


A Hot New Option for Cost-Conscious,
Culture-Hungry Travelers

East Germany



Cradles of German history, music,
and art, the cities of Dresden, Leipzig,
Weimar, and Meissen offer spectacular touring—
and surprising deals

by WENDY O'DEA



GO EAST, JUNGER MANN To call the numbers in this article from the United States, drop the initial zero and replace it with 011-49.

Before leaving, get information from the **German National Tourist Office** at 212/661-7200 or www.visits-to-germany.com. Individual city sites: www.dresden.de, www.meiland.de/meissen, www.leipzig.de, and www.weimar.de.

Your best airfare deals are via Frankfurt; typical round-trip airfares out of New York are roughly \$800 in summer and \$600 in winter. Onward air connections on **Lufthansa** (800/645-3880, www.lufthansa.com) to Dresden will run \$85 each way, and to Leipzig \$79. Or train it on **Deutsche Bahn** (www.bahn.de), which offers a reasonably priced pass (\$165 for any four days of second-class travel within one month); the **InterCity Express (ICE)** from Frankfurt gets you to Leipzig in 3½ hours and to Dresden in 4½ hours.

huge portions mean that half-portions (at half-price) are generally filling, and many German restaurants don't mind obliging.

When most Americans think of the east, Berlin is the first place that comes to mind. But it's the eastern heartland south of Berlin, anchored by larger cities like Saxony's Leipzig and Dresden and smaller ones like Meissen and Weimar (the latter in neighboring Thuringia), that provide the region's true flavor—and all are immensely important in the culture and history of Germany.

DRESDEN: A BAROQUE PHOENIX The legacy of the hammer and sickle is still apparent here, since the Soviets had to pretty much rebuild the city from scratch after the war. Yet strenuous recent efforts have been made to restore much of the glorious architecture that in centuries past drew artists such as Canaletto and now attract increasing numbers of visitors to the Altstadt (old town), home to the famous Zwinger museum and Semperoper opera house. Meanwhile, north across the Elbe River, the Neustadt (new town) is teeming with hotels, restaurants, bars, coffeehouses, and discos, often at half the price of old town. Get around most cheaply by tram; for €16 (\$15), the Dresden City Card allows 48 hours of unlimited tram travel and as a bonus provides free entrance or discounts at most museums (it also gets you between town and airport on the S-bahn, the city's metro system, for a \$12 savings each way).

Much of Dresden's beauty can be attributed to the eighteenth-century ruler and arts patron Augustus the Strong, whose legacies include the majestic Zwinger, a Baroque complex of arcades and pavilions famous for the world's largest clutch of Meissen porcelain, and the Old Masters Gallery, which includes Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*. Nearby, the Albertinum museum is especially worth a visit for its architecture and its Green Vault, which features an extraordinary jewelry collection. Both are free with the Dresden City Card.

Dresden is also home to one of the most famous opera houses in the world: the stunning Semperoper. It's difficult to find ticket deals, but if you buy directly from the box office for same-day tickets, you'll eliminate tax and surcharges; prices will

In the five German Länder (states) comprising the former German Democratic Republic, even after over a decade of rapid change, the traveler feels a visceral difference from the west; on a recent visit I had the

exhilarating, sometimes disconcerting feeling I was riding in a time machine still switched on, turbulently pushing and pulling me backward and forward simultaneously. Although just a sixth of Germans reside here, things have changed so rapidly that it's impossible to know what to expect from one month to the next. Graffiti-laden, Soviet-style slums molder next to pristine Baroque masterpieces and cutting-edge office towers.

