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The Family Adventure Project's guide to

Castle Hostels of Germany

48 hours around **Burg Bilstein** in Sauerland

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



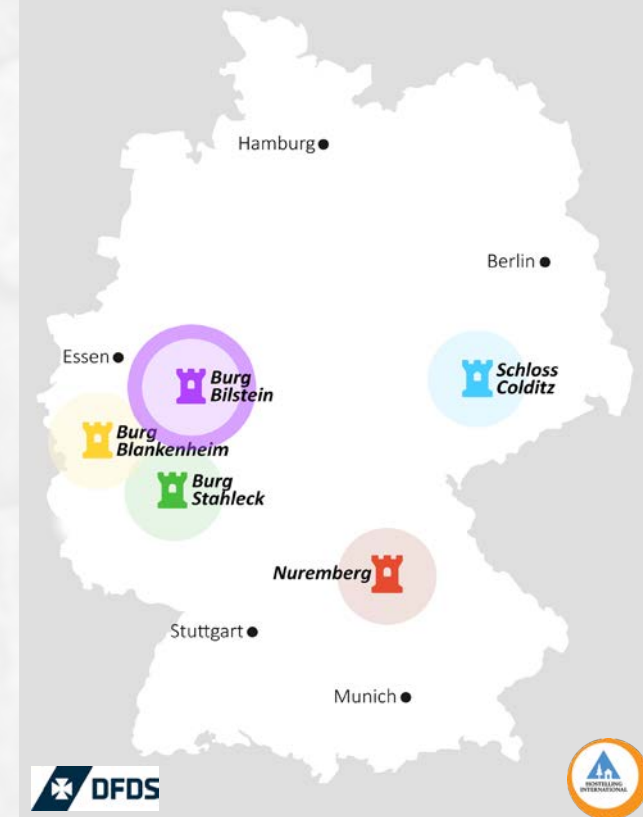
The Family Adventure Project *biography*

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, Sauerland Tourismus and DFDS Seaways for support in the production of this ebook.

Exploring Sauerland



Land of a thousand mountains

I hadn't heard of Sauerland before I started planning our road trip and had to look it up. If you're equally puzzled about its whereabouts, you'll find it in North Rhine Westphalia just under 100 kms from Cologne.

The region is rich with hills, forests and valleys and caters for just about every kind of active tourist. It's been called 'the land of a thousand mountains' but this is a modest claim; there are over two and half thousand peaks higher than 400 metres.

The best ways of exploring this beautiful countryside are human powered; hiking, cycling and mountain biking are big here. In winter you can ski in Winterberg, a winter sports resort that offers tobogganing and mountain biking thrills in summer. There are easier cycling options too with a network of trails that follow old railway tracks.

While the predominant colours are shades of green, the area is also dotted with blue; one of the joys of a break here is getting out onto the water. The region's main rivers are the Ruhr and the Lenne, while several dams have created artificial lakes like the Möhne and Bigge. A visit to the Biggesee makes for some great opportunities for water sports, boating, swimming, fishing and boat trips.

Our base for our 48 hour stay was in the south west of Sauerland at **Burg Bilstein DJH** hostel in Lennestadt. There are also DJH hostels in **Biggesee** and **Winterberg**, convenient for exploring this part of Sauerland.

Getting Active



Cycling is popular in Sauerland



Walking routes for all abilities

Hikers and bikers welcome

Sauerland was one of the first areas to be designated a 'quality hiking region' by the German Institute of Hiking and there are lots of certified hiking trails including long distance and pilgrim routes. Trails range from forest to high ridge to geological circuits and many villages in the area have linked up to provide information and facilities for walkers.

Between the eleven '**Sauerland-Wanderdörfer**' hiking villages famous paths include the **Winterberger Hochtour** (Winterberg High-Altitude Trail) and the **Briloner Kammweg** (Brilon Ridge Trail). Long-distance pathways like the **Rothaarsteig** (Rothaar Trail) or the **Sauerland-Höhenflug** (Sauerland High-Flyer) are rewarding ways to see the scenery if you go prepared for all weathers. If you are fit you could also try a 37km loop of the **Veischeder Sonnenpfad** trail (Sun Trail). You can pick it up from just outside Burg Bilstein.

Cycling is very popular too although the 'land of 1000 mountains' can bring a certain challenge. There's a wealth of downhill mountain biking trails but if you prefer for something less challenging or more family friendly there are options too. Try the Ruhrtal-Radweg or Ruhr Valley Cycle path, a lovely waterside path which links up with the **Sauerland-Radrिंग** (Sauerland Cycling Circuit), an easy trail following old railway lines, and with a famous bat tunnel!

Not all outdoor activity is on land; there are two important rivers (the Ruhr and the Lenne) and two huge reservoirs that provide opportunities for relaxation or watersports. The Biggesee near Atterndorn is the largest dammed lake in Westphalia and is a great place for a day out with caves, boat trips, cafes, golf and watersports to keep you entertained.

