

# ❁ Leipzig

## Quick orientation

Leipzig's magnificent old Hauptbahnhof claims to be the world's largest in floor area. It boasts 24 platforms and a dizzying amount of modern shopping mall. At the northwest edge of the old town, you can get from there to pretty much anywhere you'd want to go in the city by tram, bus, or the spanking new underground S Bahn City Tunnel.



Welcome to Brauerei an der Thomaskirche

The shape of the town roughly resembles a not-quite-inflated beach ball. The station was built in 1915 by two railroad companies; each got its own identical entrance. Exit from either one, and the old town lies in front of you to the south across a large expanse of tram lines and an even larger park, Willy Brandt Platz. Cross the park and keep walking away from the station, and you're in the town center in less than 10 minutes. You can get to the spectacular Neues Rathaus on the other side of the old town in less than 20 minutes if you don't stop to drink.

## Station breaks

The multi-leveled and very modern shopping area that fills the Hauptbahnhof will sell you almost anything—except an interesting beer. Unless we've missed a hidden gem, here are your limited options.

There's a small pils bar opposite Gleis 8 offering a light and dark Hasseröder from nearby Wernigerode and some international brands of draft, in a haze of cigarette smoke. To escape its smelly confines, cross Willy Brandt Platz in front of the station and head into the city center on Nikolaistrasse. On your left and down a set of stairs is the King's Head English Pub (Nikolaistr. 40), which has Newcastle and Guinness and a few others on tap. We found it dark and gloomy, but others might call it atmospheric. It opens at 6 PM most days. On our last trip it was "closed for remodeling." Goodness knows it could use it, but we've encountered too many "temporary" closures that never reopened to

be confident about this place. For a more German experience, continue just past our three-block limit to the Gasthaus Alte Nikolaischule; see below.

We try to stay away from America when we're not in America, but if you're homesick, the Champions bar in the Marriott cooks up a good burger and you can wash it down with U.S.-style pitchers of Krostitzer Pils or Schwarz. For other options, walk past the Marriott headed into town, jink right on Brühl and then left onto Reichstrasse, and you'll find a series of bars, all modern and all pretty dull. If you have the time to walk a little farther, skip all of these and head for the Brauhaus at the Thomaskirche. Several trams will take you there easily and the S Bahn drops you at the market in less than five minutes.

## History and culture

Leipzig is proud of much of its long past and is better than many cities about openly confronting the nastiness of the 20th century. Commerce and music have come to define the heart of the city. It was a major trading city of the Middle Ages and its stock exchange was one of the premier houses of Saxony. Leipzig retains its character as a commercial city, not only in its extensive (and expensive) shopping areas, but in the myriad trade shows and exhibitions that fill the winter months. Bach played the organ at the Thomaskirche and the street musicians in Leipzig are among the best in Europe.

The Nazi party had a harder time finding traction in Saxony than in some other parts of Germany, but the Third Reich exercised as much control over it as anywhere else. The U.S. Army's 69th Infantry Division occupied Leipzig before the division of Germany that put Saxony into the Soviet zone. In a reaction against the far right, some welcomed the formation of the Communist DDR—although by no means a majority.

Our friend Matthias at the Hopfenspeicher was born in 1958 and grew up in the DDR. He shared his thoughts about the era as we sipped Reudnitzer's excellent (and now, sadly, extinct) Naturtrüb Pilsner.

*"I'm not a possession person. I never minded not having things. And we had fun. We could make jokes and enjoy ourselves. But travel—that was what I really wanted. I could go to Poland and Rumania (no one wanted to go there) and Budapest was a little bit like going to the West—they had signs on the stores and advertisements. We could drink beer in Prague—all of us went to U Flekü. But I saw Paris and America on the television and knew I could never go there. 18th of October 1989 was a day of great fortune. I was preparing to leave—I had a wife and a young daughter (she is 24 now) and I knew I would have to leave."*

*(Were you ever afraid of the secret police?) "Yes. Not all the time, but you always had to think about who you were talking to. I think this person is my friend, but could he be someone who might talk to the police? Still we joked and talked among ourselves."*

*(And businesses that made it through the DDR era in private hands?) "They were 'private' in name and some small businesses were left alone so the leaders could say anyone could do anything he wanted to in the Republic. But there were larger concerns who really made decisions. Businesses were left alone only when it helped the leaders' image."*

Demonstrations in Leipzig in October 1989 were an important part of the peaceful revolution that ended Communist rule here. You can see films of them in the contemporary history museum, but no museum can convey the depth of the shift as well as a conversation with someone who lived through it.

