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A VIRTUAL WALKTHROUGH ERFURT, GERMANY

by Michelle Bienias

Andreas Kaempf, of vr.refocus.de, has built a literal [walkthrough of his much-beloved hometown Erfurt, Germany](#). Erfurt (pop. 200,000) is the capital city of the state of Thuringia and one of the most beautiful and well-preserved historical cities in Germany.



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One of the most compelling features of the website is an imaginative interactive map, complete with a “little man” who walks along the labeled streets towards the VR selected (there are currently approximately 30 VRs to choose from). It’s a great way of orientating oneself within the city while also giving a great perspective of where each VR is located in relation to the others.

The site features several technical improvements over the typical VR tour, such as enabling the user to navigate within the VR directly through the hotspots, as well as through the QuickJump menu in the scenic info. No matter which navigational method is used the little man always displays the actual position on the map in realtime. And, if you don’t have the QuickTime player installed on your computer, the VRs will automatically be displayed in Java – a nice touch!

The site is remarkably well organized and features two main panels: the right-hand panel displays the VR while the left-hand panel allows one to flip between the interactive map, information about the city of Erfurt, a Guestbook and a description of the scene of the accompanying VR. Click on the flat VR within the scenic info panel and it switches to a fullscreen version.

The Guestbook is notable for implementing lots of bells and whistles: move your mouse over a character and it bleats out the name of the person who signed the guestbook; click the message and hear the audio generated version. This is all done automatically via speech software, and it works with different languages and dialects.

I started the tour at Domstrasse/Domplatz and the Dom-cathedral, once the largest wing tip-edged building in Germany; it is the site of a number of historical buildings, among them the Green Pharmacy (18th century) and the House of the High Lily (1538). At the eastern side of the cathedral square is the Marktstrasse, once part of the famous trade route Via Regia and the setting of many dealers and buyers.

The VR entitled Marktstrasse shows the Gothic 'Allerheiligen' church, built in 1511. From there, make your way to the Fischmarkt, once an important commercial center at the crossover of large trade routes. The original city hall was built in 1275 and replaced in 1875 by the Gothic building that now stands there. The Kraemerbruecke, or Chandler Bridge, is the longest, continuous bridge north of the Alps with inhabited houses. It was first built of wood and then in stone in 1325. And the Wenigermarkt, or Small Market, is a lovely square with cafes and restaurants reminiscent of the late 19th century Erfurt.

Kaempf used state-of-the-art programming and design techniques in building the website. "We created a special Content Management System (CMS) to extend this site very easily with new VRs in the future and for updating the contents of the site," he says. The team used a mixture of QTVR, PHP, XML, Flash, Java and MySQL Database in creating the bilingual site (German and English). While all of the navigational controls are easily understood, the scenic descriptions contain sometimes hard-to-understand English, which Kaempf says will be corrected in the near future. He also plans to extend the site with more options, such as a hotel route tour and tavern route tour, in the future.

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