Staying at Burg Bilstein



Magical by night



Fairy tale characters



Knights on standby

**Don't
Miss**

Kissing the frog in the courtyard well, especially if you are looking for a prince.

A medieval fantasy castle

You can't miss Burg Bilstein as you approach Lennestadt. It's set high on a hill that plunges steeply downwards, with its walls dropping away as sharply as day turns to night. And night is when it really comes to life. As we entered the heavy gates, and caught a glimpse of atmospherically lit walls through ancient arches, we were well on our way to a warm bed. We headed up through the courtyard filled with young wizards from a Harry Potter convention and families playing ping pong. We wandered up the stairs to a hall where chandeliers cast shadows from the past onto the quaintly uneven floor, watched over by a knight in armour. This hostel has been welcoming travellers into its hundred and forty plus bedrooms for most of a century. And it does it well.

Inside the Burg



Across the bridge to the castle courtyard

Bilstein, the character castle

Bilstein is a spur castle built in 1225. Furniture is either olde wordly or hostel-simple, so don't expect curved lines and comfy sofas in the communal areas. What you will find is character: a lot of original features as well as quirky and humorous touches; from crows tangled on the wall, to suits of armour standing to silent attention beneath the wooden staircase. You're invited to play the medieval looking instruments hanging on the walls or the piano or guitars in dining areas.

The bedrooms are modern and beds comfortable. And outside the bedrooms, and in the children's play areas, an artist has been hard at work creating scenes with damsels and knights. If you follow this medieval art trail you'll find a games room with table football, and maybe even a horse.



Watch the video - click to play



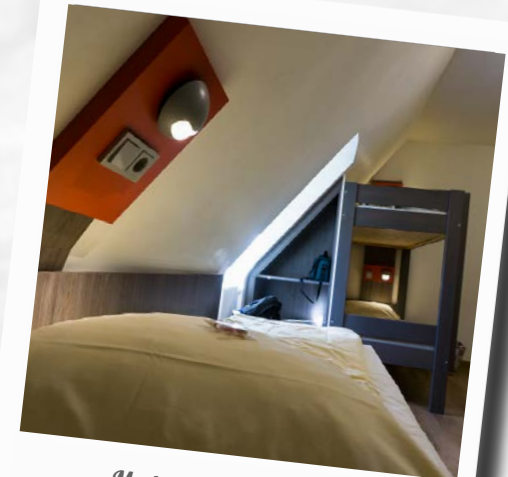
This way to the hostel



Fairy tale courtyard



Castle themed interior



Modern hostel bedrooms

Big Fun at the Biggensee



Minigolf at Sondern



Boating on the Biggensee

TIP

Check the schedule and time your visit to catch one of the White Fleet passenger boats that glide across the lake five times a day. Enjoy a relaxing drink or lunch on board.

It's a big day out at the Biggensee

If you are in the area for 48 hours or more, it's worth spending a whole day at the Biggensee in the southern part of Sauerland. There are seventeen reservoirs in the area and while the Bigge reservoir might not be the biggest (despite its name), it is one of the most fun.

We hired a pedalo at Sondern and headed out onto the lake where we watched people bouncing from a great height at the blobbing station of **Camping Biggensee Vier Jahreszeiten**. You can do a spot of blobbing yourself by arrangement. We swam in the cold, clear water, and waved to the passengers on the **White Fleet tourist boats** that glide over the lake like swans. There's a diving school if you prefer getting close up with the bottom of the lake to sitting on top of it on a boat. The reservoir is part of the Industrial Heritage Trail and you may meet a few other walkers if you choose to hike round it. You'll certainly meet people if you bike around it; it's a really popular place to cycle.

Barefoot Walking

Get your shoes and socks off

Barefoot walking is becoming a bit of a thing in European countries where free trails are springing up all over the place. While in the mountain resort of Winterberg we diverted eight kilometres or so to the **Barfußpfad Langewiese**. Here there are 13 stations offering various natural obstacles to climb, navigate and wrap your toes around. Just beware the small pebbles - they made quite an impression on our soles!

TIP

Don't carry your shoes around with you, instead pop your shoes, socks and backpack into a locker and travel light. You'll be glad you did when you come to the pebble dash.



Watch the video - click to play

Fun in Winterberg

TIP

On the Sommerrodelbahn, don't pay for a pass for each family member. Buy a book of adult and a book of child tickets and share them. You'll get 12 goes between you.

Summer fun in a ski resort

Winterberg is a ski resort just under 50 kms from the hostel but it's not just a winter resort. It also offers lots of exciting activities in summer. Toboggans are a big thing here. You can clamber over a string of them in the trees at the **Kletterwald** (high ropes course) or fly down the hill on one at the **Sommerrodelbahn** toboggan run.



Watch the video - click to play

Don't Miss

Trying a portion of the delicious apple strudel in the Panorama Cafe afterwards.

Bikepark Winterberg

Flowing downhill

Bikepark Winterberg is a focal point of the downhill mountain biking sport in Germany. But it's also a mecca for learners and the newest trail is all geared up for families.

