

**A**s Anthony threaded 35 metres of electric cable behind pitches and around bushes at the lovely Heide-Camp Schlaitz, we knew we were getting the full German campsite experience. Years ago our first German campsite taught us that finding a hook-up at the end of a row isn't uncommon and that carrying two electric cables was the best survival tactic.

Otherwise, Heide-Camp was perfectly located, on a reservoir and close to the River Elbe, within a nature reserve of lakes, forest and heath where ospreys and beavers live. Next to the site is a pretty village with a curious collection of imaginative and sizeable wooden sculptures and a serve-yourself ice cream dispenser!

A cuckoo called as we cycled on woodland paths to catch the train to the Elbe town of Lutherstadt-Wittenberg. It was here that Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses condemning clergy who sold indulgences, initiating the Reformation and the birth of Protestantism.

The seismic events of 1517 define Wittenberg in many ways, but if you have no interest in Luther, it is a picturesque town with harmonious streets edged with channels of water that lead to an attractive marketplace. For me the most significant sight was the double-tower church circled by cobbled streets and the location of the first protestant service and ordination. We couldn't resist the wittily named Witten Burger Café for lunch, played with the distorting mirrors in the park that circles the town and discovered the oak tree where Luther burnt the papal bull (decree) threatening his excommunication in 1520.

We were in Germany to explore the magnificent River Elbe that stretches 680 miles from the Polish-Czech border to Cuxhaven and the North Sea, taking in a bevy of cultural highlights along the way. Ever since I first followed the Elbe from Dresden to the Czech border in 1992, the waterway has captivated me.

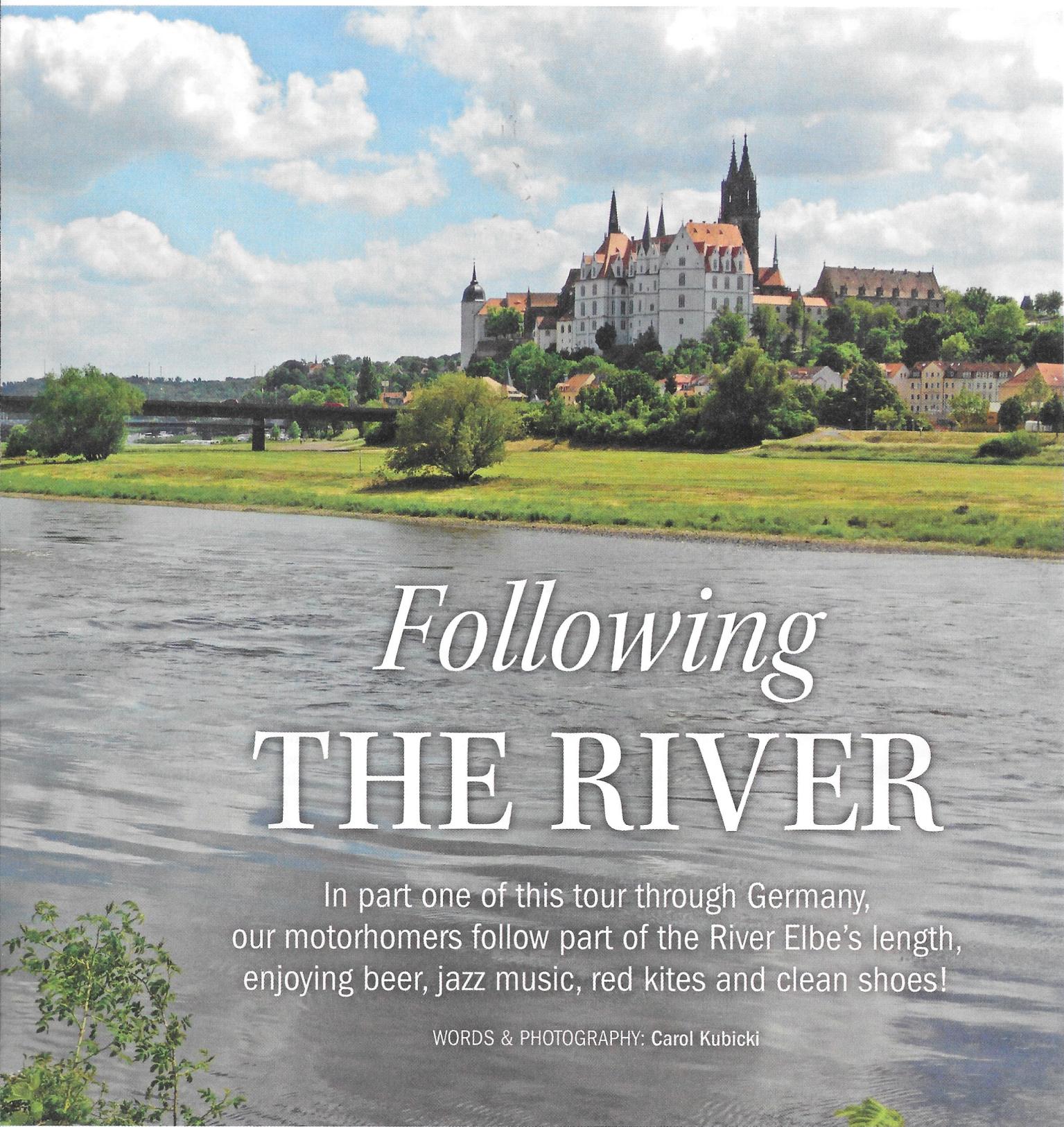
My devotion became enduring a few years later when I cruised along the Elbe into vibrant Hamburg on the ferry from Harwich. Learning there was an Elberadweg (cycle route), I bought the guidebooks and put it on my wish list.

