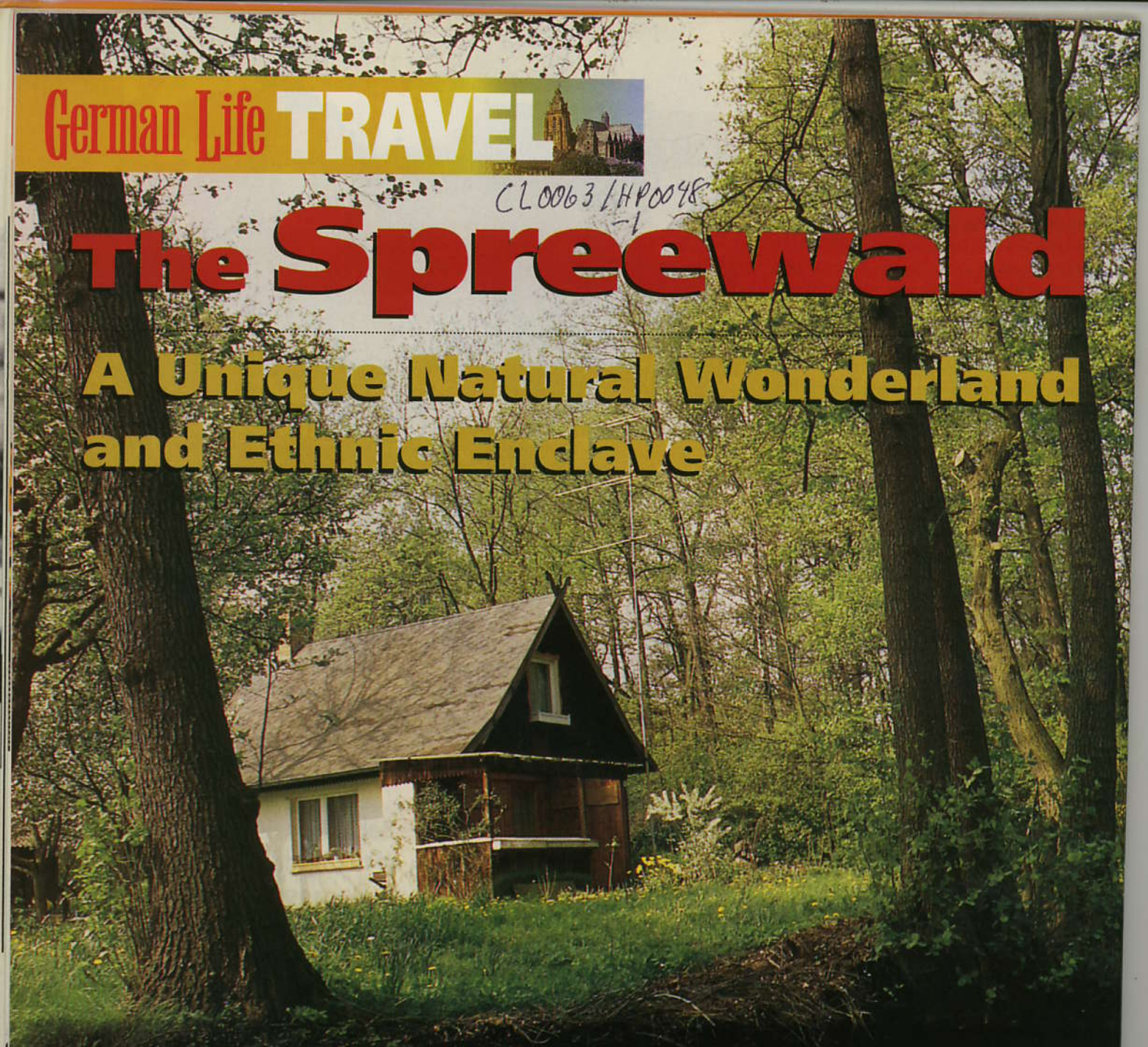
German Life TRAVEL

The Spreewald

A Unique Natural Wonderland and Ethnic Enclave



It is a corner of Germany so small you need a detailed map to find it. There are virtually no roads, just a maze of waterways negotiable by flat-bottomed punts that glide past thatch-roofed farmhouses. Wildlife almost extinct elsewhere in Europe—otters, white storks, white-tailed sea eagles, kingfishers, and 44 kinds of dragonflies—abound. Instead of German, most people speak a Slavic tongue related to Polish and Czech.