And despite a big jump in prices unleashed by the one-to-one swap of the old East German currency for the mighty Deutsche mark during unification in 1990 (leading to prices significantly higher than elsewhere in the former Soviet bloc), some bargain gems still turn up more readily than in the west, like the \$6-a-head dinner (with beer) at a beer garden in Dresden or \$45 to overnight in one of that city's hippest hotels and neighborhoods. And a little-known fact: Many eastern German hotels offer low rates during the popular summer months in a bid to entice vacationers away from southern Europe. In the dining department, usually



Dresden's Zwinger in the rain (opening spread) and its central Oper Platz in the sleepy slanting rays of sundown (left); Weimar's Schloss Belvedere, once a summer palace, still impresses (above); Meissen's renowned porcelain (below)

start around €5.50 (\$5). Alternatively, the Kreuzchor boys' choir performs vespers concerts at the Kreuzkirche in the city center on Saturdays at 6 P.M.

(€1/92¢). You'll find plenty of music in Dresden beyond classical; one oddity worth noting is May's Dixieland festival (www.dixieland.de), the second largest in the world after New Orleans'.

LODGING Among the cheaper options in town are private rooms, bookable through the tourist office (see box) for as little as €35 (\$32). But Neustadt has recently acquired several hostels. Near the Neustadt train station, Die Boofe (Hechtstrasse 10, 0351/801-33-61, fax /801-33-62, www.boofe.de) opened in late 2001 with non-air-conditioned accommodations ranging from a few doubles with private bath (€22/\$20) to dorms (€17/\$16 a head); breakfast's €4.60 (\$4.25).

My choice, though, is Neustadt's hip Gästehaus Mezcalero (Königsbrücker Strasse 64, 0351/81-07-70, fax /81-07-711, www.mezcalero.de), a Mexican-themed spot opened in 2001 with 21 vividly painted rooms that lack ameni-

ties like A/C, phone, and TV but do have fab touches like mosaic sinks; a double with shared bath is €50 (\$46), with private bath €60 (\$55), breakfast €4.50 (\$4.15).

In the same price range are an ever-increasing number of pensions of varying degrees of charm. Those in the vicinity of the Neustadt train station generally run about €25 (\$23) per person per night with breakfast. For €68 (\$63), the Pension Andreas (Mendelssohnallee 40-42, 0351/31-57-70, fax /31-57-755, www.pensionandreas.de) is a cut above. A country villa with 16 rooms on the No. 12 tram line 20 minutes from downtown in Blasewitz

(an upper-crust suburb where nineteenth-century bourgeoisie once resided), it has no A/C but makes up with plenty of down-home comfort.

Probably the best hotel deal in the Altstadt is the 100-room City-Herberge (Lingnerallee 3, 0351/485-99-00, fax /485-99-01, www.city-herberge.de), a simple but Ikea-stylish hotel conveniently close to the German Hygiene Museum; rooms have phones but no A/C (TV is an extra €3/\$2.75 per night), and doubles run €63 (\$58) with bath, €23-€26 (\$21-\$24) without; dorm-style accommodations are also available for €18 (\$17). Breakfast is included, and there are a bar and a sauna.



A little farther up the line on the main shopping street, Prager Strasse, are three high-rise outposts of France's spiffy no-nonsense Ibis chain (www.ibishotel.com), each with 306 rooms offering standard amenities, restaurant, and bar. The Ibis Bastei (0351/48-56-66-61, fax /49-54-07-6) lacks in-room A/C and costs €65–€69 (\$60–\$64) per double, while the Ibis Königstein (0351/48-56-66-62, fax /49-54-05-4) and the Ibis Lilienstein (0351/48-56-66-63, fax /49-52-50-6) both charge €67–€72 (\$62–\$66).

DINING One of Dresden's best-kept secrets is the value of private cafeterias, such as those at the Neustadt train station or at the offices of the *Sächsische Zeitung* newspaper (Ostra-Allee 20), near the Zwinger. The higher of the two posted sets of prices (the set paid by the public) will net you hearty fare like roast chicken with a vegetable, potatoes, and a drink—all for €4 (\$3.70).

Or you can go ethnic. Turkish fare is popular all over Germany, and Neustadt's Babos-Kebab-Haus (Katharinenstrasse at Alaunstrasse, 0351/804-06-66) serves a delicious *döner* kebab (similar to a gyro) and other Turkish fare in a dining room with waiter service for €3.50 (\$3.20) a person.

