

Excursions in Saxony's Switzerland

An Area in southeastern Germany extending into the Czech Republic.

by Herb Windolf / October 2007

One hundred million years ago an ocean began to cover large parts of Europe. For fifteen million years streams and rivers eroded the islands and surrounding elevations, carrying mainly quartz sand to the ocean's bottom, depositing this material, layer by layer, close to 600 meters deep. In time these layers were compressed to gray marine sandstone. These stone layers, from 20 to 120 meters thick, are interspersed by clay layers up to 4 meters thick. Clay was laid down early on, so that thicker sandstone layers dominate the upper layers. Subsequent uplifts created vertical cracks in the stone. Sandstone, being permeable, allows rainwater to penetrate downwards until it is stopped by an impermeable clay layer which directs it sideways until the water finds an exit.

When the ocean's waters finally retreated and erosion of the sandstone masses by rain and the Elbe River began, the vertical cracks and the particular layering created a wild landscape of table mountains, spires, towers, needles and ridges, with clefts, narrow, steep canyons and small valleys. Were they not covered nowadays by forests and undergrowth these formations would be reminiscent of Monument Valley.

Beginning in the stone age, men built defensible positions on some of the peaks and table mountains, such as the mighty, never conquered Fortress Koenigstein. Other such elevations feature inns where the hiker can delight in one of Saxony's specialties, Sauerbraten with red cabbage and dumplings, washing them down with a stein of beer or some good Saxonian wine. From these heights we enjoyed far-reaching views across this so varied landscape – my wife, myself, together with our sister and brother-in-law. One of these table mountains, the Bastei, once an ancient mountain bastion, high above the Elbe river, even sports a hotel which can be reached by car.

For the hiker seeking simpler pleasures, many a promontory offers a place for a snack or sack lunch. Looking down a couple of hundred meters may be forested valleys or freshly plowed fields, others showing the tender green of recently sown winter-wheat. Nearby or in the distance, other rock formations and outcrops may be visible. For the knowledgeable, mushrooms grow everywhere throughout the surrounding forests.

While some of the trails are level, most have steep elevation differences. The area's trails are maintained by the national park service. To overcome slopes with wooden beams providing stairways. When the trails pass through canyons, ravines and gorges, they become stairs and ladders of aluminum. In some of the wildest parts, there are steel rails or handles solidly imbedded in rock. We appreciated these handholds most when we descended the Wilde Hoelle (Wild Hell), a convoluted, narrow canyon which the normal hiker would be unable to cross without the handholds. Many a promontory would be inaccessible without the stairs and ladders.

On one of our excursions, our trail passed through several gorges along numerous stairways. Eventually, we had climbed up on ladders to the top of the Schrammsteine (Scarred Rocks). Then, being uncomfortable with the height, I climbed down to a lower flat area from where three trails departed. While I had a snack there, a large group of about twenty people came up the ladder, all looking like hikers, but some were carrying fancy photographic equipment. They took a break from their climb right in front of me. Suddenly, I did a double-take. There, not three paces distant, being part of this group, stood the German President, Horst Koehler with his wife Luise. My wife, having come down by then, got very busy snapping his picture. While there are some substantial differences, imagine George and Barbara Bush climbing up there!

Among many other hikes, their ups and downs straining our calf muscles, we also took a silent, leisurely, oar-powered boat trip through the narrow canyon of the dammed Kirmitsch River, a tributary of the Elbe River. Another excursion on one of the old side-paddle steamers brought us to the town of Rathen by the Elbe. Started in 1836, the Saxon Steamship Company is the oldest steamship company in the world with the most paddle wheelers and ships. From Rathen, which features the Karl-May-Festival, we hiked up the Bastei Mountain to view the remnants of its ancient fortification and looked way-down to the Elbe River where a paddle-wheeler was making its way upstream.

Dresden, Saxony's capital, was only an hour's drive away from our small A-frame vacation home in the village of Lichtenhain. On February 13, 1945, in a night air raid, the British leveled this ancient city, Dresden, with its many historic buildings causing a death toll of 30,000. The American writer, Kurt Vonnegut, experienced this event as an American POW. In 1969 his novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*, was published in which his literary alter ego, Billy Pilgrim, portrays Vonnegut's personal gruesome experience.

Today, much, but by far not all, has been rebuilt and restored – 44 years of communist rule were not conducive to the city's restoration. Today, Dresden, once again, has become a vibrant city featuring, among many other world-renowned historic buildings, the Zwinger, the Semper Opera House, and the Frauenkirche.

Our final day took us to the town of Radebeul where Germany's most successful writer, Karl May, had his residence. Between 1878 and 1910 he penned more than 80 novels and short stories dealing with the American West, the Orient, and other locales around the world, only some of which he visited towards the latter part of his life. Most were travel and adventure stories of his imagination, but usually well researched. His residence and the adjacent Villa Bearfat hold possibly the most extensive collection of Indian artifacts in Germany. A large diorama depicts the details of Custer's battle at the Little Bighorn. His writings did popularize the American West with the German public. Generations of youngsters grew up reading his adventure stories. Since little was translated into English, although into many other languages, I have made it my task to translate a number of his "Western" novels into English.

Finally, we entered the city of Meissen, where Johann Friedrich Boettger invented in the early seventeenth century the process of manufacturing porcelain which, until then, had to be imported from China, where the process had originally been discovered. From Meissen it, eventually, spread across the world.

In the Albrecht's Castle we admired the architecture and huge paintings of the Romantic period of the 18th century, depicting events from German history. It has been the seat of many Saxon kings. Its construction was begun by the first German King, Henry I, former Duke of Saxony, chosen by his peers in 919 AD.

The cries of large flocks of migrating geese and cranes overhead called on us to journey on. Two hours later we arrived in Berlin.