

A REGION REBORN *Saxony is Welcoming Travelers with Open Arms*

BY DAVID P. GAWKOWSKI



Wackerbarth Palace State Winery

FOR MANY TRAVELERS, THE THOUGHT OF JOURNEYING TO THE FORMER EAST GERMANY CAN BE DAUNTING. THANKS TO ALL OF THE CLOAK AND DAGGER MOVIES WE'VE SEEN, IT'S EASY TO BE APPREHENSIVE ABOUT WHAT ONE MIGHT FIND WHEN PEERING BEHIND THE FORMER IRON CURTAIN. IT'S BEEN 18 YEARS SINCE THE WALL FELL, AND STILL, WHEN I ARRIVED IN DRESDEN, I HALF-EXPECTED TO BE HANDED SOME MICROFILM AND BE TOLD TO MEET SOMEONE ON A FOGGY BRIDGE FOR THE "DROP." AND, YES, MAYBE I WAS HOPING THAT WOULD HAPPEN. BUT HOW WRONG I WAS. OVER THE NEXT EIGHT DAYS, I WOULD LEARN THAT A DIFFERENT KIND OF ADVENTURE AWAITS HERE AND FIND DRESDEN AND THE SAXONY REGION TO BE RICH IN CULTURE AND HISTORY, AND AS WONDERFULLY SCENIC AS IT IS WELCOMING.

The heart of Saxony is Dresden, nestled along a bend in the Elbe River. At first glimpse, viewing the city is like stepping back in time. Old palaces, monumental buildings and cathedral spires in black and tan sandstone rise up everywhere along the river. Roughly 85 percent of the city was destroyed in the Allied fire bombing at the end of WWII, famously detailed in Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five." And due to the neglect under Communist rule, it's taken more than six decades to restore the city to its former splendor, but it's almost all the way back.

Our press group's home for the week would be the Steigenberger Hotel de Saxe. A newly built, refined hotel, it's ideally situated on a square in the city center, a short walk from the river and offering excellent



Dresden Palace



Dresden along the Elbe

views of Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady). The church is a Baroque masterpiece, and a symbol of the whole city's rebirth. After laying in rubble for 50 years, it has been painstakingly restored, literally brick by brick from the original stones, and was reopened in time to celebrate the city's 800th birthday in 2006.

THE GREEN VAULT

You can't travel very far in Saxony without learning of the far-reaching influence of Augustus the Strong. Under his illustrious rule (1694-1733), Germany became the dominate cultural force in Europe. A passionate builder, he is largely responsible for Dresden's stunning Baroque architecture, and his magnificent palaces (found throughout Saxony) were rivaled only by Louis XIV. Many of his most prized possessions are now on display in the recently restored Green Vault. Only a limited number of people are allowed to visit this unique museum, and tickets are hard to come by. The precious jewels and artifacts on display here are amazing and I only wish I had had more time – a definite must-see.

Other highlights in and around Dresden include the Old Masters Gallery in the Zwinger Museum, featuring works by Raphael and Canaletto; and the Royal Palace, also newly renovated. For dining and shopping, there are plenty of options in the Altstadt and along Munzgasse Street, though it's a bit touristy. A better bet is to go across the river into Neustadt.

WINING AND DINING SAXON STYLE

Think of Germany and it's hard not to think of beer. But, believe it or not, Saxony has a long tradition of wine making. We were able to tour two wineries – Hoflossnitz and the Wackerbarth Palace State Winery. Wackerbarth in particular is as aesthetically pleasing as any vineyard you'd find in California's Napa Valley. With immaculately kept grounds, it offers an informative tour of its sparkling wine facilities and tastings.

SAXONY'S CITIES

During the week, our group visited several of the charming, bucolic towns and cities throughout Saxony. In Leipzig, we walked in the footsteps of Bach and Mendelssohn, visiting the homes they resided in, which are now museums. We also toured the recently opened Museum of Musical Instruments, which features one of the largest collections of instruments in the world.

Other towns we explored included the quietly captivating Gortitz near the Polish border, and the



Albrechtsburg Palace, Meissen



Shopping in Dresden

quaint village of Bautzen, a medieval town with more than 1,000 years of history. In Meissen, the Porcelain Capital of Europe, we toured the porcelain factory and Albrechtsburg Palace, an enormous castle on a hill offering splendid views of the countryside.

One afternoon we were fortunate enough to have lunch with Prince Alexander of Saxony at Moritzburg Palace. A courteous and down-to-earth gentleman, the prince even offered to drop me back at my hotel when he saw that I didn't have a ride back. I have to wonder if his ancestor, Augustus, would have done the same. Regardless, when the prince himself offers you a ride, you know this is a welcoming land.

GETTING THERE

There are several great ways to see Dresden and Saxony in 2007. General Tours is offering a 10-day "Berlin, Dresden & Prague by Rail" tour, which includes your choice of first class or deluxe hotels, private sightseeing in each city and first class train transportation between cities. Brendan Vacations features a 12-day "Best of Germany" tour visiting Dresden, Saxony, Nuremberg, Munich, Berlin, Cologne and more. Call your travel consultant today for more details.