Join the lively crowd enjoying the fare of the neighboring Czech Republic at the Wenzel Prager Bierstuben (Königstrasse 1, 0351/804-20-10), on one of Dresden's top shopping streets, north of the Elbe. Dine upstairs or downstairs or in the covered pedestrian mall outside. Best deals are found on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when you can get a full meal and a beer for €6–€7 (\$5.50–\$6.45).

In the Altstadt, most restaurants are outrageously overpriced, but the Café Barococo (Altmarkt 10, 0351/862-30-40) offers a great view over the square and entrées for around €12 (\$11).

MEISSEN: COBBLESTONES & PORCELAIN Although you can easily see Meissen on a day trip from Dresden (about 45 minutes by train), this small Baroque/Renaissance city in the heart of Saxony makes for a romantic overnight, having managed to hold on to much of its historic ambience. Its Albrechtsburg Castle, now a museum (adults €3.50/\$3.20) and its Gothic cathedral stand proudly on the hill above town, affording a panorama of the old town's rooftops and medieval streets, now lined with boutique shops, cafés, and wine bars.

The town's main claim to fame, of course, is its Meissen porcelain (a.k.a. Dresden china), made here for centuries (Europe's first porcelain factory was founded here in 1710). The Meissen Porcelain Exhibition Hall and Demonstration Workshop (adults €7.50/\$6.90), just outside the city center in Triebischtal, houses over 20,000 pieces, and porcelain church bells ring in the old town's Frauenkirche and Nikolaikirche.

For a budget night in Meissen, stay on the outskirts of town at the Pension Triebischtal (Talstrasse 60, tel/fax 03521/45-38-06; €50/\$46 per double room, including breakfast), a simple pension located near the porcelain factory; the 13 rooms each have their own baths. Just a short stroll from the center, the amenity-laden Hotel Goldgrund (Goldgrund 14, 03521/4-79-30, fax /47-93-44, www.hotel-goldgrund-meissen.de, doubles €39–€49/\$36–\$45) has 22 rooms delightfully set on a hill overlooking town; three smaller rooms near the kitchen go for about 40 percent less than other doubles. For a bigger investment, the payoff is huge at the classic Hotel Am Markt Residenz (An der Frauenkirche 1, 03521/4-15-10,

Germany's past and present harmonize at Leipzig's modernist Gewandhaus (below); the Leipzig Library (right) attests to the city's academic legacy



fax /41-51-51, www.meissen-hotels.com), which is in the center of the old town and fully loaded from €85 (\$78) per double room, breakfast included.

Resisting the bratwurst vendor in the main square, I once again felt myself pulled into the past at the Domkeller, a seventeenth-century restaurant that has retained its rustic atmosphere on the hill near the palace (Domplatz 9, 03521/45-76-76; dinner €11–€16/\$10–\$15). The Zum Goldener Anker (Uferstrasse 9, 03521/45-78-72) along the River Elbe, a ten-minute walk from city center, is filled with locals, wrought-



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iron decor and large portions for €11 (\$10) per person. For a snack, stop by Zieger Konditorei (on the walk toward the palace at Rote Stufen 5, 03521/45-31-47). It is only here that you can buy Meissner Fummel (€2/\$1.85), a traditional fragile loaf of pastry whose recipe dates back to former ruler Augustus the Strong.

LEIPZIG: COSMOPOLITAN FLAIR While wandering Leipzig's serpentine streets and glass-roofed arcades, I was reminded that no other German city has changed so much in such a short time, and yet I felt as if I'd returned to Leipzig's glory days, prior to the Soviet blight. A graceful, dynamic center of commerce, music, and publishing for centuries, Leipzig was instrumental in launching the "Peaceful Revolution" of October 1989 when a prayer group at the Nikolaikirche (Nikolaistrasse, town center; free organ concerts Saturdays at 5 P.M.) grew to more than 10,000 people.