### Beer styles and drinking culture

The Gose style of beer originated in Goslar, but spread to Leipzig in the late 17th century and became closely identified with the city over time. We think the Leipziger claims that the style originated in the 14th century are pretty hard to prove.

The 20th century was tough on Leipzig breweries in all sorts of ways. Most stumbled through the Depression and the war, but many were nationalized, “rationalized,” and closed during the “worker’s paradise.” In some ways it’s been even worse for the independent brewers since unification. Western capital has poured into the former DDR and bought up and closed down breweries that had somehow maintained independence during the Communist period. Others haven’t been able to meet the competition from the big breweries and have given up the ghost. In Leipzig, two major local brands that were easy to find when we started this book have disappeared.

Today most of the larger bars and Gasthäusern are affiliated with one of the big brewing chains. Ur-Krostitzer, a Radeberger brand, dominates the pub scene in the center city. It’s local and it’s not bad, but it’s almost everywhere you turn.

But as in most of Germany, a vibrant brewpub movement enlivened the urban beer scene in the 1990s and 2000s. There’s been little movement in more than a decade, but three breweries and a superb beer pub keep Leipzig clinging to our top 24 beer cities. After a significant hiatus, Gose made a phoenix-like rebirth and is now increasingly available even in the youth-oriented center city bars.

Gose brewers managed to get an exemption from the Rheinheitsgebot for this wheat-based beer flavored with coriander and salt. Gose is a genuinely distinctive beer for Germany. It can be almost as tart as Berliner Weisse, with a wheaty, lemony taste; the spices are integral but often subtle, though the salt is pretty evident. For some palates it may take a bit of getting used to, but its extremes don’t reach the challenge of some Belgian gueuzes. Despite some flavor and linguistic similarities to gueuze, which have led some of the world’s top beer experts to wonder about a connection, the term Gose seems simply to come from the city of Goslar where it originated.

Apart from Gose, you’ll find a decent range of other beers, at least for Germany. You’re deep in Schwarzbier territory here—the largest Schwarz brewery in the world, Kostritzer (not to be confused with the local Krostitzer), isn’t far away, and most local breweries brew a Schwarz. There are pilsners and some of them are quite nice. Hefeweizens, both helles and dunkles, aren’t hard to find, and there’s even a good chance you might bump into a Berliner Weisse or Kölsch. Landbier is fuller bodied than most styles and can be quite nicely hoppy as well, but is usually only available in bottles at drinks markets. Small breweries and brewpubs usually offer only three beers, some fewer, but many of the larger and regional breweries brew at least four and sometimes seven or eight, though almost none of their restaurants carry more than a small fraction of their range.

## The sixpack of drinking experiences



**Gosenschenke Ohne Bedenken** (Menckestrasse 5) is a reason in itself to come to Leipzig. The owners of the place were intimately connected with the revival and preservation of the Gose style of beer, and this is a great place to try one and sometimes more. “No Worries” serves a small but good range of other beers as well. The 500-seat beer garden can be a great place to eat good German food, but the restaurant inside is nice too, especially if the weather stinks. Service is friendly and unusually cheerful. The bar inside is fairly intimate and you may find yourself drawn into conversation even if you don’t speak German. Leipzig’s two Gose beers are usually on tap here side by side, Ohne Bedenken’s own commissioned version and the one from Bayerischer Bahnhof, but what’s interesting is to visit both locations in the same day. Jens the bar-keep at Ohne Bendenken swears that every batch of the Bahnhof’s Gose is different from the one before it, and if you try it at the brewery and again at Ohne Bedenken, it’s hard to disagree.



