

Bavarian Iron Route -- Bayerische Eisenstrasse

Along twenty-some odd towns for 120km in eastern [Bavaria](#), is the Bavarian Iron Route. It's called the *Bayerische Eisenstrasse* in German, but no matter what language you're speaking the history of it dates back centuries. Mining is not entirely a new concept, believe it or not.

And not just here in the [Upper Palatinate](#), the Bavarian Iron Route is part of a larger network known as the Cultural Path of Iron that runs into Austria, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia & Slovakia, Romania, and Italy.

To be quite frank, I scratched my head wondering what in the world was iron used for in the Middle Ages. It's not as if they used it to make steel for building skyscrapers. So, what was all the ore used for? It was used for cannons and cannonballs, agricultural tools (like ploughs and pitchforks), torture apparatus (like the Iron Maiden and thumbscrews), and for all those Knights in Shining Armor.

Go figure, I learned something new today. You'll also learn something while on the Bavarian Iron Route, since these towns along the way gave it their all in mining, smelting, coking, and everything in-between. I still can't figure it all out. ;-)

Start Of The Bavarian Iron Route

The *Bayerische Eisenstrasse* works in a north-south direction, since it isn't a circular scenic route. And it starts in [Pegnitz](#), where the mines eventually closed in 1968 after being operational for hundreds of years. The *Kleiner Johannes* mine in its heyday produced over 400,000 tons (that's almost a million pounds) a year and employing over 600 workers. You can still see part of the caves created from all the mining.

The *Farberdegrube* (Color Earth Pit) in its Troschenreuth district, which is used as raw material for paint manufacturing for the ceramic industry, is the only one of its kind in Germany. The raw material then went on to the *Farberdemühle* (Color Earth Mill) in its Hainbronn district (a very beautiful half-timbered house, BTW), where they took the red earth from the nearby *Farberdegrube* and finely ground it.

Kloster Michelfeld is the next stop, and who doesn't appreciate a medieval monastery from the 12th century? But, the monks did more than just pray a gazillion times a day. They operated the *Hammerwerke*, which is why the place is listed on the Bavarian Iron Route.

[Auerbach in der Oberpfalz](#) was a huge coal and steel industry town. More than 16 million tons were excavated from the Old Pit between 1904 and 1978, which is why the town had to build a mining colony for all its workers. The miners prayed at the Chapel of St. Barbara (the patron saint of miners) at the Church of St. John the Baptist; and now the mine is a nature area after it closed in

1987.

When you get to Königstein pay a visit to the *Maximiliansgrotte*, which is one of the largest and most beautiful dripstone caves in Germany.

Inhabited since the Romans, Edelsfeld went on to become big to the mining community. The outdoor museum *Goglhof* (which is only open on the 2nd & 4th Sunday of the month) is an interesting way to see how life was lived here. You're also welcome to visit Edelsfeld's Romanesque & Baroque Protestant church too.

Mining in [Sulzbach-Rosenberg](#) began in 1348, and continued right up into the 20th century. The *Maxhütte* Steel Plant was the largest of its kind in Bavaria, where 9,000 people worked in the industry and its 5 Blast Furnances. Want to know more? Head to the City Museum.

Ready for a quick sidestep? Good. Go ahead and visit [Hirschau](#) and its Schnaittenbach district. You'll meet with a 120-meter high white hill of quartz sand. The nearby *GeoPark Kaolinrevier* details much of the land's kaolin mining history at 12 stations along a 6km walking trail.

Back in Sulzbach-Rosenberg and continuing on on the main route of the Bavarian Iron Route, you'll pass through Poppenricht, where even more ore was mined during Bavaria's mining heyday. A map from the 17th century was found here, mentioning a number of other big mining hotspots in the area.

[Amberg](#) is the next town, and if you were here in the 1930s and '40s you'd have seen the *Hermann-Göring-Reichswerke*. It was one of the biggest mining plants of the [Third Reich](#), but mining had been done here from as far back as the Middle Ages. Its location along the Vils and Naab Rivers had something to do with it; and it wasn't just mined here — smelting was a huge boom to the economy.

By the 1960's mining was finished, but today you can see the *Altstadt* (Old Town) and *Stadtmauer*, *Rathaus*, the Franciscan Monastery, and the Basilica of St. Martin that mining built. I'd also visit the City Museum and Archaeology Museum if I were you.

Another sidestep can be done to the village of Stulln — where you can take a guided tour every hour into the Quartz pit called *Reichhart-Schacht*. If you want something rustic to drink & eat, visit the *Steigerhäusl*.

With mining came big money, enough to build the Schloss Theuren in [Kümmersbruck](#). You're looking at a Baroque castle now, but it was originally built in the 15th century. Two centuries before that, smelting started in the town, as well as making charcoal. Later on came an Iron Hammerworks that was added to the industrial side of the town.

The monks get in on the mining action again in the town of Ensdorf. The 12th century Benedictine monks had their own charcoal blast furnace, and by the 15th century they had a *Hammerwerk*. I guess idle hands really are the devil's workshop. ;-)

Time to move on to Rieden, a small town famous for smelting during the 14th & 15th centuries.

Then along to Schmidmühlen, where manufacturing had been going on way back into the 11th century. I love its 17th century Renaissance Upper Castle — which is where you'll find the town's Homeland Museum.

Dietldorf was another mining town, but the Italian Renaissance Schloss is what you'll most likely remember most. I think the same can be said for the late-Gothic manor house in Rohrbach.

There is another manor house to see in the village of Carolinenhütte, but its claim to fame on the Bavarian Iron Route is because you'll find the oldest iron foundry here.

Kallmünz links the Bavarian Iron Route with the Salt Road, but everyone comes to see the grave stone of Joachim of Bertholdshofen, a master hammersmith. They also come for a leisurely canoe ride (you can rent one if you didn't bring your own).

Five places remain on the *Bayerische Eisenstrasse*, and in Heitzenhofen (part of Duggendorf) during the 15th century more than 500 tons were mined every year. That's a heckava lot of stuff to be pulling out of the ground, don't ya think?

Our next place on the route isn't a town at all. It's a castle. Burg Wolfsegg might be more famous for its hauntings of the White Lady than its 35-meter deep hole. But, the area has many caves — and the castle offers guided tours on special dates every summer. Which is not, by the way, the same as going to see its Cave Museum.

A destroyed castle (it didn't survived the [Thirty Years' War](#)) awaits you in the village of Etterzhausen,

Now it's on to our final stop, [Regensburg](#). During the days of the Romans it was called *Castra Regina*, and the city now has a UNESCO designation. However, it was huge to the mining and salt trade.

Visit Regensburg's History Museum, Navigation Museum, Natural History Museum, Reichstag Museum, and *Thurn und Taxis Museum* (a.k.a. *Fürstliches Marstallmuseum*) before you leave. OK?

If you were as confused as I was on all this mining stuff (and what it was all used for) then I sure hope traveling along the Bavarian Iron Route helped.

Bavarian Iron Route Web Site

For your convenience, here's the official Web site of the [Bavarian Iron Route](#).