

Martin Luther (der 10. November 1483—der 2. Februar 1546)

“Luther Country” in Germany marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation

At the center of the celebrations — and in the center of Luther Country, spiritually if not geographically — sits the small university town of Wittenberg. With a population of just under 50,000, Lutherstadt Wittenberg, as the city is officially known, was home to Martin Luther longer than anyplace else.

Stretching nearly a mile between the Castle Church and the monastery that became Luther’s family home, Wittenberg’s Collegienstrasse spanned the gulf between the established church and a new religious ideology. The town’s de facto Main Street, cobbled Collegienstrasse charms visitors with overflowing flower boxes, a gurgling canal and sidewalk cafes. In between, mom and pop shops display Reformation-themed souvenirs from the pedagogic to the playful: biographies of Martin Luther and his cohorts; detailed analyses of early Protestantism; Reformation beer, wine and liquor; chocolates and noodles shaped into Luther’s profile; and socks knitted with the words “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise” — Luther’s supposed retort to the powerful officials of the Holy Roman Empire who wanted him to walk back his criticism of the pope and the Catholic church.

Within the honey-colored walls of the Luther House, the world’s largest Reformation museum, it’s easy to visualize the more intense world of the early 1500s, when heated theology discussions would have taken place at Luther’s popular Table Talks. Faded ocher and blue paint cover the walls, and sunlight streams through circular glass panes. At the center of the room stands Luther’s battered-looking wooden table, said to be the original.

Nearby, the house’s cavernous lecture hall was the scene for frequent religious discourses allowing Luther a platform upon which to rail against church corruption and the habit of selling penitential indulgences that simultaneously fed Rome’s growing budget.

Across Luther Country, from tiny Eisleben, where Luther was born in 1483 and died some 60 years later, to Erfurt, where he attended seminary, from Mansfeld, where Luther lived as a young boy, to Torgau, where his wife Katharina von Bora died, museums and monuments remind visitors that Martin Luther was once here. All claim close ties to the reformer. But at times, the links seem nebulous.

“After 500 years, many buildings simply don’t survive,” says Jochen Birkenmeier, research director and curator of the Luther House museum in Eisenach, where Luther is said to have lived and studied from 1498 to 1501. “It can be difficult all these years later to say precisely which portions of the Luther story are fact and which are legend. But there is a lot that we do know. And clearly Luther’s Reformation ideas had a profound effect not only on Christianity, but on the entire Western world.”