That is the Spreewald, a unique nature preserve and ethnic-cultural enclave where time seems to have stood still. Yet if you look closely at the map, you will see it is only 55 miles southeast of Berlin and a scant 60 miles north of Dresden. Moreover, it has been a popular travel destination for more than a century—ever since Theodor Fontane described the region in his *Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg* (Journeys Through the March of Brandenburg). Indeed, in the summer months it is so overrun that guide books recommend visiting mid-April to mid-May or late September through October.

According to legend, the Spreewald owes its existence to the Devil. Once upon a time he was out plowing with a team of oxen, drawing the furrow that was to become the Spree River. About halfway between the hill country of the *Oberlausitz* (Upper Lusatia), where the Spree rises, and Berlin, where it joins the Havel River, the oxen got tired, lay down, and refused to budge. The Devil was furious. He screamed, cracked his whip, cursed, and threw rocks at them. This frightened the beasts so much that they ran wild, first in one direction, then another, and back again in total confusion, all the time pulling the plow after them. And that, so the story goes, is how the labyrinth of the river's more than 300 branches and canals—called *Fliesse*—came into being.

The scientific explanation is that after the last ice age, when the glaciers receded and the rivers cut through the

BY JOHN DORNBERG • PHOTOS BY THOMAS A. LIPTON

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An hour outside of Berlin, the primarily Sorbian population of the Spreewald lives among and along 600 miles of waterways. Not only is the mail delivered by punt, but children go to school and adults travel to work by these vessels.

masses of rock deposit left behind, the Spree reached an area southeast of Berlin where, because of the flat terrain, it began spreading out in a lacework of channels.

Regardless of the version you prefer, the result is a region so singular in Europe that it is under special Unesco protection: 600 miles of shallow waterways connecting towns, hamlets, and isolated farmsteads that you can navigate either by rented canoes, or punts with seating up to 35, steered by polemen. Even the letter carriers and deliverymen come by boat. And in winter, when the Fliesse freeze, ice-skates and sleds are the best way to get around.

The abundance of water also created an agricultural cornucopia. The area is famous for cucumbers, horseradishes, pumpkins, onions, celery, and herbs that made it the "vegetable bin" of 19th-century Prussia.

Moreover, the Spreewald is the homeland of the Sorbs, the Slavic descendants of the Wends whom the Knights of the Teutonic Order and the Margraves of Meissen and Brandenburg subdued in the 12th and 13th centuries. Since then, though often discriminated against but at other times protected like a threatened species, this ethnic minority of 60,000 has managed to preserve its culture to such a degree that in towns like Lübbenau and Lübben, or villages like Lehde and Burg signs are in two languages.

Small wonder, then, that the Spreewald has long been touristic turf. The first narrow-gauge railroad, between Cottbus and Lübbenau, began operation in 1898. It connected with trunk lines to Berlin, Dresden, and the cities of Silesia and brought thousands of visitors to the area.

Even in Communist times, when only East Germans and East Berliners went there because others needed visas that were rarely granted, the Spreewald drew an average of one million visitors annually. For those who could not even travel to other Communist countries but were lucky to be assigned spartan quarters in party or trade union-run hostels, it was an exotic holiday destination. Nowadays those numbers are even higher.

"Actually little has changed," said Ulrich Schröter, operator of the punt on which I took an exploratory ride last fall. "In German Democratic Republic (GDR) days we had few individual visitors but busloads of factory, union, or other groups. Today our passengers are mostly individual travelers, but we're just as busy. And we get tips."

