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The Family Adventure Project's guide to

Castle Hostels of Germany

48 hours around **Blankenheim** and the **Eifel Park**

Castle Hostels of Germany

How would you like to spend a night in a castle?

Or take a road trip combining castles, palaces and forts? There are more historic hilltop residences offering beds to travellers in Germany than you might imagine, thanks to the extensive network of **Jugendherberge** hostels. We had no idea when we set out on our road trip of German Castle Hostels how much choice we would have, how many faraway hills we would sleep on, and how magical the hostels would be – thanks in part to the number of Harry Potter conventions we ran into. Well, what better place than a castle?

For the last century the German Youth Hostel Association has been refurbishing former grand or royal buildings specifically for families and groups. We set out to explore five of them to produce this series of guides which we hope will help you to do the same. We chose a range of different locations with ideally no more than three hours drive between them. We stayed for 48 hours in each and explored as much of the area as we could. In the pages that follow we describe the unique character of the hostel, profile what there is to do and give you the low down on why we think each one is worth a visit.

From a peaceful weekend escape into a national park to an overnight in a notorious prison, this action packed road trip put us right at the heart of many local stories and histories. It also offered a great night's sleep and an action packed adventure for our family. Of course, we only sampled what's on offer and welcome your ideas and feedback. Share your thoughts on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram using the hashtag **#CastleHostels**.

Kirstie Pelling and Stuart Wickes, The Family Adventure Project



The Family Adventure Project *biography*

Kirstie Pelling and Stuart Wickes are co-founders of **The Family Adventure Project**, an award winning blog that's ten years into its mission to inspire others to get out, get active and adventure together. They work as a writer/journalist and photographer/videographer team to research and share ideas that encourage families to reap the benefits of doing something new and different together.

They have worked with dozens of leading travel brands all around the world. In 2016 the British Guild of Travel Writers recognised them as Travel Bloggers of the Year, commending their use of blogging, YouTube and social media as a "glorious celebration of adventurous life and the ups and downs of family travel."

You can follow their adventures on their blog at www.familyadventureproject.org or **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **Instagram** or **YouTube**.

Castle Hostels Road Trip



Thanks to **DJH**, **Elektro Fahrradverleih Eifel** and **DFDS Seaways** for support in the production of this ebook.

Welcome to the Eifel

A wild volcanic landscape

You have to be pay attention when booking your Eifel Tour – if you get mixed up you could end with a ticket for the Eiffel Tower! But while The Eifel is only a consonant away from Paris, it's a world away in landscape and atmosphere.

The Eifel is the 14th National Park of Germany and the first of North Rhine-Westphalia. It is in the north west of the country, near the Belgian/Luxembourg border. While there are iconic settlements like Monschau in the region, much of it is populated by forest and wildlife, and you won't have many problems with mass tourism or overcrowded attractions.

This is a volcanic landscape where craters host deep lakes, and caverns, hills and waterfalls provide the spectacle. You can play hide and seek in beech and oak woods, freewheel along forest tracks and spot tiny flowers and shy wildlife. We came to the Eifel for relaxation. What we didn't expect is acceleration. But more about our Formula One experience later...



Let Nature be Nature

TIP

To help with tourist information and orientation, national park managers have established **four National Park Gates**, information centres to help you access the park. Each has a special theme to highlight different aspects of park life - including 'life veins of nature,' 'man and nature' 'wild flowers' and 'forest secrets.' Worth a visit for orientation and information.

A park for all seasons

The **Eifel National Park** is around 80km from Bonn, and 65km from Cologne. Its 10,700 hectares are packed with wildlife including wildcats, black storks and around 1,600 endangered species of animals and plants. The motto of the park is to 'let nature be nature' and much of it is left untouched.

It comes into its own in different seasons – for example people come to see the wild daffodils in the spring and the stags rutting in the autumn. According to the Hostel Manager Markus, the weather can be 'local' and unpredictable. "In Blankenheim they say we will have stormy weather but we might only get a drop, whereas our neighbour five kilometres down the road might be under a shower." So be prepared!



Eifel landscapes



Eifel woodlands



Eifel flags

Burg Blankenheim



Views over the town



DJH Blankenheim



The Bastionhaus

The hilltop landmark

Burg Blankenheim Youth Hostel is in Grafenberg castle, a beacon of white and charcoal, set on a hilltop surrounded by greenery. It's believed the Burg was built as a hill castle around 1115 by Gerhard I but it was most famous as the seat of the Blankenheim family who were elevated from Lords to Counts in the 1300's. It became a youth hostel in 1936.

