

## TRAVEL

# The whole story

In the fairy-tale villages that inspired the Brothers Grimm, there isn't a demented goblin, a wicked witch or a gingerbread house to be seen.

by JEFF KAVANAGH

I'm standing in front of a tangle of stainless steel in Gelnhausen, a small town near Frankfurt in Germany. "What do you see?" asks my guide, Brigitte. It looks like an angel that's been set on fire, but as we're standing outside a church, that seems unlikely. I say it anyway, and I'm surprisingly close. The sculpture is of Elisabeth Strupp, a local woman found guilty of witchcraft in the 16th century. As she was a noblewoman, Brigitte explains, she got off lightly, and instead of being burnt at the stake, she was decapitated, then burnt. It's a brutal story, but given that it involves a witch who meets a nasty end, also apt for my first night in the land of the Brothers Grimm.

Born two centuries ago, just down the road in the village of Hanau, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm spent much of their early lives in towns and villages here in northern Hesse. Made famous by the local legends they chronicled and adapted into tales of gingerbread houses, demented goblins and evil witches, the brothers were also renowned academics who worked on the first comprehensive German dictionary, which is still in use today. Less well-known, though – with the exception of somewhere like Hamelin (and its relationship with the Pied Piper) – are the places that inspired these stories.

**The brothers once quipped there were more steps in Marburg than houses, and as I climb through the Old Town to the castle, I reckon they're not wrong.**

Outshone by the bright lights of Berlin and the alpine beauty of Bavaria, these towns and villages have looked to trade on their storytelling heritage, setting up themed museums and exhibitions, and running summer plays and festivals in the hope of attracting tourists. The main route they lie along has even been branded the "Fairytale Road".

As the route weaves its way up from Hesse through Lower Saxony to Bremerhaven on the North Sea coast, its evocative name is not without merit. The path follows gentle rivers through a rolling landscape of forests, fields and pretty villages of half-timbered buildings.

Gelnhausen is not officially on the Fairytale Road, but the brothers' birthplace was heavily damaged during World War II and is now a fairly dour suburb of Frankfurt, so Gelnhausen seemed a better place to enjoy a sunny spring afternoon.

Stretched across a hillside, the town has cobblestone streets and half-timbered buildings that flow gracefully down to the Kinzig river below. On a narrow residential street, Brigitte shows me a tower where witches were interned before being immolated or bound hand and foot and thrown into the Kinzig. A group of schoolchildren, dressed in traditional garb, are guided past us, laughing. Seeing how much fun they're having, I find it hard to imagine they're getting the same version of the tour as I am.

After the tour, I catch a train and travel 15 minutes to Steinau an der Strasse, where the Grimms lived for most of their adolescent years. It's another attractive village, but like Gelnhausen, the elegance of its old town is offset by the functional postwar architecture that has grown up around it.

Happily, I'm staying the night at the Burgmannenhaus, a handsome 16th-century customs house that's been converted into a travellers' inn. Owner Norbert, a burly bloke, is a bit of a storyteller himself. Over a few early evening beers, he tells me about the secret tunnel that lies beneath the

Clockwise from top left, Burgmannenhaus, Steinau; a costumed tour in Gelnhausen; Marburg's Cafe Vetter; half-timbered houses in Gelnhausen.





## The Brothers Grimm were also renowned academics who worked on the first comprehensive German dictionary, which is still in use today.

inn and runs to the nearby castle and church, and how his wife, Rosi, bought a couple of first-edition copies of the Grimms' tales for a pittance on eBay. Slapping his generous paunch, he also relates how he and two friends put away a 30-litre keg of beer one night. He points to my almost empty glass: "Another?"

The next morning, following a solid breakfast of bread rolls, cheese and eggs, I wander across the road to the Grimms' old family home. Nowadays it's a modern little museum, with the familial kitchen restored to its former glory and an upper floor dedicated to fairy tales from around Europe. The upstairs area is mainly designed for kids, but among the princesses' crowns and magic wands is a Little Red Riding Hood display that shows her various manifestations from around the world, including what appears to be a fetishist's rubber costume. Not for the first time on my trip, I have to assume younger visitors will be spared the less-savoury details.

There's time for a quick visit to the town's medieval castle, which boasts its own more conventional Grimm museum, before I get back on a train and take a pleasant journey through valleys embellished with spring blossoms to Marburg, where the brothers studied law.

A lively university town, with its own picturesque *Altstadt* full of cobblestones and half-timbered buildings on a hill overlooking a river, it is significantly larger than my previous two stops, and also much more popular with tourists. Despite being early in the tourist season, the weather is superb, and tables outside restaurants are full of diners feasting on fare you suspect hasn't changed much since the brothers' time: thick slabs of beef and pork served with seasonal vegetables and rich sauces, and washed down with strong German beer.

The brothers once quipped there were more steps in Marburg than houses, and as I climb through the Old Town to the castle at its summit, I reckon they're probably not wrong. My sweaty back and tight calves are worth it, though, as once at the top I discover an almost deserted castle park with views over gabled roofs and wooded hills.

Sitting on a bench under an old oak, I spy a lone tower among the trees on the other side of the river. The rumble of the town below is faint, and my mind drifts to thoughts of malevolent stepmothers, kindly woodsmen, and forlorn maidens trapped in stony citadels, not all of whom were fortunate enough to enjoy storybook endings. ■