Though private hotels and restaurants—most of them moderately priced—have mushroomed since the fall of the Berlin Wall, they are booked during summer school vacations. Thus the best time to come is in spring or fall, and on weekdays.

The best starting point is **Lübbenau** (Lubnjow) population 22,000, the largest town in the region and the touristic epicenter of the *Oberspreewald* (Upper Spreewald), a landscape of scores of islands and densely wooded river banks.

Lübbenau had its beginnings as a fortified settlement of the Lusizi, a West Slavic tribe, who began settling here in the 6th or 7th century. Remnants of their moated, earth-walled 9th-century fortress were excavated on the grounds of Schloss Lübbenau, the castle of the local lords, that was built on the site of this Slavic settlement in the early 14th century.

Despite constant strife between the burghers and the ruling counts, Lübbenau blossomed into an important linen-weaving, clothmaking, and beer-brewing center in the Middle Ages. It declined in importance during the early Industrial Revolution but soon regained prosperity in the late 19th century when that narrow-gauge railway began bringing weekend tourists. But some of the Spreewald's oldest inns, such as the *Gaststätte zum Fröhlichen Hirsch* and the *Gaststätte Wotschofksa*, date back to the 1700s. These are the spots to sample the local cuisine: *Quark* (smearcase) with linseed oil and boiled potatoes, carp soup, boiled beef with horseradish sauce, panfried zander with potato salad, pike and eel in creamy sauces, and accompanied with pickles of various kinds.

On a weekday it's an inviting town with narrow, cobblestone streets, lined by half-timbered houses. The main feature of its Marktplatz is the 18th-century *Stadtkirche St. Nikolai* (St. Nicholas City Church). Near the square you'll find

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Schloss, or Castle, Lübbenau.

The present structure is neo-Classical in style. Over the centuries it had many owners, among them the Counts von der Schulenburg family, one of whose descendants, Friedrich von der Schulenburg, was Nazi Germany's ambassador to Moscow, helped draft the Hitler-Stalin pact, and then was executed in November 1944 for his part in the plot to kill Hitler. In 1621 the Schulenburgs sold the castle and lands surrounding Lübbenau to Count Johann Siegmund zu Lynar, scion of a Tuscan family closely linked to the Medicis, who had come to Germany through trade in flax. The Lynars have owned the castle ever since—except for 46 years during which they were expropriated, first by the Nazis and then by the Communists. The expropriation is part of the story.

Count Wilhelm Friedrich zu Lynar, the father of the present owner, Christian, was a Wehrmacht major, adjutant to Field Marshal Erwin von Witzleben and, like Schulenburg, one of the key members of the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. He was executed in September 1944. Like many others in the plot, the family, consisting of his widow and Christian, then 10, was expropriated by the Nazis. East German authorities upheld the confiscation and turned the castle into a school, but allowed Countess Lynar and Christian to continue living in three of its more than 50 rooms. In 1953 they fled to West Germany. Christian zu Lynar successfully reclaimed the property after Germany's 1990 reunification and has turned it into a top category hotel.

In the castle's former chancellery and orangery you will find the Spreewald Museum, a collection of Sorbic folk art as well as porcelain, faiences, and portraits of Lynar family members, including ones by Antoine Pesne and F. A. Tischbein. An old narrow-gauge locomotive and a combination passenger-and-freight car are in a nearby hall.