**Bayerischer Bahnhof** (Bayerischer Platz 1) used to be one of the main train stations in the city. The façade of the station was restored after the war—it now stands as one of the city’s most striking landmarks and one of the world’s largest paperweights. The station site was retained as an S Bahn site and now, after several years of construction, trains whiz through the City Tunnel far below the gleaming white arch on the platz. An S Bahn from the Hauptbahnhof takes about five minutes and you can hop off at the market in the old town center in even less time if you wish. A variety of trams and buses will get you there more scenically if less quickly.

Gose options at Bayerischer Bahnhof



The Bayerischer Bahnhof brewery and restaurant is a bit touristy—there’s a good chance there will be a tour group there when you are—but they make distinctive beer and they’re among the few brewers in the world who depend on Gose sales for success. In addition to the Gose, offered with more syrups and concoctions than you could imagine, Bayerischer Bahnhof brews a chalky, thickly yeasty, almost white pilsner and a similarly unfiltered Schwarz. Despite its abundance the yeast is tasty, and a second half liter goes down easy.

Food is generally well prepared, but be prepared for cream and heavy gravies on dishes for which you do not expect cream and heavy gravies. Portions can be gigantic even for Germany. An English menu is available that does an unusually good job of conveying what you’re going to eat.



**Brauerei an der Thomaskirche** (Thomaskirchhof 3) would be much like any other of hundreds of brewpubs if it were located where those other hundreds of brewpubs are located. But it’s not. Directly on a small park overlooking Bach’s home church, it’s simply a great place to drink. If you sit at the bar, check out the growler filler on your left. They’re not uncommon in the States now, but this one was here years earlier.

The beer varies from batch to batch, but at its best the unfiltered Pils can be exceptionally good. The Schwarz was even better on our last visit: nicely chocolaty, softly yeasty, and very, very smooth. Both were moreish. There’s also a seasonal—always Hefeweizen in the summer. The restaurant is Italian; the menu is large and imaginative and the pizzas and pasta are pretty good for this part of the world. The barstaff is Italian and everyone speaks English. The service has been without exception welcoming and patient. You’ll drink comfortably here.



**Brauhaus Kaiser Napoleon** (Prager Strasse 233) is fairly typical German modern brewpub, though the Napoleonic theme cutes it up a bit. The Napoleonic reference is to the Völkerschlachtdenkmal monument just down the road, which commemorates the Battle of the Nations (1813), one of the earliest of Napoleon’s major defeats. Kaiser Napoleon brews a Helles and a Dunkel, both softly yeasty and pleasant but unremarkable. The Hefeweizen comes from Wickau. The restaurant attracts an upscale and graying crowd, but the advantage is that you can hear yourself think even if it’s crowded, which it isn’t very often. A good menu suggests they might care more about food than about beer, and an extensive cocktail selection highlighted by house-made schnapps makes you wonder why they bother with the brewery at all. But the brewery, we assume, is something of a draw and they need to provide a range of reasons for people to take the longish trip out from the city. It’s easy enough, if not quick, to reach; take tram #2 or #15, get off at Prager/Russenstrasse, and you’re virtually there.



**Gasthaus Alte Nikolaischule** (Nikolaikirchhof 2) isn’t really a beer hall, but it’s a good place to have a beer on a historic square. The building was a school until it outgrew the space in the late 19th century. Its students included Bach, Schiller, and a host of other names you’ll remember from your European history course. The inside is dark and woody and the patio sports a fabulous view of the Nikolaikirche.





**Gasthaus Alte Nikolaischule**

Krostitzer Schwarz and Pils are on tap. The Krostitzer beers come from Bad Krostitz (*not* Kostritz), just a few kilometers outside of Leipzig, so at least you're drinking local.



Tram 4 reaches the Reudnitzer area a few stops outside the center city; get off at Riebeck/Oststrasse. The former Reudnitzer brewery, a typically beautiful 19th century structure, is on nearby Muehlstrasse, and its former tap is just around the corner at 38 Oststrasse. The **Brauereilokal Hopfenspeicher** was the brewery Gasthof until the Radeberger group shut down the last two local Reudnitzer products in 2012. Today it serves Ur-Krostitzer Pils, Schwarz, and Zwickel, though we hope you can get a bottle of the Sternburger beer that's now produced next door.