A gentle stroll downhill from the hostel brings you to an impressive medieval village packed with cultural monuments and houses that look like they've fallen out of a picture book – there's no shortage of pillars, beams, struts and whitewashed walls. There's also something rather special in one of the cellars. More about that later too.

There are plenty of bars and restaurants in the village and several curious little museums; the **Eifel Museum** is a little gem dedicated to local traditions and customs displaying everything from shoe making to weaving.

Inside the Burg



The main hostel building of Burg Blankenheim

At home in the castle

On arrival at **DJH Burg Blankenheim** we were greeted by a knight in shining armour, a popular selfie stop for the kids. Markus Paschek, Hostel Manager of DJH Burg Blankenheim then took up the welcome, showing us to our family friendly accommodation in the Bastionhaus.

This large house in the grounds of the main building was renovated and divided into five apartments in 2010. Our apartment, which can be extended to house two families, was spacious and homely at the top of the house. We had self-catering facilities, a TV and comfy sofas that could be converted into sofa beds for extra guests. The sloping roof and the shafts of light that gently woke us added to the attic style atmosphere. Meanwhile, both the view from the window and the winding staircase in our apartment tempted us down into the village and the countryside.

The main hostel building is light and airy and its walls are studded with interesting objects and images. The pleasant eating area serves a free buffet breakfast and meals are available on request. We enjoyed filling breakfasts and a picnic style tea with plenty of good bread, ham and cheese.



Watch the video - click to play



A warm welcome from a knight in armour



Breakfast time



Medieval styling



Plenty of room to relax in one of the family rooms in the Bastionhaus

An Eifel Tour

Cycling the Eifel

We hired bikes to see as much as possible in an afternoon. **Elektro Fahrradverleih Eifel**, a family run firm in a residential part of Blankenheim produced five shiny bikes and a suggestion for a local circuit of around 12km that took a couple of hours. Electric bikes are also available if you want to speed things up. They can also deliver bikes to the Hostel by prior arrangement.

Our journey took us through wooded beech forest, past tufted fields and along flat gravel tracks. We said hello to the cattle, stopped to watch a train go by, and accidentally ended up biking through a meadow. At the half way mark there was a convenient refreshment stop in Nettersheim. Coffee, apple strudel and ice creams provided enough fuel to get us back to Blankenheim.



Bikes for rent



Easy navigation



A wrong turning?

Other Eifel Cycling Options

Exploring the rivers and valleys

If you are a keen cyclist, and have more time than we did, there are numerous biking trails to make your own Tour d'Eifel, many with interesting themes. For example you can bike the **Eifel-Höhen-Route**, a 230km route that takes in three dams and endless rock formations around the Eifel Park.

Or you could follow sections of a 300km 'three rivers' trail, the **Drei-Flusse Tour** (Erft, Ahr, Rhine in case you were wondering). There's a gentle section of trail on the old Ahrtalbahn railway lines connecting the Ahr source in Blankenheim to the river mouth near Sinzig on the Rhine, calling at wine-making villages and spa towns. The Valley Route is a 265 km long trail network along the river beds of the Erft, Urft, Olef, Ahr and Neffelbach, allowing you to move from valley to valley on a gentle downhill.

If you still have energy after a long route, there are plenty of shorter mountain bike trails to try. Check out the mountain bike routes of the **Eifel Free Rides** or **Bad Münstereifel**. For families who just want a taster with gentle gradients, there's an easy non circular route called the **Eifel Radweg**, following old railway lines.



Good signage helps with route finding



Be prepared for any change in the weather

Rev up at the Nürburgring

Formula Fun for all the family

A visit to the Eifel region might be an escape from the hustle and bustle of the city but it's not all peace and quiet and natural pursuits. Around 40km from Burg Blankenheim Hostel is one of world's best Formula One circuits; the **Nürburgring**. When we visited there was a huge classic car rally at the track, which is situated in the town of Nürburg. The Nürburg Old Timer rally was a colourful riot of cars and drivers, all racing noisily for trophies. And at the end of the event there was a fun parade of slick, shiny and no doubt very expensive classic cars.