From Leipzig's Hauptbahnhof, one of the most beautiful train stations in Europe (and the largest), you step directly into the heart of Germany's most musical city. Leipzig was home to many accomplished composers and musicians, from Bach to Wagner. This tradition continues today with the world-renowned Gewandhaus Orchestra, St. Thomas's Boys Choir, and a constant flow of music of all types. Home to Johann Sebastian Bach for over 25 years, Leipzig is perhaps best-known for the St. Thomas's Boys Choir he directed, which today performs at St. Thomas's Church (Thomaskirchhof 18, www.thomanerchor.de) on Saturdays at 3 P.M.; admission just €1 (92¢). The world-famous Gewandhaus Orchestra, once directed by Felix Mendelssohn, performs at its own very modern concert hall on the Augustusplatz (Augustusplatz 8, 0341/12-70-280, www.gewandhaus.de); for the best deal at this theater-in-the-round, buy €12 (\$11) tickets for the Ogelempore section, where you'll view the backs of the musicians' heads, but win a two-thirds savings

over other seats. The Leipzig Opera House (Oper Leipzig, Augustusplatz 12, 0341/12-61-0) sets aside one Thursday a month as "opera day," with tickets for €11.50 (\$10.60).

Leipzig isn't all music. The Forum of Contemporary History museum (Grimmaische Strasse 6, www.hdg.de/indexeng.html; free), near the old city hall, focuses on the anti-Communist resistance from World War II through 1989. Exhibitions include videos of historic uprisings and background on the building and dismantling of the Berlin wall. As is the case in Dresden, the Leipzig City Card (one

day €5/\$4.60) allows travel on the entire tram system as well as free or discounted admission to most museums.

LODGING Behind an anonymous green facade close to the city center, a good rock-bottom option is the rustic International Guesthouse (Mendelssohn Strasse 7, 0341/22-84-817), which rents three large rooms with up to eight beds in each for €15 (\$14) per person. A kitchen is available; breakfast is €3.50 (\$3.20).

In the Eutritzscher neighborhood, the 80-room Prodomo Hotel (Gräfestrasse 15a, 0341/9-03-50, fax /90-35-113, www.prodomo-hotels.de) offers standard amenities (except A/C) for €67 (\$62), with breakfast. Book directly to avoid fees.

About a 15-minute walk from the city center is the Lutherburg Pension (Wittenberger Strasse 26 at Schiebestrasse, 0341/90-15-133), located above a quaint eatery. Each of its five rooms will set you back €49 (\$45), with breakfast, phone, TV, and shower (but again, no A/C).

Given that it's central and impeccably comfortable, consider paying a little more (€53–€66/\$49–\$61) for the 126-room Ibis Zentrum (Brühl 69, 0341/21-86-0, fax /21-86-222, www.ibis-hotel.com), located near the main train station.

For more luxury without breaking *die Bank*, the Vivaldi Hotel, not far away (Wittenberger Strasse 87, 0341/90-36-0, fax /90-36-234, www.hotel-vivaldi.de), is a beautiful Italian-themed hotel in a residential area surrounded by restaurants, a supermarket and bakery; doubles are €66–€75 (\$61–\$69), including breakfast.

DINING Beneath the city hall near the main square, the atmospheric Ratskeller (Lotterstrasse 1/Neues Rathaus, 0341/12-34-567) leavens €3–€7 (\$2.75–\$6.45) entrées with €9 (\$8.30) all-you-can-eat dinners on Fridays, 5–8 P.M. There's a two-course-plus-dessert dinner menu Monday through Thursday for €10 (\$9.20) and a €5 (\$4.60) lunch.