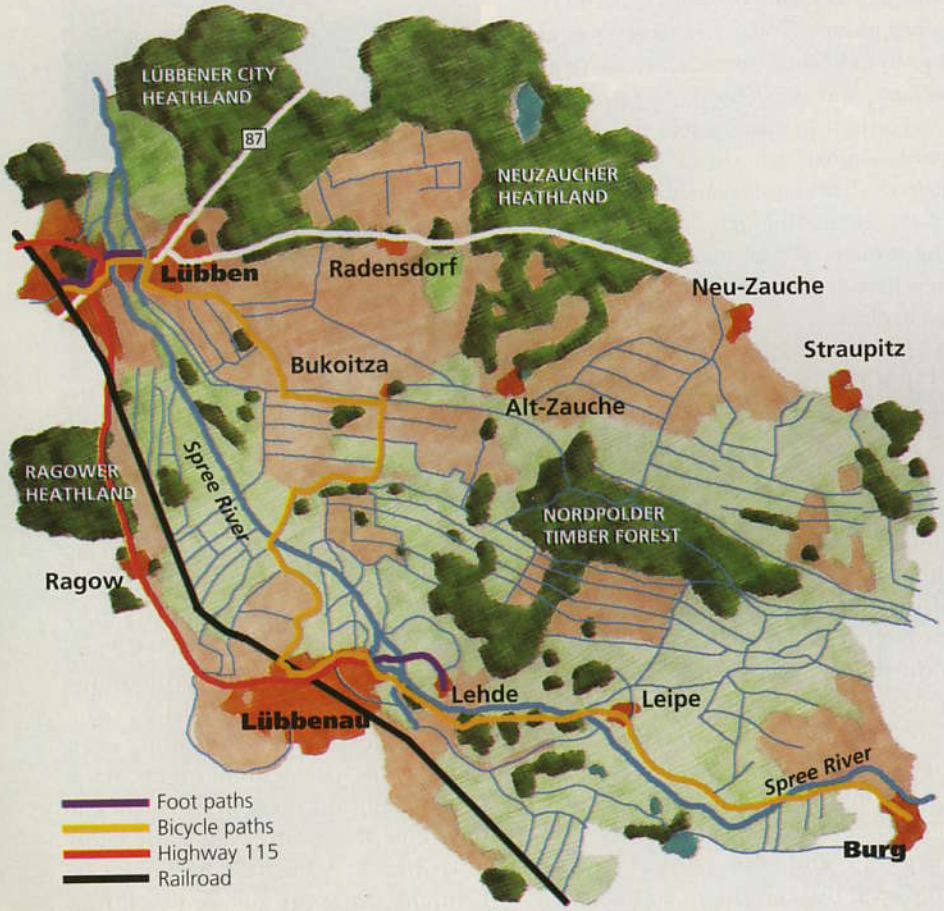
From the museum it is a short walk to either of Lübbenau's two *Kahnfährhäfen*, the harbors where you can board a punt for a choice of excursions lasting from two to ten hours with several stops along the way.

The flat-bottomed boats are privately operated by *Fährmänner* (ferrymen) who work in cooperatives, some of which have existed for 100 years. Coffee, beer, wine, and soft drinks are served on board. Umbrellas are available to shade you and blankets to keep you warm. Prices average DM 5 (about $3) per hour per person.

One of the most rewarding roundtrips from Lübbenau, which you can reduce by about an hour by walking back along clearly marked trails, is the three-hour excursion that includes a stop at the village of Lehde and its open-air museum of farmhouses and Sorbian customs. It is a journey through Fliesse densely lined by weeping willows, silver poplars, ashes, birches, and alder trees, many with trunks five feet in diameter and nearly a century old. Patches of water lilies and reeds narrow the channels to little more than six or eight feet in width.

The usually vociferous "gondoliers" who propel the barges with long poles that reach down three to five feet to the bottoms of the channels, will tell you that the whole area is a unique biological enclave and that no less than four score pairs of storks return here to roost each year. But the islands are also very much inhabited by farmers, craftsmen, and vacationers who live in the wooden, thatch-roofed houses. A unique feature is the emblem of two crossed, crowned heads of snakes on the front gable of nearly every house. The *Schlangenkönig* (snake king)—representative of the ringneck snakes and slowworms that abound here—plays a benign protective role in Sorbian mythology. Although there are paths, foot bridges, and even a few roads (for residents only) that connect the larger islets nowadays, most people who live and work there still travel by rowboats or punts. When your punt pulls up to one of the stands on the shores, farmers sell their vegetables, handicrafts, and pickled cucumbers.

