

Dressed to impress at Leipzig's Opera House.
image: kate hennessy



BACK IN BLACK

text: kate hennessy
images: various

Kate Hennessy dons her blacks and joins 20,000 goths in Germany at the world's most un-colourful festival.

HE STALKS BY THE TRAM STOP in head-to-toe black PVC, thighs squeaking like rodents. Sunlight glints from studs around his neck that are long enough to skewer a steak, and his face scowls out from behind a fragile scaffolding of chains and piercings. Yes, I think. We've arrived.

Each year in May or June, the German city of Leipzig hosts the biggest gothic and dark culture event in the world – the four-day Wave-Gotik-Treffen (WGT). More than 20,000 of the gothic diaspora heed the call to come and swamp Leipzig in black.

But planning to attend a gothic festival is tricky when you've been travelling for six months. Our clothes are tattered and we left the leathers, fish-nets and capes back home. An unofficial WGT website, www.sadgoth.com, comforts festival neophytes like us, saying: "You will encounter a sea of black-dressed people the moment you arrive, making you feel at home and safe."

SadGoth.com was right. When we emerge from Leipzig train station a day

before WGT, there are goths everywhere. There are pale people dragging coffins, men in top hats and gas masks, couples strolling by in full Romantic-era regalia and cyberpunk goths in welding goggles with hip-length hair extensions made from electrical wiring. There are rockabilly goths, transgender goths, steampunk goths, rivthead goths and vampire goths.

even without a festival pass. WGT is held in around 40 venues right across the city meaning there are Goths promenading simply everywhere. Contrary to their reputation for sinister habits and depressive tendencies, there's a celebratory, theatrical air in Leipzig. Oh, and the fashion! As the premiere event on the global Goth

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Hundreds of them, all dimming the city streets like a colony of bats flying across the sun. And I'm caught out wearing my travel trackies and sandals. The first thing to do? Hightail it to the hotel and get all 'gothed up'.

Uninformed tourists arriving in Leipzig during WGT will find accommodation scarce, but if they get lucky they're in for a fabulous people-watching treat,

calendar, festival-goers spare no effort. It's like being at the Melbourne Cup in a parallel universe where everyone likes Nick Cave. But goths, remember, dress to shock, so it's BYO open mind.

Day one at WGT sees us don every black item in our suitcase and make a curious shopping list: black nail polish, black eyeliner, black hair dye and white face powder. Must. Fit. In. Our hotel is a



The dark 'family' gathers at the medieval village.
image: heidnisches dorf

crisp, corporate establishment with white walls, upright chairs and about 50 goths eating breakfast. A woman enters wearing a shroud and a black gauze tutu. She helps herself to boiled eggs at the buffet, taking care not to dip her shroud in the jam.

That afternoon we see Greek-American 'horror opera' diva Diamanda Galás at the Opera House. Unfortunately we miss the costume memo. No one congregating on the Opera House steps is in modern-day attire. I admire a Victorian-era widow-in-mourning with delicate bird wings for eyelashes. She's accompanied by a fellow with an Amadeus Mozart 'up do' wearing a perfectly tailored hunting suit. "Spooky and cool," my husband keeps murmuring as he watches yet another incredible frock flounce by. "It's people watching people who want to be watched!"

We ask a German goth what bands he wants to see. "All and none," he replies. "For me it's more important to come here and just be. It's a magic time for us. For four days this city is ours. It's like being on another planet."

For goths, being the majority in public is a rare event to be celebrated. Banned by the East German communist government in the 1980s, WGT relocated from Potsdam to Leipzig after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Leipzig is a pleasant, plain and well-served city – a surprising host for a movement that worships all things dark. Just an hour south of Berlin, Leipzig shares little of the gritty urban chic of its northern counterpart. But as a major conference city, it has ample hotel accommodation with about 12,000 rooms in the city centre alone. Come WGT, however, there's barely a suit in sight when the hotels are dominated by goths.

These days WGT encompasses up to 200 musical acts, Renaissance fairs, Viking markets, a full-scale medieval village, film premieres, literary readings, artist signings and a campground. Its popularity has put Leipzig in the unusual position of having a gothic festival as one of its biggest civic events. The city embraces the festival. It runs a free 'black' tramline to festival venues and hands organisers the keys to venerable cultural institutions like churches, museums, the Opera House and – naturally – the cemetery.

