



# THE ROMANESQUE ROAD





**Opposite:** Burg Falkenstein rests on a rocky cliff above the Selk valley. **Above:** The pulpit inside the collegiate church St. Cyriakus in Frose.

Entered in Magdeburg, the Romanesque Road runs through Saxony-Anhalt like a figure eight and includes seventy-two cathedrals, abbeys, and castles in sixty towns. With so many sights to choose from, visitors can easily put together an itinerary mixing city cathedrals, small village churches, rural monasteries, and imposing castles to experience the best of the Middle Ages.

Romanesque architecture dates from the late tenth to the thirteenth century, from which point it evolved into Gothic. It is characterized by semi-circular arches, columns and incredibly thick walls with few openings, which were often necessary to support the heavy vaulting that replaced the flat wooden roofing. It is often found in the many churches built during this period, a result of both increased wealth due to trade and religious revival.

The area between the Harz Mountains and the Elbe River was once one of the most important areas of Europe in the Middle Ages. Otto I "The Great" was crowned the first Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 962, ruling a large portion of Europe from Magdeburg, near the east-

ernmost border of the empire. It was from here that he launched his campaign to Christianize the heathen Slavs.

As it was Otto's seat of power, Magdeburg is the appropriate place to start exploring the route, beginning with the Magdeburger Dom, Otto's final resting place. The current Gothic cathedral, officially known as the *Dom zu Magdeburg St Mauritius und Katharina*, was built in 1209 following a fire that almost completely destroyed the Romanesque church. However, several Romanesque elements remain. Impressive works of art include thirteenth-century sculptures of the ten virgins and a memorial for the dead of World War I by Ernst Barlach.

One of the best-preserved Romanesque churches, and Magdeburg's oldest building, is the monastery of *Unserer Lieben Frauen*. It dates back to 1064 and today houses a concert hall and art museum.

Northwest from Magdeburg is the ruined church near Hundisburg (built around 1200), all that remains of the village of Nordhusen. The village of Nordhusen was deserted in favor of neighboring Hundisburg sometime in

Experience the Middle Ages through Romanesque architecture in the small cities and villages of Saxony-Anhalt. BY ZAC STEGER

Photos courtesy Zac Steger



the mid fifteenth century and the church fell into disrepair shortly after.


Several small villages with Romanesque churches dot this part of the northern route until we reach the Hansestadt Salzwedel. This small town in the Altmark was once a part of the famous Hanseatic League. Here, among a beautifully eclectic mix of half-timbered and gothic brick architecture, is the St. Lorenzkirche, a beautiful red brick church built around 1250, as the Romanesque period transitioned to Gothic.

Havelberg's Dom St. Marien was built between 1279 and 1330 after the original church had burned down, reflecting both Romanesque and Gothic styles. It includes a valuable display of stained glass windows dating back to the fourteenth century, mainly depicting the lives of Christ and Mary.

Several small village churches between Havelberg and Magdeburg are worth seeing. The three-aisled St. Marien und St. Willibrord basilica at Schönhausen is not only impressive for its Romanesque attributes, but also as the site of Otto von Bismarck's baptism.

Dating back to 1200, the village church at Wust has undergone many changes, as indicated by the Baroque roof bonnet and half-timbered tower. It is also the final resting place of Hans Hermann von Katte, a Prussian officer and close friend (some believe lover) of Friedrich II (Frederick the Great). When their plan to escape to Great Britain and return to conquer King Friedrich Wilhelm II failed, von Katte was beheaded.

The southern route arguably offers the best overall selection and concentration of sights on the route, including fine examples of half-timbered architecture. From

The image shows the interior of a Romanesque chapel crypt. It features large, thick columns with decorative capitals, supporting a series of rounded arches. The floor is covered with blue plastic sheeting. In the background, there is a small, arched window. The lighting is warm and comes from the window and possibly from the camera flash.

**Above:** Capitals in the crypt of the chapel at Konradsburg are some of the best examples of Romanesque architecture in the area. Courtesy Zac Steger. **Top right:** Chapel at the Konradsburg in Ermsleben. Courtesy Zac Steger. **Below right:** The "Black Kitchen" at the Konradsburg helps re-create the Middle Ages for visitors. Courtesy Zac Steger.



Magdeburg the route heads southwest towards the Harz Mountains and first important sight at Halberstadt.

A bishopric was founded at Halberstadt in the eighth century, becoming a station for Carolingian missionaries. Though eighty percent of the city was destroyed during World War II, many of the notable sights have been rebuilt or restored. Two Romanesque churches are found here; the Liebfrauenkirche (1005), which includes impressive plaster reliefs from the Romanesque era, and the much-celebrated Dom of St. Stephanus, whose origins go back to the ninth century.

The St. Stephanus church treasury has one of the most extensive and impressive collections of medieval church treasures in Europe. A new exhibition opened in 2008 featuring three hundred of roughly six hundred fifty pieces, including medieval tapestries, robes, reliquaries, and other gold work. While the cathedral as we see it today is from a Gothic-style reconstruction, many Romanesque elements remain.

