

# Halle

This central German city has **Albert Ehrnooth** singing "Halle-lujah"! Not only was Georg Friedrich Händel born here, and widely remembered, but Martin Luther gave one of his final sermons in the Marktkirche. There's even a Beatles museum – though the Fab Four never visited...

In Halle (Saale) it is hard to miss Georg Friedrich Händel. He is a vital part of the city's identity. The composer and the iconic Marktkirche (also known as Marienkirche) vie for attention in the town's market square. Händel, one hand on his hip and the other resting on the score of Messiah, stares absently towards the church where he once learned his trade as an organist.

The Händel statue in Halle's main square was partially funded by Queen Victoria, the reason being that Handel was an Englishman. Yes, if you want to upset a Hallenser, as the natives are called, you point out that Handel spent 46 years in Great Britain, became a British citizen and was buried in 1759 in Westminster Abbey. But why agitate the very welcoming locals? Let's simply agree that Händel spelt with an 'a' belongs to the Germans and Londoners can claim Händel with an 'a'.

Georg Friedrich Händel was born on February 23, 1685 in the House of the Yellow Stag, which has been known since 1948 as the Händel-Haus. Young Georg spent a reasonably comfortable childhood in this house, departing for Hamburg when he was 18 and thereafter only returning occasionally to visit his mother (who died in 1730). Over the centuries, the corner house has been redeveloped and extended to include an adjacent property as well as a lovely Renaissance

courtyard where concerts are held in the summer. Allow a couple of hours in the Händel-Haus to study hundreds of fascinating documents, scores and pictures. There is also a wonderful timber-panelled music room containing 16th-century wall-paintings. In a connecting modern building you can see important historical instruments but there are also replicas available for playing.

From the Haus it is a short and pleasant walk to the Marktkirche, completed in late Gothic style in 1554. Its two pairs of slim towers and a fifth, free-standing tower in the square are the city's main landmark. The massive Red Tower (84-metres tall) is set apart from the church and its belfry houses one of the world's most impressive carillons, which on the hour does a pretty good imitation of Big Ben.

In the Marktkirche, Martin Luther delivered one of his final sermons in January 1546 from the pulpit, which later received a marvelous, elaborately carved canopy. Three weeks after the sermon he was dead, his body briefly lying in repose in Halle on his way to the funeral. A cast of the reformer's face and hands (made out of wax) can be seen in a memorial inside the church.

We know that Händel was christened in this church and the bronze baptismal font remains intact. Young Georg Friedrich would have played on the small, but beautiful Reichel organ above



“HÄNDEL WOULD HAVE PLAYED THE BEAUTIFUL ORGAN ABOVE THE WINGED ALTARPIECE”

the winged altarpiece (by Crasach the Elder's studio). His influential teacher was the Marktkirche's cantor and composer Friedrich Wilhelm Zachow. In 1713, Johann Sebastian Bach was offered the prestigious

**TRAVEL INFO***Average Temperatures:*

Winter: 0°C – Summer: 18°C

*Currency:* Euro (AUD \$1 = 0.65 USD)*Best time to visit:* Halle has year-round appeal, but the Händel Festival in early June is a cultural highlight.**TOURIST INFORMATION**

halle.de

Marktplatz mit Raveln

position as the church's organist, but he declined, preferring to stay in Weimar. His eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann, a true virtuoso on the instrument, was for many years the church's organist, but was disappointed not to be considered for the position of musical leader. Should you visit the Händel Festival, do not miss the brilliant current cantor Irénée Peyrot's daily performances on both of the church's organs during the Festspiele.