On the second day we go to the vampire masquerade. The venue is miles away, but we're hoping for an impressive show. Instead we find a damp, decrepit house on the outskirts of town with 30 or so goths in the backyard beginning a vampire role-play game. Slightly alarmed, and spectacularly out of place, we decline

their offer to play and instead stand awkwardly next to a tree, watching. The players wear fangs that look creepily real. But it's not a spectator sport so we slip

"What time does the cemetery open?" It's not a question I usually ask when I wake up, but day three is open day at Leipzig's cemeteries and churches and

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away and head to lush Parkbühne, which is full of goths mushrooming out of the greenery like some sort of spreading black fungus.

we anticipate quite a spectacle. The day is sunny but that hasn't dampened the dark spirits of the goths gathering at Südfriedhof cemetery. Hundreds are

Striking a pose is second nature at WGT.
image: martin höhne



A Leipzig tram stop during Wave-Gotik-Treffen.
image: falk scheuring



Nostalgia for a bygone era at the Victorian picnic.
image: alexander lobel



Front row with a bier at an outdoor stage in Parkbühne.
image: tobias seeliger



Nineteenth century gothic literature is a strong influence here.
image: kate hennessy



Elderberry, rhubarb, mead and dandelion wines for sale along with other bona fide medieval fare.
image: kate hennessy

germany

here, draped over gravestones or milling around the chapel. Stunning women with spectacular cleavages, hooped gowns, corsets and parasols meander down leafy paths while a dead-looking goth drags his friend around on a chain. Next we enter a Cathedral, where an earnest Christian goth theatre troupe performs a musical about humankind's fall from grace. Hang on, Christian goths? Yes, there are many unexpected subcultures sheltering beneath the gothic umbrella.

While the city of Leipzig capitulated to gothic purchase power long ago, some hotels remain aggrieved by the gothic influx. It's true that their hotels do often look like the Hellfire Club has vomited up several hundred patrons over the inside of the lobby, but www.sadgoth.com maintains that's no reason to raise an eyebrow. The website aims to punish prudish Leipzig hotels with a goth star-rating system. To determine the rating, Goths answer questions like "How did hotel staff treat you when you appeared 'all gothed up'?" and "Did staff let you sleep or did they pester you to clean your room?" A rating of one measly goth star means the hotel "Treated you like an alien and told you not to come back next year." A two-goth-star rated hotel "Treated you unequally, gave you dirty looks and made you feel ostracised." Meanwhile, a five-goth-star hotel "Treated you with utmost respect, even with your best goth gear on."

Day four and it's time to visit The Agra: home to the campground, the rock stadiums, the medieval village and the gothic marketplace. We trundle through the city past tram stops where dozens of goths coagulate, making regular Leipzig citizens stick out like sore thumbs. Our tram, too, is packed with goths. We are, after all, headed to The Agra – the black, beating heart of WGT. We wander

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the marketplace until the PVC and rubber fumes make us dizzy, then while away hours in the medieval village where fathers push 'gothed up' prams wearing T-shirts saying: 'I'm Dæad'. Stalls sell modern essentials like swords, chain mail, axes, bows and arrows, perfume vials, potions and suspect medieval meats spinning on spits. We drink elderberry wine and dance to pagan folk (think brawny men in animal skins playing lutes, flutes and fiddles).

striking a killer pose. We watch bands, drink cheap steins and eat bockwurst. We walk the length of Leipzig mall and giggle at medieval damsels eating pizza. We marvel at goths downing fiery absinthe shots with mechanical equanimity and invent a guessing game of which ones can 'de-goth' for a conservative day job. We people-watch at WGT until it closes. This is one festival where the attendees are undoubtedly the star attraction. ☒



The unofficial festival site warns: "If you've got soles big enough to house explosives, take them off at the airport." image: beate wolff

By anyone's definition, the medieval village is a big old barrel of fun. Even www.sadgoth.com agrees. "If you fail to enjoy yourself here, you may as well give up and crawl into your coffin."

Back in Leipzig central, goths are running the gauntlet of happy snappers. Tourists have given up being spooked and the city has transformed into a sprawling photo shoot. They tap goths on the shoulder and point eagerly to their camera. "Ja," most subjects reply before



GET PLANNING

Get There

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines flies from Sydney to Berlin from A\$1,820 return. www.klm.com
From Berlin, the fast train to Leipzig Hauptbahnhof (main station) takes just over an hour. www.bahn.com

Get Informed

The next WGT festival is 25–28 May 2012. www.wave-gotik-treffen.de/english
www.sadgoth.com has info on accommodation, getting to the festival, maps and what to expect for first-timers. www.sadgoth.com