

Sighisoara

14 September

Climbing the 175 steps up the covered scholar's stairs to the aptly named *Bergkirche* - church on the hill - gives a

sense of importance to the majestic church that towers above the citadel of Sighisoara. Founded in 1345 as the Catholic parish church, this church of St Nicholas was not finished until 1525 due to the numerous alterations in the Transylvanian gothic style. The church on the hill is unusual in having Transylvania's only crypt where priests and wealthy townspeople were buried, as well as an extensive Saxon cemetery. In the 15th century, the interior walls were completely covered with elaborate frescos, one of which was the fight of St George, which interestingly ends not in the slaying of the dragon but with its taming by a princess. These wall paintings, some of the most valuable in Transylvania, were only recently discovered during restoration. They had been whitewashed over in 1777: sometime after the reformation of the Saxons to the Lutheran-Protestant faith (1544) they were seen as worthless and too extravagant for the Protestants.

The church on the hill was seldom used for worship because the former Dominican monastery near the clock tower was chosen as the Lutheran parish church of Sighisoara instead. However, the Bergkirche survived fire and earthquakes to become one of the Saxon strongholds. Following the mass exodus of the Transylvanian Saxons, when the fortified village churches were abandoned and pillaged, several late medieval altarpieces, one dating from 1513, and renaissance furniture, including intricately carved pews decorated with inlaid wood, were placed here for safe keeping. These items enhance the rather austere interior. Some of the carved woodwork is by Johannes Reychmuth the most famous Romanian furniture carver in the middle ages, who was born in Sighisoara; he was also the craftsman of the early choir stalls at Biertan.

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