Unloading for a race at Old Timer Rally



Old Timers Parade at Nürburgring

The 20.832 km North Loop (Nordschleife), winds around Nürburg village and medieval castle and has more than 300 metres of elevation change – it was so lethal that Jackie Stewart nicknamed it “The Green Hell.” These days, races happen on a newer track, the infamous 5.148km Grand Prix track.

TIP

Check the **Nürburgring website** to see when events are on. Visit on a race day for the event experience. Visit on a non-race day if you want to have a go at **driving yourself**.

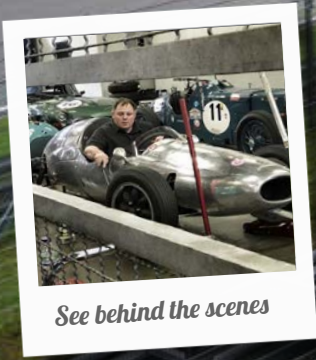
A Day at the Races

TIP

You can buy ear plugs a euro in the stadium to protect your ears. We advise it!

Grandstand action

Out on the BMW Grandstand watching the racing action it was impossible to hear each other. We experienced the air being cut, we felt the rev of engines in our gut, we smelt oil in the air, and were at one with the crowd. But the biggest sensation was **the roar of the cars** as they flew past, down a straight, round a bend and into nowhere. It was exciting and relentless and most of all noisy.



See behind the scenes



Try a race simulator

Behind the scenes or take to the track

The Ring Boulevard provided some respite, although it was almost as crazy-busy, with people being tattooed while looking down onto the tracks, having an edge of their seat lunch or driving like maniacs on linked up simulators. We toured the pits and workshops and watched the wheels being changed. You don't just have to watch though. On days when there's no racing you may be able to drive around the legendary Nordschleife track yourself. You can do this in your own car, or hire a smart one as part of the **Nürburgring tourist offer**. You can also hire an instructor or navigate the 20.832 kilometers, 73 curves, 17 percent gradient, and 300 meters difference in altitude on your own. Easy peasy eh?

Step Back in Time



Walk around in Roman times

You can explore another side of Blankenheim history at the Roman Villa, **Romervilla**, on the outskirts of Blankenheim. Here an artistic reconstruction of a Roman Villa dominates what now looks like grassy parkland. The 'to scale' pillared Villa Rustica makes you feel small, and that's before you start wandering the rest of what was once the Villa's estate, where interpretation boards, excavations and rusting steel templates show how Roman Blankenheim might have looked.

It is one of the largest Roman sites in Rhineland. Archaeologists have covered some excavated parts of the original Roman buildings with glass so you can peer down and examine the remains. It's an interesting place to explore and gives a tangible sense of the scope and size of Blankenheim's Roman past.



TIP Take a walk up onto the old railway embankment for good views across the site and also across to Blankenheim with Burg Blankenheim above it.

The Source of the Ahr



AHROLEIE



Das Ahrquelle
ist ein
Bach, der
aus
dem
Berg
steigt
und
in
den
Ahr
fließt.
Das
Ahrquelle
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Search for the source

The Ahr is an 85km long river running eastwards from Blankenheim, studded with vineyards on south-facing slopes carved out by a 300m deep gorge.

Blankenheim proudly claims to be the source of the Ahr and you will spot the embryonic river as a feature running throughout the town. For a fun thing to do, go hunting for the source. Follow the flow of the watercourses in the centre of town and you'll find the source beneath an old and well marked timbered building.

After a few minutes peering in through the bars and smelling the damp we decided a warm up was in order and headed to **Beros Grillhouse and Pizzeria** in town for pizza, which we doused in another kind of sauce.



The centre of Blankenheim is very picturesque



The church of St. Mariä

More Things to Do



It's easy to get up close with nature around the Eifel National Park

Immerse yourself in real nature

If you enjoy hiking, head south of Blankenheim to explore the area of **Lampertstal** where you can walk through the juniper heath of The Eifel. According to Hostel Manager Markus, this nature reserve offers “small hills filled with Lampertstal plants. They bloom yellow and it's very special. This is real nature.”

Have a bug hunt

If you get tired of flower spotting you could always try bug hunting. On a **previous visit to the Eifel** a ranger told me there are more than 1,300 species of beetle in the park.