The Romanushof (see below) almost knocked this pub off the top six list, but while Hopfenspeicher isn't the beer mecca it was five years ago, we still like the place. It's a type of brewery-owned big pub you don't often find in big cities any more. Hopfenspeicher is typical in many ways, although the bowling alley upstairs gives it a certain distinction, and it keeps later hours than most other similar places. A modest entrance belies its size. Its very pleasant garden backs up to the brewery property, so you have the sense you really are drinking at the brewery if you forget what's being brewed over there. A covered lounge area of the garden is very inviting, with a giant round communal table. Inside, the décor is typical Gasthof with lots of wood and

some copper, and some of the tables have their own metered taps. Good if a bit predictable German food is offered; the English menu is one of the few we've seen that is mostly accurate and clear. The Radeberger corporation owns the Hopfenspeicher, though the same family has managed it for over a decade. We hope the big guys leave the management alone—it's still a fine place to drink.

### Other places to explore

If you have time before or after your required visit to Ohne Bedenken, a short walk can take you to **Gohliser Wirtschaft** at #20 on Gohliser Strasse. A few years ago, they featured several Gohliser beers from Hartsmannsdorf Brewery. We know it still pours the Gohliser Pils. It also serves Saxon style meals at a fair price. It's an unassuming bit of a pub, but we've always received a warm welcome there.

A few big brewers still compete for attention in Leipzig, and with some leg work you can sample a range of fairly well-known beers. If you're relatively new to Germany, you can find a variety of novel beers in the restaurants and bars in the passages off the market and around the Thomaskirche. The draft Früh Kölsch, for example, at **Johann S.**, almost opposite the church, is disappointing only if you've just come from Cologne.

If you ride the trams and keep an eye out, you'll also find a number of regional beers including Freiburger, Einseidler, and maybe still a few Bauer beers. The Bauer family brewed in Leipzig until 2009 and now contract-brew elsewhere, we think at Hartmannsdorf. The bar scene runs along Barfüsser Strasse, essentially an alley that leads off the market square. On a warm evening the street is crammed with café seating with hardly a spare chair, but there are indoor seats going begging in most of the bars. The young and affluent pack Spizz, but we like the other simpler places like **Bellini's** better. There's some choice of beers and even the Irish Pub serves the local Gose beers.

The area along Karl Liebknecht Strasse south of the center city is an alternative scene that draws crowds on weekends.

### Where to eat

**Auerbachs Keller** (Grimmaische Strasse 2-4) is an atmospheric downstairs cavern and offers a huge menu at prices that make you think you're in Berlin. The **Mephisto Bar** is on the ground floor upstairs in the huge gallery and is a decent place to sip a very expected Krostitzer Pils, or three other usual suspects, on a rainy day. Downstairs looks quite old; the bar is 1920s railroad station décor.

Slightly less atmospheric but much more affordable is **Romanushof**, just down the street from the tourist office at 21-23 Katharinenstrasse. We think it's one of the best things to happen to Leipzig in a while. The Baroque building dates from the early 18th century and was a coffeehouse when Bach, Schiller, and Goethe lived in Leipzig. The Romanushof has the decency not to claim they actually all did indeed have coffee there, but we suppose they could have.

The current restaurant is only a few years old, though the stucco vaulted columns and ceilings give it a much older feel. The downstairs vault feels even older. While it's not a beer destination, it does give you the chance to taste Ur-Krostitzer and Radeberger pilsners side by side. Radeberger was one of the few quality products to come out of the DDR, but other breweries have caught up in quality. When it was time to reorder, we chose Krostitzer's fuller body and better balance.

Food items emphasize Saxon cooking; even the schnitzel featured a distinctive breading with a touch of paprika. Parts of pigs show up in all sorts of interesting ways and there are at least a couple of fish dishes as well. An amuse-bouche of a small pickled cheese salad (much better than it sounds) was an unexpected surprise in a restaurant in this price range. Specials are listed on a meter-tall chalkboard that is brought to your table for your order. Entrees run between 10 and 15 euros. The menu features a range of small dishes specifically designed to be consumed with beer, so you can be adventurously Saxon without risking a fortune.