Quedlinburg, an UNESCO World Heritage Site, is one of the most important and most visited stops along the

route. Many come for the medieval old town, filled with beautiful half-timbered architecture, however, the castle complex includes one of Germany's most important Romanesque structures—the Stiftskirche St. Servatius.

Consecrated in 1129, the church contains many important treasures of Romanesque art, as well as many precious books and manuscripts. American soldiers looted the church at the end of World War II, though many items, including the relics of Saint Servatius, made their way back in 1993. The crypt contains the remains of King Heinrich I, the first king of the Germans, and his wife, Mathilde.

In the small village of Frose stands the Stiftskirche St. Cyriakus, founded in 950 under the Margrave Gero, who maintained a close relationship with Holy Roman Emperor Otto I. Twentieth-century renovations required the removal of the church organ, which revealed the west work from the earliest building of the church and convent. The church is noted for having no crypt.

Margrave Gero also founded Stiftskirche St. Cyriakus in Gernrode, one of the most beautiful and best-preserved basilicas on the route.

Not far away is the Konradsburg at Emsleben. Benedictines took over the buildings of the castle from the nobles in 1120. The monastery church of St. Sixtus is noted for having some of the best examples of Romanesque architecture in its crypt with elaborately decorated columns. Looking around this somewhat remote location, you get a feel for what it may have been like in the Middle Ages. It is even possible to rent parts of the complex, including the famous Black Kitchen, for private events.

The House of Konradsburg also built the next site on the route, Burg Falkenstein. It was in this mighty twelfth-century fortress that Eike von Repgow wrote the "Sachsenspiegel" in the early thirteenth century. It is the most important book of law from the Middle Ages because it was both an early example of written German and because of its continued effect on German law.

Burg Falkenstein has numerous displays relating to medieval life in the castle, including bedrooms, an impressive kitchen, cellars, and a chapel. Visitors can also see several falcons on display in the courtyard.

Further on is Ballenstedt, considered the oldest ancestral home of the House of Ascania and houses the tomb of Albert the Bear, one of the most famous members of the family. A collegiate chapter was founded here in 1043 and became a monastery not long after.

Burg Querfurt is one of the largest fortresses in Germany, featuring Romanesque chapel and towers. Querfurt was the birthplace of Saint Bruno, a missionary who was beheaded while trying to spread Christianity to the Russians in 1009.

At the southern most part of the route stands Naumburg's cathedral of St. Peter and Paul, perhaps most noted





**Below:** Originally dating back to 975, the church at Nienburg reflects the transition between Romanesque and Gothic styles. **Right:** Ballenstedt is the oldest ancestral home of the Ascanian dynasty. **Far right:** The basilica of St Georg und Pancratius in Hecklingen dates back to 1150 and is considered one of the best preserved Romanesque churches along the route.





for the statues of the church founders, including Margrave Ekkehard II and his wife, Uta von Ballenstedt. It features one of the oldest and best-preserved hall crypts in Germany, an excellent example of early Romanesque, as well as an impressive treasury.

A short distance further is the cathedral at Merseburg. It was founded in 1015 by Archbishop Thitmar and consecrated in the presence of Henry II, the last Ottonian king of the Holy Roman Empire, who was later canonized. While much of the cathedral was rebuilt in Renaissance and Gothic styles in later centuries, the original hall crypt is an important example of early Romanesque architecture.

Few consider Halle to be particularly attractive thanks, in part, to years of industrial pollution, though this city of Händel and the famous Halloren chocolates has its own charm nevertheless. The ruins of legendary Giebichenstein Castle sit high above the banks of the river Saale, dating back to 961. Today, the lower complex houses the College of Art and Design.

Further up the Saale is Bernburg and the late twelfth-century Waldau church, St. Stephani, considered to be



the archetype of Romanesque village church architecture. Within walking distance is the town's second sight, the Romanesque Eulenspiegel tower at the otherwise Renaissance styled Schloß Bernburg.

It is just a short distance to the village Nienburg and the monastery of St. Marien und St. Cyprian. Founded in 975, it displays the transition from Romanesque to Gothic styles despite several fires and alterations.

After a winding tour through the Medieval era, the route's final stop is Hecklingen and the basilica of St. Georg und Pancratius. Fourteen stucco angels from the thirteenth century decorate the interior of this unassuming church, referred to as the "Peak of Saxon Byzantinism."

While Romanesque architecture can be found through-



out Europe, the concentration of sites along the Romanesque Route in Sachsen-Anhalt provides a unique view into life in the Middle Ages. Whether marveling at the impressive castles or enjoying the view from a small church in a village that time seems to have forgotten, you are certain to come away with a lasting impression of the age.

**For more information, visit the following websites:**

Strasse der Romanik: [www.romanikstrasse.de](http://www.romanikstrasse.de).

Sachsen-Anhalt Tourism: [www.sachsen-anhalt-tourismus.de](http://www.sachsen-anhalt-tourismus.de).

Magdeburg Tourism: [www.magdeburg-tourist.de](http://www.magdeburg-tourist.de).

Halberstadt Cathedral: [www.dom-und-domschatz.de](http://www.dom-und-domschatz.de).

Konradsburg: [www.konradsburg.com](http://www.konradsburg.com). **GL**