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Tourists find a forest of options for climbing family trees

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Credit the Internet and baby boomers. For Americans of European lineage, the urge to learn the stories of our ancestors on the other side of the pond continues to fuel a strong interest in ancestral travel.

Genealogy ranks among the top search categories on the Web, led by members of the 50-plus generation who have reached a stage in life where they have the time, the resources and the inclination to look back on the trail left by early European immigrants.



(Katherine Rodeghier)

For many of these Americans, the trail leads to Germany. A U.S. Census survey indicates 50.7 million U.S. citizens claim German ancestry, more than any other ethnic group. (The Irish are second at 36.9 million.)

And Germany has plenty to offer ancestral travelers, including three museums that tell the emigrants' stories.

The German Emigration Center in Bremerhaven, Europe's largest emigration museum, is on docks where 7 million emigrants, German as well as Eastern European, once stood. It captures the fear and hope they felt as they embarked on a new life.

Visitors experience the museum (dah-bremerhaven.de) through the eyes of one of 15 emigrants whose name appears on a boarding pass they receive upon entering. The pass triggers audio recordings telling the emigrant's personal story at exhibits along the way. One pass follows Johann Dietel, who left Bremerhaven in 1848 and settled in Oswego, where he worked as a farmhand before buying his own farm in western Illinois.

The horrific conditions that Dietel endured in steerage aboard a 19th-century sailing vessel are portrayed, as well as the more humane emigrant quarters aboard the first steamship vessels and finally the relative luxury of the ocean liners of the early 20th century. Exhibits also convey the obstacles new arrivals faced at New York's Ellis Island.

In Hamburg, Ballinstadt is what remains of Germany's Ellis Island (ballinstadt.net). Because emigrants who were refused entrance to the United States, often for poor health, were sent back at the expense of the shipping line, the Hapag company wisely built this facility to check the health of emigrants before putting them on its ships. Museum exhibits occupy emigration halls that once housed dormitories, a hospital, dining hall, church and synagogue.

In 1889, Hapag transferred its trans-Atlantic service to Cuxhaven and built a passenger terminal that operated until 1966. The Hapag Terminal now is a museum with exhibits on emigration in the 20th century (hapag-hallen-cuxhaven-eng.jimdo.com).

All three museums provide free access to Ancestry.com for visitors to search passenger lists and other resources for information about their ancestors. But the search for data usually begins months, maybe years before travelers arrive in Germany. Genealogists have made a business conducting research for Americans seeking their German roots, and tour companies have sprung up to take them to places where their ancestors once walked.

"Some just want to drive through the area where they know their ancestors lived; others want to find their hometown, their church and even meet living relatives," said Wolfgang Grams, whose Research and Travel company (routes.de) evolved from an academic project at the University of Oldenburg, where he teaches. He not only organizes tours but also conducts genealogy research and consults on migration studies.

Family Tree Tours (familytreetours.com) is run by St. Louis-based genealogist Kathy Wurth, who organizes ancestral trips to German-speaking countries. Finding tangible evidence of their roots "really is an emotional thing for most people," Wurth said.

For tourists looking for something more than a walk on the beach, it's a can't-miss trip for deeper meaning.

Other resources

Because every country organizes its historical records differently, the best results often come for professional researchers familiar with the local language and customs. A sampling of resources and emigration sights in other European countries:

Ireland/Northern Ireland: This is a special year for anyone of Irish ancestry to return to their roots because the Irish government is backing a grass-roots initiative dubbed Gathering Ireland 2013. It kicked off in Dublin on New Year's Eve and continues throughout 2013 with family reunions, clan gatherings and sporting, culinary and cultural events. View events by date, map or county at thegatheringireland.com.

When in Ireland, visit the Dunbrody Famine Ship, a reconstruction of an emigrant ship with a database of passenger lists, in New Ross. In Strokestown, the Famine Museum balances the desperation of tenants with the grandeur of the landowner's Georgian Palladian mansion. The Ulster American Folk Park, with its Centre for Migration Studies, in Castletown, Northern Ireland, is in a farmhouse of an emigrant who founded the Mellon Bank in Pittsburgh.

If you're tracing Irish roots, have a look at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast (www.proni.gov.uk), the National Archives of Ireland in Dublin (nationalarchives.ie) and the Irish Family History Foundation in Newbridge (rootsireland.ie).

Several tour operators offer roots tours, but a few also offer some genealogy research to get you started. Custom Ireland (customireland.com) partners with accredited genealogist Helen Kelly (www.helenkelly.com). Family Ulster (www.familyulster.com), specializes in Northern Ireland but will arrange a visit to Scotland for Americans of Scottish-Irish descent whose ancestors first immigrated to Ulster. Lynott Tours (lynotttours.com) uses professional genealogists.

England: William the Conqueror commissioned the first survey of land and landowners, a document called the Domesday Book. The first draft, completed in 1086, contained more than 13,000 settlements. The book can be accessed online at domesdaybook.co.uk, but if you're in London, peek at the real thing housed in a special chest in the National Archives in Kew. Also in London, the British Library has 13 million books and 920,000 journals, and the Society of Genealogists (sog.org.uk) opens its library to nonmembers for a small fee.

Wales: About 2 million U.S. residents claim Welsh ancestry. Among the online resources for exploring Welsh roots are the National Library of Wales llgc.org.uk and freebmd.org.uk, which have records of births, marriages and deaths for England and Wales.

Ancestry research in Wales must surmount the Welsh language as well as many social and legal differences from England. Former journalist Joanna Masters, a genealogist who specializes in Welsh ancestry, founded Where You're From (where-youre-from.com), which uses a network of researchers and guides in creating escorted or independent tours.

Scotland: The tourism bureau Visit Scotland posts pointers on researching Scottish roots as well as itineraries by clan at ancestralscotland.com. If you're in Edinburgh, visit the Scotlands People Centre for digital genealogical archives going back 500 years.

Among the tour operators offering genealogy tours are Scots Family (scotsfamily.com) and Scottish Ancestor (scottishancestor.co.uk).

Poland and Eastern Europe: Among the tour operators that incorporate genealogical research is [Ancestral Attic \(ancestralattic.com\)](http://ancestralattic.com). Its genealogists in the United States and Europe will help locate an ancestor's roots or assist clients with their own research abroad by directing them to archives and providing translation.

Italy: My Italian Family (myitalianfamily.com) uses a team of researchers in Italy.