You can definitely save some cash at Leipzig's popular "potato restaurants," serving spuds accompanied (*continued on p.115*)

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(continued from p.91) by the likes of bratwurst or broccoli. The Kartoffelhaus, right off the main square near Thomaskirche (Barfussgässchen 12, 0341/960-46-03) is filled with tchotchkes and potato-loving Germans; though it's not quite gourmet fare, the location and price (€9/\$8.30 per meal) are right. Another good choice is the Lutherburg Restaurant (Wittenberger Strasse 26 at Schiebestrasse, 0341/90-15-133), on the ground floor of the pension of the same name. Here neighborhood families pack in plenty of authentic German fare for about €5 (\$4.60) a person.

You can also get amply fed for about €15 (\$14) at one of Leipzig's most famous haunts, the noble Coffe Baum, just behind the main square (Kleine Fleischer-gasse 4, 0341/96-10-061), which has hosted many of the city's famous residents through the centuries. Germany's first coffeehouse (dating to 1694), this historical spot houses a too-fancy restaurant upstairs but a more casual and less pricey dining area downstairs.

WEIMAR: HIGH CULTURE & LOW BARBARISM Impossible to separate from Germany's foremost literary figure, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, this tiny, genteel city about an hour by train from Leipzig is a paradox. Traditionally the center of classical German literature, music, and art, it hosted the likes of Bach, Schiller, Liszt, Luther, and Lucas Cranach the Elder. Yet after giving its name to the famously wobbly Weimar Republic between the World Wars, it was then branded by Hitler, who held the second national congress of the Nazi party here and built the Buchenwald concentration camp three miles from town (take bus No. 6; free admission).


Easy to navigate on foot, Weimar is loaded with museums and historic homes, among them Goethe's house in the city center (Frauenplan 1; €6/\$5.50); his garden house (Park an der Ilm, €2.50/\$2.30); Schiller's house (Schillerstrasse 12, €3/\$2.75), where he wrote *William Tell*; and Liszt's house (Marienstrasse 17, €2/\$1.85). It was also in Weimar that the Bauhaus movement formed, and examples of the style can be seen around town

as well as at the Bauhaus Museum on the main square (Theaterplatz; €3/\$2.75).

Yet more *Kultur*? Weimar's also the site of the second largest collection of the works of Shakespeare in numerous languages (Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek, Platz der Demokratie 1; free) and it was the final home to philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (Nietzsche Archives, Humboldtstrasse 36, €2/\$1.85). In the evening, a bustling local university means great pubs and an active nightlife.

The best deal in town is actually on a hill overlooking town: the traditional Pension Villa Gisela (Wilhelm-Külz-Strasse 35, 03643/88-68-0, fax /88-68-9, doubles €42-€54/\$39-\$50, including breakfast). Each of its six rooms, including one for disabled guests, provides private bath, TV, and phone, and hosts Gisela and Helmut will pick you up from the train station upon request. In town, not far from that train station, the Pension Savina (Meyerstrasse 60, 03643/86-69-0, fax /86-69-11, www.pension-savina.de, €55-€73/\$51-\$67 per person, including breakfast) is rather dark, but its 15 rooms have private baths and ample amenities; you can also fix your own meals in a small shared kitchen.

Near the city center and a great base for exploring, the Hotel & Gasthaus "Zur Sonne" (Rollplatz 2, 03643/80-04-10, fax /86-29-32, www.weimar.de/sonne, €66-€77/\$61-71 per double room, with breakfast) offers all amenities except A/C, plus a basic but tasty restaurant which, unusually, boasts a salad bar (three-course lunch €3.50/\$3.20, dinner €10/\$9.20).

My own favorite digs were at the Köstritzer Schwarzbierhaus Restaurant and Pension (Scherfegasse 4, 03643/77-93-37, fax /77-93-39, www.koestritzer-schwarzbierhaus-weimar.de; doubles €75/\$69, including breakfast and parking), housed in the oldest half-timbered building in Weimar's center, with small uneven doors and original wood floors. Its eight, large, newly renovated rooms have private baths, and there's a beer hall/restaurant downstairs with classic German food (meals as little as €12/\$11) and jazz music. 

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