

Hainich National Park -- The UNESCO Badge Makes It Even Better

On December 31, 1997 the state of [Thuringia](#) got its very own National Park, known as the Hainich National Park. And less than 14 years later, on June 25, 2011, the Hainich National Park was designated as a [UNESCO site](#), for its ancient beech forests, and the protection of said beech forest.

You'll find the Hainich National Park, which is part of the (larger) Hainich forest, in the southern part of the Eichsfeld-Hainich-Werratal Nature Park, encompassing 75 square kilometers of the 870 square kilometer nature park. (The Hainich forest is 160 square kilometers, BTW.)

I know it sounds a bit complicated, and it's not like the entire nature park is pure forest. There are over a hundred villages and almost a hundred thousand people living in the larger nature park. That many do not live in the Hainich National Park, however.

How could they? The area was once a military training area. This part of the forest, by the way, is the youngest section, just over two decades old.

It's almost like a triangle the way the towns are set up around the national park. One entrance is found in the village of Lauterbach. There's a youth hostel on the Harsberg (known as *Urwald-Life-Camp*) for anyone interested in staying in a hamlet of less than 700 people. Maybe you'd like to come for Sunday services at the St. Nicholas Church?

Lauterbach can be found on the western edge of the Hainich National Park, making it a great place to camp. The other three compass directions of the Hainich National Park are each as unique as the three other towns found on its edges.

As I mentioned before, there is a section of the forest that's only a couple of decades old. You'll find that in the southern part of the forest.

In the north there is a "prehistoric" Cult Path with all sorts of shrines; and the eastern part is where you'll see the "Canopy Trail" — a boardwalk of sorts, where researchers and every day people can get totally engrossed in the tree tops.

From the tops of the trees to the forest floor all sorts of wildlife can be found. Beeches aren't the only trees within the Hainich National Park, there are Ash trees, Linden trees, and Maple trees too.

Unless you're a mushroom expert, I wouldn't try eating any of the fungi that grows here. OK?

Keep your eyes peeled everywhere. You never know what kind of animal or insect you're going to

see. Wildcats call the park home, as do more than a dozen species of bat, seven kinds of woodpeckers, and 500 kinds of wood beetles.

Great, now I got the heebie-jeebies. I'm going into town. Ain't no place better than [Eisenach](#), which is part of the *Bund der Lutherstädte* (League of Luther Cities).

I'll forget all about the bugs and beetles in the comfort that Johann Sebastian Bach was born here. I love its medieval *Nikolaiturm* with *Nikolaitor*, and my favorite: [Wartburg Castle](#) is nearby. Oh, look at that... another UNESCO site!

Just when I was starting to get over the whole insect thing, Eisenach gave me its canyons and gorges (like the Dragon's Gorge), where even more wildlife lives.

Perhaps I should have gone to the Hainich National Park Visitors Center in [Bad Langensalza](#) first? ;-)

I'm better now, because I know a town that's labeled "Bad" is OH SOO GOOD. I love my spa experiences, but I also love history — so I'm glad to spend time in a walled medieval city (check out the *Klagetor*) with lots of half-timbered houses, castles, and a City Museum housed in the Augustian Monastery.

The fact that the place borders the Fahner Höhe, a hilly nature area with a medieval observatory, the *Bienstädter Warte*, only makes it better.

For fun on the outskirts of the park, you gotta go to [Mühlhausen \(Thuringia\)](#) where they hold a huge fair on the last weekend of August.

Famous visitors to Mühlhausen included Attila the Hun, and Bach worked here for a while in this medieval city. Follow the *Stadtmauer*, which runs along the *Altstadt* to the *Frauentor* (Women's Gate) — and the town even had its own moat.

It's been a long day here in Mühlhausen looking at the old synagogue, Jewish cemetery, the James' Church (that's now a library), the Divi-Blasi Church, and the Nikolai Church. So now I'm heading back to the western side of the Hainich National Park.

Remember, that's where the hostel is, right? Hopefully I didn't bring any bugs back with me. ;-)