Lehde (Ledy) is where many punts stop for lunch or afternoon coffee at the 70-year-old thatch-roofed, half-timbered Café Venedig, and where you can decide whether to continue or walk back to Lübbenau. It is but one of the colorful villages that you can see on longer excursions, however it is the most picturesque and romantic, for the hamlet of 200 has preserved its original character and appearance. Theodor Fontane called it a "Venice in vest-pocket size."



MAP BY ERIK WASHAM

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Land of the Sorbs

Sorbian *Tracht* (native costume) from the town of Burg

For all their colorful customs, and their role as a tourist attraction in the Ober- and Niederlausitz, the Sorbs are not just part of the Spreewald's folklore. They are a living reminder that Germany in its modern geographical configurations is the result of eastward expansion in the Middle Ages.

The Sorbs are ethnic-cultural-linguistic descendants of the West Slavic peoples who settled between the Oder and Elbe rivers around A.D. 600. They inhabited those territories for half a millennium before the Germanic Franks and Saxons arrived. Countless place names in eastern Germany attest to their long presence. Schwerin (from the Slavic word zwer, meaning a wild animal), Kamenz (from kamen, meaning rock), Leipzig (from lipzi, the place under the linden trees), or the Berlin boroughs of Spandau (originally Spandowo), and Köpenick (called Copenice in Slavic) are some examples.

Most of the other Western Slavs were either slaughtered or forced to flee eastward into today's Poland and Czech Republic during the mid 12th- to mid 13th-century campaigns by the Margraves of Brandenburg and Meissen and the Knights of the Teutonic Order to conquer the territories east of the Elbe. But the Sorbs stayed put.

Though they adopted many teachings, Christianity, and the German language from their occupiers, they also preserved their own idiom and many pagan customs. From the Middle Ages into the 19th century they were oppressed and subjected to repeated attempts at forced assimilation.

In the early 20th century they enjoyed a brief respite, but hopes of a state of their own, like Poland and Czecho-Slovakia were never realized. They were cruelly persecuted in the Third Reich. The Nazis disbanded the Sorbs' cultural societies, notably the *Domowina* (Homeland), their umbrella organization. Many Sorb leaders were incarcerated in concentration camps. There were plans to deport the entire Sorbian populace to German-occupied parts of Eastern Europe.

After World War II, to demonstrate "fraternity" and "alliance" with the Slavic countries of the Soviet bloc, East Germany's Communist regime bent over backwards to protect the Sorbs. It supported preservation of their language with subsidized newspapers, publishing houses, a radio station, and schools, and sponsored their cultural events. But there was a price to pay. Although the Domowina was reestablished, it was subverted and became virtually an extension of the ruling Communist party.

Following Germany's reunification in 1990, the Bonn government slashed most central support for the Sorbs, and rejected proposals to amend the constitution to give the Sorbs official status as a cultural-linguistic minority, such as that enjoyed by the approximately 50,000 Danes in Schleswig-Holstein.

Because their territory was divided by the reconstituted states of Saxony (Upper Lusatia) and Brandenburg (Lower Lusatia), responsibility for preserving Sorbian culture passed to those two state governments. Current federal government funds amount to about DM 16 million ($9.5 million) but are due to be cut in half by the year 2007; funding by the two states comes to another DM 20 million ($12 million).

Ironically this division corresponds roughly with the linguistic and religious divisions within the Sorb community. Their language has two dialects: Upper Sorb, which is closer to Czech, and Lower Sorb, which is akin to Polish. The Upper Sorbs, who inhabit the Oberlausitz are predominantly Catholic; the Lower Sorbs of the Niederlausitz and the Spreewald in Brandenburg are mainly Lutheran Protestant.