"Flow Country is 1.6 kms long and there are lots of corners and little bumps, but no big jumps," says Thomas from the on-site Bike Station which rents out equipment and provides information on routes as well as bike servicing.

For anyone who finds cycling uphill arduous, the lift runs from 9.30-5.30 each day. They also offer tuition if you want some coaching to help you get better in the saddle.



TIP

The Winterberg Bike Schule offers group lessons, private lessons and women only sessions. For booking or enquiries email info@bikepark-winterberg.de

Don't Miss

9 trails featuring a mix of jumps, drops, bends and waves, roots, gaps, sand and wooden tramways.

More Things to Do



Take a boat trip on the Biggensee

Go with the flowstone

If you're near the Biggensee and fancy going underground you must visit the **Atta Hoehle Caves** in Attendorn. This is one of the biggest flowstone cave attractions in Germany and it's best to go early in the morning to avoid the crowds. The multicoloured experience takes you right into the cliff, where in 1907, workers at the former lime works discovered a wonderland of stalagmites and stalactites.

When you emerge, blinking in the sunlight, you can pick up the **Biggolino** – a green and yellow train that runs hourly between cave, the Biggedamm and passenger boat landing zone. If you time it right you can maybe hop onto one of the luxurious White Fleet boats for lunch.



Ride the Biggolino train

Splash about in nature

Near the hostel you'll find the popular outdoor swimming pool **Naturbad Veischedetal**. A pretty spot for natural bathing, with a kiosk serving refreshments.

Walk like an Egyptian

And for something a little different you can visit the Pyramids. Yes really – there's a curious version at the **Galileo Park** - a visitor attraction with seven pyramids, four of which are filled with scientific exhibitions that encourage playful learning.

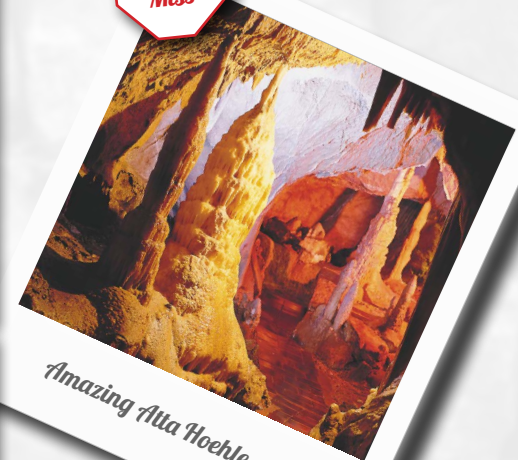
Be wild in the west

If you like going back in time, the huge **Karl May Festival** in Elspe is a well known festival that whips you off to the Wild West. Open air theatre performances and tournaments on a spectacular scale. Perfect for castle themed adventurers.



Check out the little churches

Don't Miss



Amazing Atta Hoehle caves

Eating and Drinking



Biggedamm Lighthouse Restaurant

Coffee in the round

For morning coffee try the delightfully cylindrical **Lighthouse Café**, built on the Biggedamm. We took ours outside, enjoying the sunlight glinting on the reservoir and the cyclists and birds busily buzzing by, stirring up the air.

A crazy lunch

Further down the lake the simple kiosk Café am See offers Flamkuchen; a thin pastry base with toppings. We grabbed a coffee and an ice cream at the friendly, family run **Gaststube Zum Minigolf** and enjoyed a crazy game of sending a ball uphill, as we walked towards a perfectly formed mountain church.



Delicious flamkuchen

Oodles of strudel

In Winterberg the **Panorama Cafe** near the toboggan run sells heavenly apple strudel that almost took away the point of lunch. Almost, but not quite. There were burgers too!



Apfelstrudel

Fuel for family fun

Back at **DJH Burg Bilstein Hostel**, we enjoyed simple hostel fare - filling portions of pasta bolognese for dinner and a continental style buffet breakfast that provided plenty of fuel for the day's activities.



Pasta supper

Our Awards

As we were staying in a castle, it seemed appropriate to award shields and not stars. Here's where Burg Bilstein came out victorious in the battle of the Castle Hostels. Shield scores out of 5.

Artistic Decor



Musical Entertainment - Grand Piano to Guitars



Play Areas - Games Room and Playground

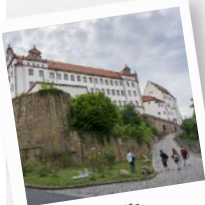


Atmospheric Medieval Building



Our German Castle Hostel Guides

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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](#).



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](#).



Stahleck

Burg Stahleck - The Fairytale on the River

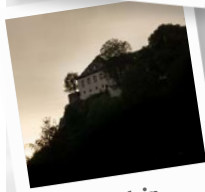
Bacharach hostel, known as **Burg Stahleck**, is all about location, location, location. Set on a hill on a bend of the middle Rhine, the view is either sparkling in the sunlight or moody in the mist. There's nothing as pleasurable as enjoying board games and drinks on the terrace at sunset, especially 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 offers 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](#).



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](#).

