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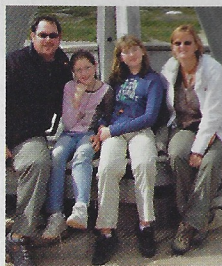
EASTERN GERMANY

CARAVANNERS
**JANE AND ANDREW
SULLIVAN, WITH
THEIR CHILDREN
ELENA (11) AND
MADELEINE (9)**

STAY
ONE WEEK

CAR
**2007 NISSAN
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Our eight-month caravanning tour of Europe was heading into its next stage. On this once-in-a-lifetime trip, we started in Norway, driving north to cross the Arctic Circle. Now we were heading south to explore eastern Germany. We expected to visit a lot of sites connected to World War II and the Cold War. But we hadn't anticipated the glorious palaces, varied towns, stunning scenery and the friendliness of the local people.



The Sullivans had a good idea of what they wanted to see

Teutonic touring tales

Jane Sullivan and family tour the former East Bloc and discover a rich history, stunning views and friendly local

HAVING SPENT A lovely summer in Scandinavia ('In at the Deep End', March, page 30) we sailed across the Baltic to Rostock in northern Germany. We were looking forward to a week in eastern Germany visiting Berlin, Colditz and Dresden.

Our first campsite was south of Berlin and three miles from Potsdam, the capital of the state of Brandenburg in north-east Germany. Camping Sanssouci-Gaisberg is in a lovely spot right on the banks of a lake, the Templiner See. The site had its own beach and play area, so the girls were happy.

It also had a restaurant and bar so Andrew and I were pleased, too.

We knew little about Potsdam, other than it was the location of the Potsdam Conference, held in the summer of 1945 to sort out issues arising at the end of World War II. Potsdam is also the home of Sanssouci Park, which houses palaces built in the 1740s by Prussia's king, Frederick the Great.

After stocking up at the local supermarket, our first outing was to tour the park and its palaces by horse and carriage. The route circumnavigated the park, giving us glimpses of palaces as we went by. We then meandered through downtown Potsdam. Back in the





The Chinese House in Sanssouci Park was built in the 18th century as a summer pavilion. It now houses a collection of Meissen porcelain



Sanssouci Palace was the summer retreat of Prussia's Frederick the Great

park, we ate at a little café near the Neues Palais, where Andrew tried a German dish of grilled herrings. The owner was quick to point out that the fish was served cold and pickled, probably because English tourists order it and send it back expecting it to be warm. It was delicious, however, the girls and I chose something more familiar.

After lunch we strolled around the gardens and found the Chinese House with its beautiful life-sized gilded figures drinking tea, the Sanssouci Palace and its terraced vineyard, and the Neues Palais, an impressive palace with an equally impressive domed cupola.

The Neues Palais is said to be one of the most beautiful buildings in Germany, so we paid the €6 for the grand tour to see for ourselves.

It didn't disappoint. As we glided around the palace, wearing the obligatory oversized slippers to protect the floor, we passed through magnificent halls and suites. Our favourite room was the Grotto, a beautiful space with walls and ceiling covered entirely with shells, precious stones and minerals. We left the palace in complete agreement that it was indeed very beautiful.

One of the reasons for touring this part of Germany was to visit Berlin. Although we didn't want our tour to focus on the world wars, we did want to learn more about them and the changes to Germany since then.

We took the complimentary campsite bus to the train station, travelled to Berlin's main rail

terminus and headed for the Reichstag, the home of the Bundestag, Germany's parliament. This amazing building mixes the traditional with the modern, the latter in the form of the huge dome that proudly stands atop the original structure.