The subsidies are used to support a variety of cultural and educational activities.

In the Oberlausitz there are 37 primary schools in which Sorbian is taught, and a secondary school in Bautzen in which all courses except physics, mathematics, and chemistry are in Sorbian. There are 22 Sorbian language schools, including three secondary schools, in the Niederlausitz.

Two radio stations broadcast Sorbian programs, and two daily Sorbian newspapers are published.

In addition there are Sorbian museums in Bautzen and Cottbus, theaters, an institute of Sorbian studies, and chairs of Sorbian language and literature at the universities of Leipzig and Potsdam.

"For the next few decades prospects of preserving the language and culture are fairly good," says Dietrich Scholze, director of the Sorbian Institute, "but I would not make longer-term predictions. Assimilation into German culture seems inevitable unless we gain special political status."

Sorb identity is also threatened by continuing destruction of their village culture through strip mining of lignite. This began under East German communism and continues under post-1990 capitalism. Between 1945 and 1989 some 46 Sorbian villages were razed and destroyed by brontosaurus-like excavators that turn the lands between Bautzen and Cottbus into horrorscapes.

Horno (Rogow), population 350—is next on the list of the Lausitz Brown Coal Corp. (Laubag). Last June Brandenburg's supreme court ruled that forced resettlement of Horno's inhabitants would not contravene the state constitution's guarantee of Sorbian minority status. Horno's burghers have filed a class action appeal at the European Court of Justice, which is expected to rule some time this year.

—John Dornberg

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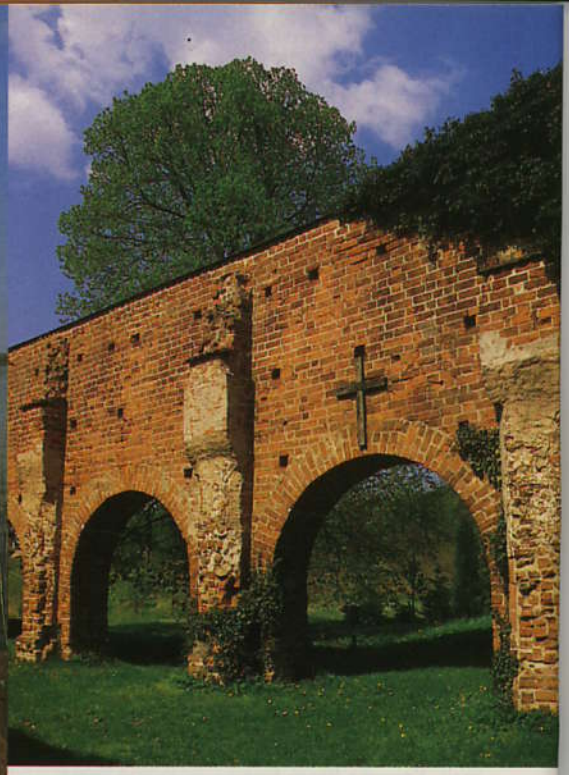

When your punt pulls up on shore, local farmers sell their vegetables, handicrafts, and pickled cucumbers. Polish-style, cobalt-blue pottery is especially popular (bottom left). The ruins of a Cistercian monastery and chapel date back to the mid-12th century (top right). The Spreewald's quiet canals are not the only waterways just outside of Berlin (top left).

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Lehde's biggest attraction is the *Spreewald Freilandmuseum* (*Blotjoski Muzej Lubnjow Ledy* in Sorbian) an open-air museum of three fully furnished and equipped Sorbian farmyards with 200-year-old log and thatch-roofed buildings, some of them brought there from the larger village of Burg. Among them are a bakery, barns, and a workshop for making the punts. The three-dimensional picture of what life was like for the Sorbs features agricultural tools, colorfully painted furniture, costumes, and countless household artifacts. It is open daily April through October. From the museum it is a leisurely 45 minutes' walk back to Lübbenau.