Halle was spared major damage during World War II and the town centre has maintained much of its attractive pre-war

character. In many ways the Communists did greater damage (Halle lies in the former East Germany) by demolishing or failing to maintain many historic buildings. Halle's initial prosperity stems from the discovery of 'white gold' in the Middle Ages. For centuries salt mining remained a very lucrative business and it is reflected in some of the city's grand buildings, constructed during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Salt production was wound down under Communist rule, but salt seething still takes place on a much smaller scale. You can find out more about the salt of the

earth and other good things at the Hallors and Saline museum. The existing industrial buildings are near the river Saale and on a sunny day I would recommend a stroll along this gently flowing stream. From the Saline museum cross back over to the east bank for a longer walk (or cycle) and on your return stop at café Sonnendeck (Franz Schubert Strasse 7) where you can relax along the riverside in a deck chair.

For a cultural amble, choose a route from Market Square through the old town, to the Neue Residenz, a rare German example of early-Renaissance architecture with



A staging of *Pomoso in Festa*

## GETTING A HÄNDEL ON HALLE'S FESTIVALS

There are three German Händel festivals. The Händel Festival (est. 1952) in Halle is the most extensive and this year attracted star performers like DiDonato, Cenčić and Stutzmann. The Halle opera company also stages short productions of its own with the accomplished Festival orchestra (on period instruments). I saw an infectious and exuberant take on Handel's rarely performed opera *Renzo*, *regino d'Egitto*. Very camp, but truly joyous, was the full-on Baroque staging of *Pomoso in Festa* with expert early music ensemble *Laufften Compagnie* in the orchestra pit. This allegorical courtly entertainment took place at the Goethe-Theater in the idyllic spa resort *Bad Lauchstädt* (20 km outside Halle). In this summer resort, in 1834, Wagner started his career as an opera conductor. Next year's Händel Festspiele (Händel Festival) will take place from May 31 to June 16.

a pretty courtyard garden. Next to the residence stands the towerless early-Gothic cathedral (Dom) where in 1702 Händel spent a probationary year as an organist. Head further north up to the citadel Moritzburg where Luther's catholic nemesis, the powerful Cardinal Albrecht von Brandenburg (1490-1545) used to reside.

During the Thirty Years War, much of the fortress was damaged by fire and canon blasts. A large part of the complex lay in ruins for centuries, only to be slowly reconstructed during the last century. This millennium a Spanish architect duo cleverly integrated some of the crumbling walls and added a modern roof resulting in a very functional museum. The Moritzburg Art Museum of the state Saxony-Anhalt is strong on

exhibition mainly concentrates on works by painters that confronted cultural policies or refused to conform to the communist regime's ideas of beauty. The very informative texts on the walls more than make up for a slight lack of essential masterpieces in the Moritzburg collection.

The Slovak composer, Peter Beeiner, wrote four Beatles Concerto Grossi in the style of Händel that are quite amazing. The Beatles Museum in Halle is also a bit of a laugh, if you are a fan. The Fab Four never visited East Germany, but until 1965 their music could be played in the GDR. The fun stopped after the country's head of state Walter Ulbricht made an infamous speech denouncing the bad influence of Western music and the "the monotony of

yeah yeah yeah and whatever it is called". The passion that has gone into assembling and cramming three floors with every official vinyl pressing and bootleg ever released is almost admirable. There are heaps of memorabilia, photographs and an opportunity to play on a violin-shaped Höfner bass (favoured by Paul McCartney).

Londoners have usurped Händel (even devoting a museum to him), so it is only right that Halle claims the early Beatles. I can reveal that the Beatles had a secret love for Halle. On the Beatles *Anthology I*, the three-volume CD of out-takes and rarities, there is a home recording from 1960 of McCartney singing Ray Charles's *Hallelujah I Love Her So*. If that is not evidence enough, then Handel is an Englishman. ●

## “ LONDONERS HAVE USURPED HÄNDEL SO IT'S ONLY RIGHT THAT HALLE CLAIMS THE BEATLES ”

German representatives of Expressionism, Constructivism and New Objectivity. I particularly liked the section focusing on artists that were favoured by the Nazis. This is a subject mostly swept under the carpet in German art museums, but here extensive texts (also in English) help to explain the historical context and why some artists became Nazi collaborators.

Even more fascinating is a whole wing devoted to art created during the German Democratic Republic era. The



Market Church