest to the next level, consider hiring an experienced researcher familiar with German records and who's able to read Old German script.

Wolfgang Grams, a professor of cultural tourism at Germany's Oldenburg University, got involved in the university's migration studies project that followed emigrants to German settlements across America. The migrants left Germany for many reasons, he says: among them war, political oppression, religious persecution. Often it was the promise of land in America. Grams' academic pursuits led him to start a business that helps Americans search for their roots in Germany. The business also organizes customized tours of Germany.

Kathy Wurth, who developed a passion for genealogy 30 years ago, also operates a business assisting descendants of German immigrants to find and visit their German roots. Based in the St. Louis area, she partners with a German genealogist to do research and organize tours.

Trace ancestors in Germany

After clients spend months or years tracing their ancestry, a visit to Germany helps them close the book on their quest,



German Emigration Center

In the Gallery of the Seven Million, visitors can open drawers containing the emigration documents of some of the millions who departed from Germany.

says Wurth. "People tell me it's the trip of a lifetime," she says.

Some people just want a general tour of the area where their ancestors lived, Grams says, while others want to zero in on their surroundings to find their home or church. Sometimes, research leads to living relatives. Grams recalls introducing one client to cousins he'd located and watching amused as they spread family photos across a kitchen table. "Look, there's Aunt Mary," he remembers them saying.

Must-visits for a roots tour of Germany are museums in the port cities that funneled emigrants onto ships bound for America.

Europe's largest such museum, the German Emigration Center in Bremerhaven, tells emigrants' stories in an emotional way. Upon entering, you are given a boarding pass with the name of one of 15 emigrants. As you work your way through the galleries, you use the pass to activate audio recordings of your emigrant's life story.

If you carry the pass for Justina Tubbe, you discover she was the poor widow of a weaver in Oderberg in what was then Prussia. In the Gallery of the Seven Million, you open a drawer containing her emigration documents, including the letter from her son.



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Ballinstadt is a museum on the former site of Germany's version of Ellis Island.

She describes the fear in her heart as she and two other sons set sail on the Tuisko, bound for New Orleans.

You'll learn about the conditions aboard the sailing ships in museum exhibits. Many emigrants ate and slept on shared bunks on low platforms built between decks. "They were human cargo," says Grams. Food and sanitation were poor and many died of disease and starvation during a journey that could take six to 12 weeks.

Conditions in steerage improved when faster steamships came along. By the 1870s, ships carried doctors, supplied meals and had flush

toilets.

In Hamburg, you get a glimpse of what life was like for emigrants on Germany's version of Ellis Island. The Ballinstadt museum is a former holding ground for emigrants traveling on Hamburg America Line ships. Because shipping companies had to pay return passage for emigrants who were refused entry to the U.S., often because of sickness, the companies had doctors examine emigrants prior to departure. Now a museum occupying some of the emigrant dormitories, the Ballinstadt tells the story of 5 million who emigrated from Hamburg between 1850 and 1939.

When you go

Museums:

- German Emigration Center, \$15, dah-bremerhaven.de.
- Ballinstadt, \$16, ballinstadt.net

Tour and research companies:

- Research and Travel Dr. Grams, routes.de.
- Kathy Wurth Family Tree Tours, familytreetours.com.

Lodging:

- Courtyard by Marriott, Bremen, located at the railway station in the former headquarters of the North German Lloyd shipping company, marriott.com, from \$117 double occupancy.
- Grand Elysée, Hamburg, five-star conference hotel with spa, grand-elysee.com/en/, from \$200 double occupancy.

Dining:

- Bremer Ratskeller, Bremen, restaurant and casual bistro serving traditional German fare in the historic Rathaus, ratskeller-bremen.de (in German).
- Treffpunkt Kaiserhafen (Last Bar Before New York), Bremerhaven, working man's bar and restaurant next to the shipping port, serves a trucker's special, treffpunktkaiserhafen.de (in German).
- Ballinstadt Restaurant, Hamburg, museum cafe serves light lunches, including the sailor's traditional dish, labskaus (corned beef hash with potatoes, beets, eggs and fish), ballinstadt.net.