





Dresden, Saxony

A Trip Down Museum Lane

Historically speaking, Saxony was perhaps one of the wealthiest states in Germany before the Second World War, while Dresden was the richest city and centre for art and culture. There are hundreds of museums in Dresden, but during our visit we found that some of the museums were out of the ordinary, which helped us understand Saxonians better.

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We are not museum people per se. However, during our 100 days in Europe we had our fair share of museums. Hidden amongst them were a few museums that are unique in their own way and quite unusual.

Saxony, Germany, is often called, amongst other things, the 'museum state' and more lately the 'state of the arts'. There are hundreds of museums catering to various types of arts, like painting, sculptures, music and so on.

Fact of the matter is, visits to these unique museums give you a better understanding of the life and

culture of Saxonians, then and now, than the usual museums.

Glashütte Original Watch Factory and Museum

If Saxony had not gone the communist way, the Swiss watch companies would have faced a tough competition from Glashütte, a small town in Saxony where every household was a watch factory - such was the workmanship of Glashütte watchmakers.

During the communist era, however, the watch makers were forced to produce low cost, assembly-like watches for the masses and slowly

their quality, aesthetics and originality suffered. Multiple companies were merged to form a single entity to further enforce common socialistic objectives.

Only after unification in the early nineties watchmaking was privatised. And thus, Glashütte Original was born.

We were greeted with gongs from a grand grandfather clock, when we entered the museum that looked like a mansion from outside but used to be the school for watchmakers. We were awed by rooms after rooms, floors after floors of watches and clocks of exquisite designs right from their humble



Clockwise from top left: The German Watch Museum; The Museum of Military History; Stasi Prison; Terra Mineralia Museum; The Nutcracker Toy Museum; Ore Mountain Museum

beginning in 1843 to the current times.

Glashütte also started attracting young apprentices to learn the skills of watchmaking. In WW2 it was largely unaffected until the end of war, when it was bombed with extensive damage to life and property. If not for the grit of the people, the watchmaking here would have been a thing of past. They decided to manufacture every little part here itself, thus controlling cost and improving quality.

Our guide Seema Prakash says, while we watch an expert watchmaker at work, the Glashütte watches are now regaining much of its lost glory and the museum bears a testimony to the difficult times. Even the watchmaking school is very much operational.

The Nutcracker and the Toy Museum & Seiffen

A nutcracker, the size of a cottage, welcomes us with his large jaw ready to crack open the largest of the nuts when we enter the gates of Nussknacker Museum (the nutcracker museum) in the small town of Neuhausen a few minutes from Seiffen. Though huge, his expression is cheerful

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bordering on comic.

The Seiffener Volkskunst (folk art) is even more spectacular. Apart from the ubiquitous nutcrackers of all sizes, there is a plethora of other toys and figurines, like the pyramids (with a fan on top), smoker, angels, miners and the intricate wood chip trees. The lively workshop was full of artisans chipping, turning, cutting and painting hundreds of toys every day.

The Spielzeugmuseum or the toy museum has over 5,000 exhibits, like a toy replica of Noah's Ark (with 300 animals), a carousel, doll houses and so many other beautiful things. It is said that Ore Mountain region or the Erzgebirge, as it is called in Germany, is the birthplace of the nutcracker and other wooden toys. In particular, the town of Seiffen looks like it is celebrating Christmas all year-round.

Most houses are adorned with the Seiffen wooden creation of the angel and the miner, depicting the local ethos.

Once upon a time there used to be a thriving silver and tin mining industry near the town of Seiffen. Seiffen also had a rich Christmas tradition and the miners used to create wooden toys as hobby. In due course, around 400 years back, mining industry died but the miners converted their hobby into a profession of manufacturing wooden toys as Christmas presents.

Ore Mountain Open Air Museum

Erzgebirgisches Freilicht museum, as it is called in German, is an open sky museum with a collection of replica houses from the ore mountains region, dating back to a couple of centuries.

There are houses of blacksmiths, weavers, farmers with their granaries and for each house there is information on how they lived, their tools of trade, vessels, etc., tracing the history of the region. In some of the houses, there were live artisans showing their skills. We again saw wooden toy making in one of the



smaller wooden-shingled cottages.

There is also a small model showing how hydro-power was used in many of the farming activities. When electricity became available, a small sub-station was built on one of the taller structures as well. Advent of electricity ensured the development progressed faster.

We would say we had a lot of fun here getting in and out of cottages and enjoying the fine weather outside in the fields. The air had instantly renewed our energy.

Freiberg Minerals and Crystals Museum

As we went through the main gates of Freudenstein Castle, in the mining town of Freiberg, our respective jaws would not close when we entered the Terra Mineralia Museum. Room after room was filled with the rarest collection of gem stones, minerals and meteorites of every imaginable colour and shape and a few unimaginable ones too. The collection is divided into halls in terms of continents. Out of the 3,500 plus exhibits over 1,400 are from Asia.

This fascinating journey through treasures of the Earth is made possible because of the passion and drive of Dr HC Erika Pohl-Ströher. While collecting gems and minerals was her interest during younger years, she took to serious collecting for the last 60 years or so and built up an inventory of around 90,000 specimens. During her time, she ensured that young minds would get involved in this discovery through various educational and research programmes. Her collection has been permanently loaned to the state of Saxony.

Stasi Museum

This is indeed the memory of darkest period of Germany after WW2. In an unflattering cuboid building, not too far from Elbe River was the State Security Remand Prison, of the erstwhile German Democratic Republic (GDR), abbreviated to Stasi.

One of the primary activities of Stasi was to spy on its own people by turning citizens against other citizens, by coercion, threats and so on. There were Stasi officers posted in major factories to report any underground activities. Every apartment block had a Stasi officer posing as a tenant and reporting back the activities of the other tenants. Any rebellion or protests were dealt with covert and overt measures.

Stasi prison was used to hold the citizens accused of the so-called crime against the nation, which was in reality a protest against German communist party.

It is in exactly the same condition as it was then, a grim reminder of that period. All the records are exactly as it was and anyone interested in researching lost citizens are provided help to find them. A look around the holding prison, with the interrogation room, judgment room and other areas gave us goosebumps.

At the time of German unification, there were more than 90,000 employees and 180,000 citizen informants! At one point it was said that there was one informer to 6.5 citizens.

Museum of Military History

This museum is different from other

war museums as it hardly eulogises war and the military. There are no latest missiles or tanks showing the might of the German army. In fact, it is quite the contrary. It has captured all the ills of war and its impact on the people. Even the building is slightly redesigned so that you can now see a gigantic wedge plunged into the building, denoting how wars cast a permanent wedge into the social fabric.

A word of advice: this museum is huge and would take more than half a day. ■



• Museums



How to Reach

The best way is to fly Lufthansa Airlines to Frankfurt or Munich and then take a local flight or train to Dresden, which could be a base for further explorations.

Indians require the Schengen Visa from the German Embassy or Consulate situated in major Indian cities.

Where to Stay

Dresden offers accommodation options for all budgets - from hostels to luxurious hotels. Amedia Plaza in the heart of the old city of Dresden is one of the best value for money hotels, especially known for its location. Radisson Blu and Hilton are other top hotels that may be considered. Melia and Best Western offer great mid-priced segment hotels.