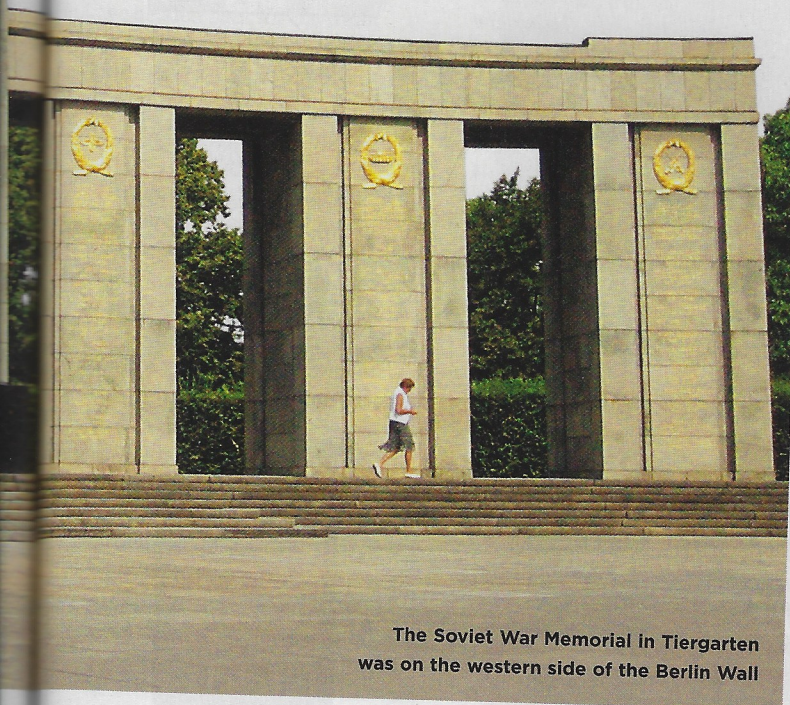
The public can go inside the dome and climb a spiral stairway to the top, but I'd read that the queue would be enormous. Sure enough, it flowed out of the building, down the steps and beyond. We didn't bother queuing, opting instead to sit and eat bratwursts (a type of sausage) watching a meeting to commemorate the 66th anniversary of Germany's invasion of Russia.

It turned out we'd picked a busy day to visit Berlin, as it was 'open house' for several buildings and

a rock concert was being held at Brandenburg Gate against school bullying. We skirted the gate and found the memorial for Soviet soldiers who died fighting the Nazis, flanked by two T34 tanks and guns. We also saw the city's Holocaust memorial. Called the Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe, it is a field of 2700 concrete slabs, each one a unique size and shape.

To visit all the sights of Berlin you would have to cover an area eight times the size of Paris, so we opted to take in some of them by bus. Ever budget-conscious, we took a regular city bus rather than a tour bus. Route 100 covered most of the main sights and we rode free with our travel ticket. It took us through eastern Berlin, past old

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The Soviet War Memorial in Tiergarten was on the western side of the Berlin Wall

THE ROUTE



After driving off the ferry at Rostock, we followed the E55 south towards Berlin, but exited to visit Potsdam first. We visited Berlin, 18 miles away, by train. To reach Colditz, we drove south to the E55 and E51 towards Leipzig, skirting its northern edge along Route 14. From there, Route 14 became Route 4 on its approach to Dresden.

Getaways EAST GERMANY

museums, ornate churches and typical Eastern-bloc flats, back to the Reichstag and then westward to the Berlin Zoological Garden.

This was the end of the bus line, so we stopped for drinks and ice creams at a spot overlooking the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche. This is a church that has become a war memorial as the tower has been left as it was after being bombed in 1943. Where the rest of the church once stood there is now a modern, octagonal church and free-standing bell tower.

We caught the bus back to the centre and then a tram to Checkpoint Charlie, the border crossing between the former American and Soviet sectors. Walking along Zimmerstrasse, we read the information boards regarding the Berlin Wall and the tragic deaths of people trying to get over it. Further on, we came to one of the few sections of the wall that still remain.

You get an idea of how monstrous a structure it must have been for Berliners. It formed a 96-mile-long, solid barrier around West Berlin, closing it off from East Germany. There are many 'escape' stories to read, but none more tragic than those that took place just before the Wall fell in 1989. It is incredible to think that this barrier existed just 20 years ago. We bought a tiny bit of the wall as a souvenir.

After a tiring but interesting day we headed back for the train, spotting an aptly named street sign for Andrew – Stressemann Street – not that he gets stressed.

After a few days in the north we left Potsdam and made our way to Dresden, stopping off at Colditz to look around the infamous castle.

Our sat-nav took us through the local housing estates in search of the site it claimed existed, before we were rescued by a lovely elderly German woman who mimed directions to us, pointing us to the town outskirts towards the edge of Colditz Forest. Here we found a lovely, quiet campsite, with good washblocks and other facilities and a friendly owner. Aside from static vans, the site was deserted except for our tourer and one other.

Once we were settled in, we cycled through the woods to the castle, arriving in time for the 3pm



Reichstag is home to the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament



The Checkpoint Charlie crossing is one of Berlin's top tourist attractions



Colditz Castle, once a POW camp, is now a museum and a youth hostel. Guides show visitors where and how Allied prisoners tried to escape

"The Germans thought the castle was escape-proof but the POWs came up with plenty of daring escape plans"

guided tour in English. We were the only English people, so we had the guide to ourselves. As she took us around the castle, she regaled us with escape stories, pointing out where they had taken place.