Lübben (Lubin), population 14,000 and seven miles northwest of Lübbenau, is the region's second-largest town and the gate to the *Unterspreewald* (Lower Spreewald), so called because it is a few feet lower in altitude. Like other towns in the area, it was not only a site of rivalry and conflict between Germans and Slavs but, later in the 17th and 18th centuries, between Saxony and Prussia. Prussia finally triumphed at the 1815 Congress of Vienna when the German kingdoms and principalities realigned their borders. In the southern part of town there are still remnants of the outer defenses of the 9th-century Sorb fortress. Although Lübben was almost 85 percent destroyed by artillery bombardment during the last month of World War II, a section of its medieval brick wall, including two Gothic watchtowers, survived and has been well restored. Fontane described Lübben as a "sleepy farming town," which it has remained. Its main attractions are the parish church and the 17th-century castle.

The *Stadtkirche* (City Church) is officially called the Paul Gerhardt Kirche in honor of its 17th-century pastor, considered one of the greatest German hymnal writers. There is a statue of him in front of the main portal. It is a three-naved late-Gothic hall church with some fine interior furnishings.

The Schloss, a five minute walk from the church, is a brick Renaissance structure that replaced a moated castle from the 14th century. The dukes of Saxony used it occasionally as a summer residence. Most of the time it was the seat of their local administrators. Though the building now houses municipal offices, it incorporates a small museum of local history which includes the *Wappensaal*, an ornate neo-Renaissance hall, now used for concerts. Its walls and ceiling are richly ornamented with murals depicting 116 escutcheons and coats of arms of Saxonian rulers and Lübben lords.

Lübben is the departure point for *Kahnabfahrtstelle*, or punt excursions, of two to eight hours to both the Lower and Upper Spreewald. Near the castle you can also rent canoes and paddle-boats for do-it-yourself exploration. But if you do, be sure pick up a hiking-biking-boating guidebook to the waterways. They are a maze in which it is easy to get lost.

From Lübben it is an 11-mile drive along the northern boundary of the Upper Spreewald to the village of Straupitz in the heart of a lake district.

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Straupitz (Tsupc) is a so-called unplanned village: a conglomeration of farms that just got bigger and grew into a community over the centuries. It would hardly be worth mentioning were it not for the Counts von Houwald who settled here in the 17th century, acquired vast parcels of land, and helped the area to prosperity. The Houwalds left their mark with a chateau in English country manor house-style, now a school, surrounded by a 30-acre landscaped park; an unusual kind of windmill; and a magnificent village church designed by none less than Karl Friedrich Schinkel, the Prussian master architect.

The 18th-century *Holländermühle* (Dutch Windmill) is unique in Germany in that it serves a triple purpose: It can press flax to linseed oil, grind grain to flour, and also operate as a saw-mill. It is still in operation and can be visited daily (except Mondays) from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The *Dorfkirche*, which replaced an earlier 17th-century village church, is an eye-popping testimonial to the status of the Houwald family. You had to be really rich to commission Schinkel, then Prussia's most acclaimed architect, to erect a church of this magnitude virtually in the middle of nowhere. The austere cream-colored structure, built between 1827 and 1832, is a masterpiece of neo-Classical design. Its twin towers, each more than 130 feet high, are visible from miles away. The interior is remarkable for its clean lines and sparse decoration: a few frescoes and paintings; epitaphs of a succession of Houwalds; a 17th-century altar and baptismal font, both from the previous village church.

A narrow road through marshes and Fliesse leads seven miles south to **Burg** (Borkowy), the "eastern gate to the Upper Spreewald." Incorporation of several other hamlets has made this one of Germany's largest villages in area—20 square miles with a population of only 4,000. Within the communal boundaries there are 194 navigable Fliesse spanned by some 300 bridges, which are called *Bänke* (benches). Sorb customs play an especially important role in Burg, and if you want to see traditional costumes, then you should visit the local *Heimatfest* on the last weekend in August. Farmsteads here are larger and more isolated than elsewhere in the Spreewald, and many of their thatch-roofed houses and barns are half-timbered or made of logs and date back to the 17th and 18th centuries.

