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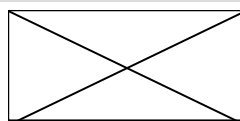
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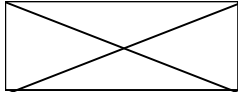
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Dresden: A baroque city by the Elbe

Features - September 18, 2005

Wahyuni Kamah, Contributor, Dresden

Just the day after my arrival in Dresden, the capital of Germany's Saxony Bundesland, my German friend Dietmar dropped me in Dresden's Old City. Having heard some negative comments about the locals I wondered whether it would be alright to stroll through this quarter alone. However, this negative thought quickly went away as soon as I reached Bruehl Terrace, a remnant of the Old City's fortification facing the picturesque Elbe River, and found out how friendly the locals were.

Bruehl Terrace is a favorite place for both locals and tourists since from this large square one can enjoy a wonderful panoramic view of Dresden, where harmony of nature and old architecture meets: a slow flowing Elbe where boats transporting tourists float by and a surrounding complex of beautiful baroque architecture. No wonder Goethe, a prominent German poet, once said that Bruehl Terrace is the Balcony of Europe. The pedestrians that throng Bruehl Terrace also attract street artists who earn money by street theater or playing musical instruments.



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I went down the stairs to Munzgasse, an alley of restaurants and sidewalk cafes packed with tourists. I stopped at a shop that sold stickers and banners bearing slogans reminiscent of the period of communist rule of the German Democratic Republic. Munzgasse led me to the restored Frauen Kirche (Church Of Our Lady), the largest Protestant baroque church in Europe. The city's landmark was built in 1726, but was damaged in World War II. Although the church has not been completed many people flock to visit it. For 8 euros a tour visitors can have a full view of Dresden from its tower.

Then I walked to the west through a shaded passageway to the Schlossplatz. I met some friendly smiling girls wearing traditional German dress who sold souvenirs to passersby. On the wall of this passageway, pedestrians can see an attractive 102-meter Procession of Dukes, a parade of rulers of the house of Saxe-Wettin. This etched stucco dates back to 1870 and was covered by Meissen porcelain tiles. Interestingly it survived the air raids of World War II. Vendors in this passage sell souvenirs ranging from postcards and matches to photographs picturing Dresden before and after WW II. I found their prices to be a little lower than in the shopping center.

Schlossplatz is a wide and clean square. Here tourists take endless photographs of the buildings: Georgenbau, a Renaissance palace with magnificent portals, which links the stable and the palace building; Hausmann Tower; and Hofkirche.

Hofkirche, the Catholic Church, which faces the Elbe, is an eye-catching building. It is about 83 meters high. It has a high nave and is framed by 78 statues of three-meter-high saints. It represents a piece of history of Sachsen because its construction in the mid 18th century was related to the conversion of Frederick Augustus I, prince elector of Sachsen who was dubbed Augustus the Strong, to Catholicism in order to become the King of Poland. When Augustus the Strong died his body was laid to rest in the crypt of Krakow cathedral but his heart was buried in Hofkirche.

Just walking distance in the west of Hofkirche, in Theaterplatz, again, I saw a magnificent triumphal facade of an opera house. Designed by Gottfried Semper in 1841, Semperoper is the pride of Dresdner. German composer Richard Wagner performed his first opera in this building.

In Theaterplatz, I took a rest by the riverbank and enjoyed the wonderful old buildings around me. Semperoper was on my left side, Hofkirche and the Palace were on my right side, and behind me was Zwinger. This is a touristy area; fleets of tourist buses, many large tourist groups, and some Italian ice cream carts selling delicious ice cream in a cone for 80 cents. "If you love the arts, don't forget to visit Zwinger," an Indonesian artist who I met in Copenhagen told me. Indeed, I would not miss any highlights of the birthplace of author Erich Kästner.

The art gallery Zwinger has four entrances. One of them is in Theaterplatz. This grand baroque building has a Neo-Renaissance facade which leads to a wide inner courtyard. It was originally constructed as an orangery for Augustus the Strong who was an avid art collector. The collections in the four renowned museums in Zwinger are mainly his.

Old Masters Picture Gallery houses 3,000 paintings of 14th to 18th century European painters. Masterpieces such as *Sistine Madonna* of Raphael, *Venus of Giorgione/Titian*, and *Self-Portrait* of Rembrandt make the museum a distinguished gallery. Taking pictures in this museum is allowed provided visitors pay an extra fee. In the Armory Museum, visitors can see 10,000 different weapons from the 16th to the 18th century, many of which belonged to Augustus the Strong. The Porcelain Collection in Zwinger houses the biggest and the most complete Meissen porcelain collection in the world. During the rule of Augustus the Strong, the porcelain collection reached 50,000 objects including those from China.

In fact, all the remarkable baroque-style buildings I looked at were restored. The air raids of the Allied forces virtually decimated the whole city killing 35,000 citizens on Feb. 13 and Feb. 14, 1945. Up until now, Dresden has kept reconstructing and restoring its historical buildings. The city that will be 800 years old in 2006 has a unique history. It used to be the "Rome" of the Protestants since Martin Luther's reform movement took place in Sachsen in 1539. Under the rule of Augustus the Strong (1694-1733) who wanted to make Dresden the Florence of the North, Dresden developed into an important city in North Europe. Dresden attained its golden age in the 19th century, when various renowned artists met. There were poets Goethe, Schiller who resided in Dresden; Danish author Hans Christian Andersen; composers Richard Strauss who performed his first opera in Semperoper, Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, as well as Indonesian painter Raden Saleh who stayed in Dresden for a couple of years. After World War II, Dresden fell under the communist authority of the German Democratic Republic. Following Germany's reunification in 1988, it has become part of the united Germany.

In Dresden, life is not as hectic as in other big German cities. The relaxed atmosphere is sensed when you shop in the city center or explore the city by bicycle. The people are nice and far from the rumors I heard about unfriendly former "East" Germans. Most people speak German with a *sächsische* dialect, but in the tourist center, people can speak English. In the city, although most buildings have been restored and reconstructed, I still could see some buildings of the 1950s or 1960s architecture of the communist rule.

The city is not only about baroque buildings. Those who love nightlife must go to the liveliest quarter in Neustadt, where restaurants, sidewalk cafes and bars are concentrated. In the popular hang out for young people, life begins at midnight, especially on Saturday night. And for nature lovers, a boat ride along the Elbe River offers scenic views of its valley, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004.

- Dresden is two hours by car or one and a half hours by train from Berlin. Its airport is accessible to other German cities and major European cities.

- To take a quick look at the city, the City Tour (18 euros), which is available in different languages is worthwhile.

- To visit museums free of charge or at a reduced rate with free transportation in the Dresden area, you can buy a 48-hour Dresden City Card (19 euros).

- Different trips along the Elbe River are available, including to the neighboring Czech Republic.

- Exploring the city by bicycle is strongly recommended.
- Most hotels are situated in touristy or business areas. Budget hotels can be found in Neustadt.

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