The castle was used during the war as an *oflag* – a prisoner of war camp for senior officers, 'special' soldiers (related to British royalty), and persistent escapees. Non-commissioned soldiers were held at *stalags*, where conditions were poor. At Colditz the story was different. All its prisoners were looked after well, as the Germans stuck to the terms of the Geneva Convention. The Germans used Colditz as a 'show' camp, so that whenever the Red Cross wanted to check up on how internees were treated it all looked acceptable.

The Germans thought the castle was escape-proof but the POWs came up with plenty of novel and daring escape plans, several of which succeeded. Those prisoners whose attempts to flee failed were photographed and details of their

ESSENTIALS

COLDITZ CASTLE

The castle has undergone a great deal of refurbishment and has become a major tourist destination. It is now a museum with a souvenir shop and houses a youth hostel.

WEB www.schloss-colditz.com

OPENING TIMES Daily. April-October, 10am-5pm. November-March, 10am-4pm. Closed 24-26 and 31 December, and 1 January

PRICES Guided tour: Adult €6. Family €12.

TOURS Daily. April-October, 10.30am, 1pm, 3pm. November-March, 11am and 2.30pm



Getaways EAST GERMANY

plans circulated to all other POW camps. We thought this was an exceptionally good ploy by the Germans, because the castle only held officers and those good at escaping. The Germans learnt all the potential ways a prisoner could escape from the 'experts', and passed them to all the other camps.

After one night we left Colditz and headed east to Dresden. Our new base was Campingplatz Wostra, in the small town of Heidenau just south of Dresden. The site sits right on the edge of the River Elbe, with great cycling paths along its banks, and is only 15km outside Dresden.

Once pitched we headed straight for the cathedral – the Frauenkirche. The cathedral was destroyed during



Dresden's 334ft Fürstenzug is made from thousands of porcelain tiles

World War II and was rebuilt using original sandstone fragments collected from the area and cleaned. The structure itself is as inspiring as the story of how it was reconstructed, a project which started in 1993 and was completed in 2004.

We took the steps and walkways spiralling up inside to the top of the huge dome. The views over Dresden were great, but the best views were those inside.

We had a short wander around the historic part of the city when we came across the Fürstenzug. It is an impressive 334ft frieze depicting a procession of dukes and princes from the House of Wettin – the first dating from the 1100s. The frieze, which is made up of 24,000 Meissen porcelain tiles, survived Dresden's bombing during the war.

After lunch back at the caravan we drove to Sächsische Schweiz (Saxon Switzerland) to see the

Bastei. These are inselbergs – tall, hard-rock formations – connected by footbridges. Tourists have been visiting the area for 200 years and before that the Bastei was long used as a fortress.

The original footbridges to the formation were wooden – now there is a large sandstone bridge built in 1851 and smaller steel bridges. It must have been quite hair-raising to put up the original bridges, which span several very steep crevices and you needed strong legs to cross them. It was definitely a 'wobbly legs' kind of experience but the magnificent views across the countryside make the visit worthwhile.

It always amazes me how much sightseeing can be packed into seven days – and we certainly did plenty in our week in eastern Germany. We enjoyed the cities, gardens, countryside and people so much we hope to return.



Dresden's Frauenkirche is an astonishing feat of reconstruction



You can walk the sandstone bridge that links the extraordinary rock formations of the Bastei in Sächsische Schweiz

CAMPSITES

Campingpark Sanssouci-Gaisberg

An der Pirschheide 41,
14471 Potsdam

Tel 00 49 (0)3 31 951 09 88

Web www.camping-potsdam.de

Email info@recre.de

Open April-October

This lovely campsite is on the banks of the Templiner See, with lakes, rivers, woods and Potsdam all nearby. The pitches are level, sandy spaces in deciduous woods, and are freshly raked after each visitor.

The site has English-speaking staff, an internet café, a hairdresser and several clean, spacious washblocks with free



Level pitches are set in a lakeside location of Campingpark Sanssouci

hot showers. The restaurant serves local specialities, and the shop is well stocked. The free shuttle bus takes you to and from the nearby

station, there are boats for hire and guided tours in the area are offered. Dogs are welcome. For children there is a playground and a small beach area for swimming in the shallows of the river.

Pitch+2+hook-up.....€31.20

Extra child.....€2.70

Dog.....€4

Facilities

■ Washblocks ■ Restaurant ■ Play area ■ Shop ■ Wi-Fi

Campingplatz Wostra

An der Wostra 7, 01259 Dresden

Tel 00 49 (0)3 51 201 32 54

Email cp-wostra@freenet.de

This site is located on the south-east outskirts of Dresden, 200



Campingplatz Wostra's 60 pitches are set among trees near the Elbe

yards from the Elbe and the cycle path that runs alongside the river. It has 60 pitches, washblocks and a recreation room, as well as a naturist swimming pools nearby.