## Where to stay

The Hotel Astoria was once the pride of the downtown, but it's a shell now, so unless you want to get some help from the tourist office to get out of the downtown area, or fork out some serious money on the luxury hotels that remain, you're probably going to have to settle for a chain. The Best Western is across the street from the east end of the Bahnhof, but the rooms are among the smallest in Europe: trust us. Better to exit either of the main portals of the station and walk across the street. The hotels are clustered between there and the Nikolaikirche.

Novotel is on the corner of Strauss and Goethe, which is not as romantic an intersection as it sounds. On the back side of the Novotel is the cheaper but clean Ibis. Continue on Brühl and you'll see the Marriott and the four star Park. If you're there in the summer, even the upscale chains offer good prices. Try to get a rate with breakfast—many European buffet breakfasts will allow you to skip lunch altogether.

The Westin towers high above the city from its location west of the Bahnhof; you can find your way back from town just by looking up at the skyline. The rather charmingly decorated Mercure Art (careful, there's another Mercure far from here) is a long walk north from the Hauptbahnhof, but once you're there at Wilhelm Liebknecht Platz you're staying at an intersection of at least five tram lines.

## What to see

Leipzig's center city is mostly traffic free and compact enough to walk easily. Most of it is restored or preserved pretty well. Much of the massive dig required for the City Tunnel (see Bayerischer Bahnhof above) has been covered over and the city is a good deal more walkable than it was a few years ago, though scars remain.

The tourist office has a nice brochure laying out a walking tour of the downtown area. If you find directions at the Bahnhof to the tourist office, ignore them. Walk straight out of the station and down Nikolaistraße two blocks, turn right on Brühl,



and walk past the gigantic eyesore shopping center to Katharinenstrasse. Turn left for a block to #8. You'll see the "i" sign on the left. It's open from 9:30 to 6 PM on weekdays, but closes earlier on weekends. In the winter, it shuts on weekends altogether. Curious.

Keep going on Katharinenstrasse and you'll end up in the old marketplace, where you'll find the old Rathaus and a slew of restaurants. See "Other" below. The Nikolaikirche and school are a few blocks off to the left of the Markt, and Thomaskirche, with its brewery, is straight ahead.

Johann Sebastian Bach was choir director at the Thomaskirche for over a quarter of a century. This gorgeous late-Gothic pile shows little of its over-500-year age, bright and cheery inside, with two magnificent organs. Choirs are allowed to buy "permission to sing" sacred music a capella in front of Bach's grave, so you might get a free mini-concert. Outside, in the church's shadow, is a favorite venue for local musicians (frequently excellent) to busk.

However, our "don't miss" choice for Leipzig, if you have any interest in recent history, is the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum, or Contemporary History Museum (Grimmaische Strasse 6, near the Markt). Save at least an hour or two for it. Find it by looking for the statue of a striding man with the red boot of Communism and a fist in a Nazi salute. His outstretched foot is trying to move away from repression into a new and free future. Entry to the museum is free, but photography is forbidden and they clearly hope to help pay the bills by selling souvenir books showing what you couldn't take pictures of. Most of the exhibits are in German only, but you don't have to be a linguist to figure out what's going on. Exhibits range from the table used by the Communist Politburo leadership to a number of films and pictures showing the demonstrations that brought an end to the DDR. A small theater shows portions of anti-Nazi movies, produced by the Communists after the war, that strike at religion and the far right at the same time. Noir has rarely been noisier.

### Scams and alerts

It's a city. An above-average number of street beggars inhabit the area across the street from the station, but we haven't seen them cause any particular trouble. Steer clear of the drunken groups at night there, but again we haven't seen anyone threatened.

Perhaps in a futile attempt to limit the drunken action, any shop that sells beer at the station closes early and it's very hard to find a downtown location of any sort that sells alcohol at night. Asian restaurants will sell you beer if you're not particular about the brand. Late night shops exist, but most are away from the downtown area. There is one almost opposite the Bayerischer Bahnhof that stays open until 10 or 10:30. The S Bahn probably gets you there faster than you can find beer near the Hauptbahnhof.

### Further information

It's almost universal to greet people with "Hallo" and depart from them with "Tschuss!"