The name Burg has nothing to do with a fortress but derives from the Sorbian "borkowy," which means "a pine forest," of which there are many. The Schlossberg, the community's highest hill, rises up to 30 feet above the Spree. Archaeological excavations there have turned up remnants of a Sorb prince's fortified residence. The hillock is the subject of many Sorb myths, among them the story of a Sorbian king who lives in its depths. This center of Sorb settlement was the focus of strong Slavophobic feelings during World War I and as a result German locals built a 100-foot observation tower on the hillock.

Along the road between Straupitz and Burg there is the *Arznei- und Gewürzpflanzgarten*, a garden of medicinal herbs. Guided tours are available on the first and third Sunday of every month between May and September.

A must-see is the *Alter Spreewaldbahnhof*, where the narrow-gauge trains made a stop on their runs between Cottbus and Lübbenau until the line stopped operating in 1970. It has been made into a picturesque, turn-of-the-century-style inn, and there are a number of restored railway cars to see.

One- to eight-hour punt rides are available at the Kahnfährhäfen in Burg-Dorf, the central hamlet, and in Burg-Kauper.

From Burg it is a 14-mile drive back to Lübbenau or 12 miles to **Cottbus**, the largest city (population 125,000) in the Niederlausitz, where the main attractions are the Baroque and neo-Classical burgher houses surrounding the *Altmarkt* (Old Market Square); the Gothic *Oberkirche*; the *Apothekenmuseum* (Apothecary Museum); the *Wendisches Museum* (Sorb Museum); and *Schloss Branitz*. GL

Contributing editor John Dornberg writes from Munich.

HOTELS

Lübbenau

Hotel Schloss Lübbenau, Schlossbezirk 6, 03222 Lübbenau; Tel.: 011.49.3542.8730; Fax: 011.49.3542.873666. Doubles DM 230 to DM 290 ($140 to $175) in high season, DM 170 to DM 240 ($100 to $145) off season.

Turmhotel, Nach Stottoff 1, 03222 Lübbenau; Tel.: 011.49.3542.89100; Fax: 011.49.3542.891047. Doubles DM 180 ($110) in high season, DM 160 ($95) off season.

Hotel Spreewaldeck, Dammstrasse 31, 03222 Lübbenau; Tel.: 011.49.3542.89010, Fax: 011.49.3542.890110. Doubles DM 160 ($95) high season, DM 130 ($80) off season.

Lübben

Spreewaldhotel Stephanshof, Lehnigksberger Weg 1, 15907 Lübben; Tel.: 011.49.3546.27210; Fax: 011.49.3546.272160. Doubles DM 160 ($95).

Hotel Spreeufer, Hinter der Mauer 4, 15907 Lübben; Tel.: 011.49.3546.27260; Fax: 011.49.3546.272634. Doubles DM 140 ($85).

Hotel Spreeblick, Gubener Str. 53, 15907 Lübben; Tel.: 011.49.3546.2320; Fax: 011.49.3546.232200. Doubles DM 130 ($80)

INFORMATION

Fremdenverkehrsverein Lübbenau, Ehm-Welk-Str. 15, 03222 Lübbenau; Tel.: 011.49.3542.3688; Fax: 011.49.3542.46770.

Fremdenverkehrsverein Lübben, Lindenstrasse 14, 15907 Lübben; Tel.: 011.49.3546.2433 or 3090; Fax: 011.49.3546.2543.

Fremdenverkehrsamt Burg, Am Hafen 1, 03096 Burg-Dorf; Tel.: 011.49.35603.417.

Fremdenverkehrsbüro Cottbus, Karl-Marx-Str. 68, 03044 Cottbus; Tel.: 011.49.355.24254; Fax: 011.49.355.791931.