Lots of hiking trails to choose from

Race to eat ice cream

In the nearby village of Nettersheim, we discover **Cesars Eiscafe Serafin**, one of a family run chain of cafes. We then discover another branch in Blankenheim. The family has been producing gelato from Italian family recipes for more than fifty years, but we manage to consume five After Eight ice cream based milkshakes in about 50 seconds, so in my opinion we won. (The Formula One racing experience clearly rubbed off!)



Strudel stop at Cesar's Eiscafe in Nettersheim

Visit a wildlife park

If you want to see local wildlife up close, visit the **Eifel Wildlife Park**. It has 200 animals including bears, wolves and lynx, as well as a falconry experience, live shows, rollercoasters and rides.



Horses grazing in the Eifel

Our Awards

On our Castle Hostel tour we've been awarding shields for excellence. Here's how Blankenheim fared in the battle of the Castle Hostels. Shield scores out of 5.

Access to the Eifel National Park



Family Friendly Accommodation



Motorsport Rush of Adrenaline



Medieval and Roman Remains



Our German Castle Hostel Guides

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Bilstein

Burg Bilstein - The Character Castle

Burg Bilstein is set on a hill above the town of Lennestadt. There are plenty of walks from the door or you can take off in many different directions enjoying what the region has to offer. Western Germany's Sauerland is liberally populated by hills, forests and valleys. Hikers and bikers alike come to enjoy the scenery. We loved messing about by the water at the Bigge dam and reservoir, where we hired a pedalo and played mini golf. We also enjoyed visiting the ski resort of Winterberg where there's tobogganing, barefoot walking and one of the best bike parks around. But the real fun began back at the imaginative youth hostel where you're as likely to bump into a knight as kiss a frog. Read more in our [Burg Bilstein blog post](#).



Colditz

Schloss Colditz- The Prison Hostel

People don't come to **Schloss Colditz** for the hospitality. They come for the escape stories, the museum and the TV and film nostalgia. But within the imposing looking gates, you will find a comfortable, simply furnished hostel. The real treat comes in the morning with a tour. There are different lengths of tour - long and even longer- but our guide kept the whole family captivated. After all that information about how to escape, you'll want to head off and enjoy the surrounding area. We had strawberry pizza in the Colditz village centre, visited an aquapark with crazy and lazy rivers and then took a canoeing day trip in nearby Leipzig. Read more in our [Schloss Colditz blog post](#).



Stahleck

Burg Stahleck - The Fairytale on the River

Bacharach hostel, known as **Burg Stahleck**, is all about location, location, location. Set on a hill on a bend of the middle Rhine, the view is either sparkling in the sunlight or moody in the mist. There's nothing as pleasurable as enjoying board games and a drink on the terrace at sunset, especially if you are one of the lucky families to be returning to a castle themed bedroom. There are dozens of castles packed into a small section of river here including a floating one. Check it out on the way to the famous Lorelei rock with its summer toboggan run. Further afield, Koblenz provides a fortress tour, city attractions and opportunities for tea on the palace lawn. Read more in our [Burg Stahleck blog post](#).



Nuremberg

Nuremberg - A Modern City Break

The modern city hostel in **Nuremberg** is situated in the old stables of Imperial Castle of Nuremberg and one of the joys is being so close to the old town action. Any tour surely starts on the doorstep where you can view the gardens and palace, gaze down into the darkness of the well or climb the circular Sinwell tower and see for miles. But there's a lot to do in Nuremberg that doesn't involve royalty. Turn the bronze ring in the famous fountain, visit the delightful toy museum, sample the famous sausages and see how they make the gingerbread that goes down a storm at the Christmas markets. Read more in our [Nuremberg City Hostel blog post](#).



Blankenheim

Burg Blankenheim - An Old World Escape

Burg Blankenheim is located in Germany's Eifel, a national park in western Germany near the border with Belgium. Don't come looking for night life - you're more likely to find bird life, country life and a quiet life. The baroque castle was built as a display of wealth rather than a defence and is thought to date back as far as Roman times. There are five apartments for families in the bastionhaus and simple pleasures on the doorstep range from hiring a bike (or e-bike) and pedalling around the Eifel to eating After Eight ice cream in a family run gelato shop and then visiting Roman ruins. If it's all too slow you can head to the infamous Nürburgring for motor racing action. Read more in our [Burg Blankenheim blog post](#).