## Day trip

### Chemnitz

Frequent trains from the Leipzig Hauptbahnhof can take you to Chemnitz. Named Karl Marx Stadt during the DDR period, it's now a monument to capitalism. It thrived as a free Imperial City in the Middle Ages and developed into an industrial powerhouse in the 19th century. Its very success, however, made it a target of Allied bombing in World War II, and not much of the original city remains. After reunification in 1990, Western capital poured into redevelopment. Today Chemnitz has a bustling center, comfortable suburbs, and a respected technical university. And good beer.

If you want to take time away from drinking, the Saxon Museum of Technology offers impressive exhibits and the Villa Esche shows how the rich folks lived before Communism leveled things. A tourist office, which by now may have settled at Markt 1, by the town hall, can give you maps and brochures.

Chemnitz is a great town for a pub crawl because the beer scene ranges from established local-regional breweries to modern spiffy brewpubs to just plain funk. Most are in or near the city center, but we recommend one suburban jaunt before you begin your city crawl.



A tram and a bus will take you to Zwickauerstr. 478 and the **Brauerei Reichenbrand**. Reichenbrand is the sort of place we absolutely love. It's not fancy, the beers won't win a lot of international awards, and the menu is pretty ordinary Gasthaus fare, but it almost defines Gemütlichkeit. The place is clean and inviting, the beers are above average in an above-average country, and the young, friendly staff will make you feel like you've come home. It's the tap for a production brewery—you'll see the delivery trucks squeezing through the courtyard. Somehow the light wood snugs, plastic plants, and the big fake tree inside all work to create an atmosphere that makes us want to stay all day. Clean bathrooms show that someone cares. Smallish independent breweries are closing at a terrifying rate in Germany; we really hope Reichenbrand is here the next time

we get to Chemnitz—it's well worth the effort to get there.

On your way back you'll have a chance to see the Braustolz brewery looming over the end of the tram line. We didn't find a tap near the brewery, but you shouldn't have trouble finding the beers in town. The brewery offers tours.

The easiest brewery to find is **Karls Brauhaus** (Brückenstrasse 17), named for the gigantic statue of Karl Marx that still stands across the street. If anyone remembers the DDR days with fondness, we haven't met him, but plenty of Germans feel that it wasn't Marx's fault. Certainly the German Communist reality was a far cry from the workers' paradise Marx envisioned. Free market Karl hasn't fared as well as hoped, either, in this newpub—perhaps the beers we had were rushed to meet the summer demand. The atmosphere was more like a slightly grubby English pub than a German Gasthaus: a bit funky with some battered furniture. The style seemed more out of

intention than neglect or insolvency, though, and the bathrooms were fine. The menu was pretty standard German beer-bar fare; you could do worse.

By far the spiffiest brewery in town is **Turm-Brauhaus** (Neumarkt 2), opposite the gorgeous old Rathaus and modern Kaufhof department store. A big wooden staircase leads to an upper level that gives a bird's eye view of the brew house. A wide range of breweriana complements the shining copper to make the inside a somewhat more attractive place to drink than the outside so-typical square with the looming Kaufhof. The beer selection is tiny—a Helles or a copper—but the beers are good: chalky, a bit fizzy, but professionally crafted. We save this for last on a crawl not because it provides a spectacular end of the day, but because it's nearly completely unchallenging—perfect for sitting back and just drinking in beer and atmosphere at the end of a long day.

Finally, if you'd like to fill a suitcase with local and regional beers you haven't tried, the Getränkemarkt in the Ermafa Shopping Mall (Reichstrasse 58) has a great selection, most of them at or near a euro each.

### **Day trip alert**

We were told by a good source that a day trip to the brewery in Rechenberg-Bienemuehle was one of the top brewery-hunting experiences in the area. Rechenberg is a cute, very small town in a nature park with a small local brewery. There's a biker's hotel where you can stay for 8 euros (not a typo).

When Rechenberg modernized its plant, they kept the old one as a museum. It's open only for guided tours. The brewery would make a fine half-hour tour. We found the 2-hour tour numbingly boring, though if a 20-minute lecture—in German—on different spigot sizes is your cup of tea, the multi-train trek could be well worth the time. The Germans on the tour seemed to enjoy it; there were plenty of jokes—in German. If you don't speak German you won't understand any of them. If you speak just enough German, you'll understand most of the jokes are about you.