After a day cycling around the reservoir, sampling German beers in the sunshine on the way, we once again caught the train, this time to Dessau. Sitting on a bend of the Elbe, Dessau is best known for the modernist Bauhaus art school that combined fine art with functional design.

The 1926 Bauhaus building was at the movement's heart; as well as light and airy



*"The cycling was glorious and mostly traffic-free along the vast floodplain of the lazily winding river"*



# *Following* THE RIVER

In part one of this tour through Germany, our motorhomers follow part of the River Elbe's length, enjoying beer, jazz music, red kites and clean shoes!

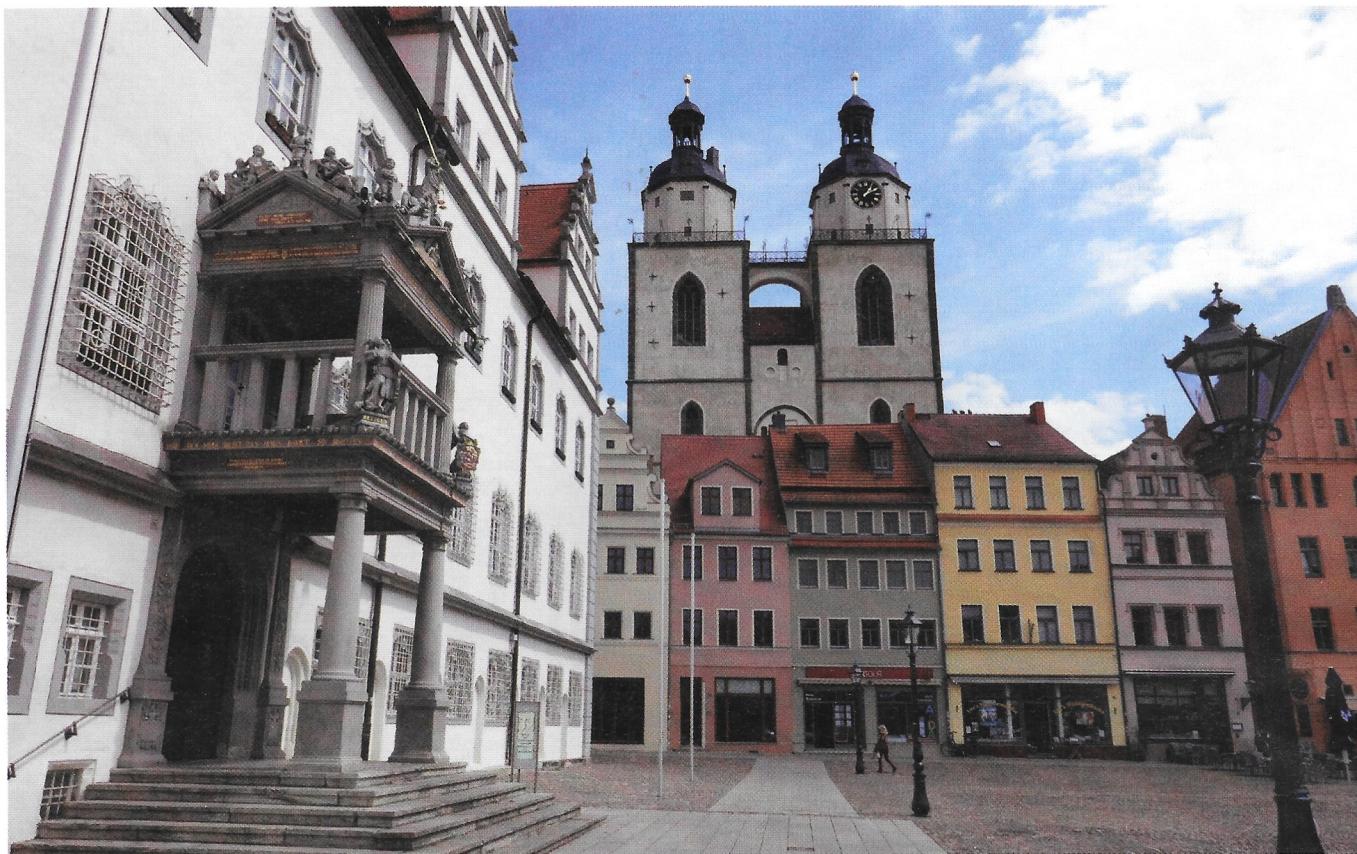
WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

ABOVE A paddle steamer on the Elbe passing Meissen

teaching spaces, it incorporates student flats with stylish balconies. Focusing on brilliant-white concrete and shiny metal railings against a cobalt-blue sky, I was in a David Hockney Hollywood pool painting.

Closer to the Elbe, the row of angular Masters' Houses sit stylishly among pine

trees. Inside the first one, the austere concrete rooms, mezzanine floors and unusual indoor balconies felt like the set for a thriller. In contrast, I could imagine an artist working in the bright studio in the final house and picture convivial parties on the terrace. The Nazis didn't ➤



## US AND OUR 'VAN



*Carol Kubicki...*

and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring the historical and natural environments



2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. This is our third blue campervan and we have called them all the 'Blue Bus'

approve of the 'alien' Bauhaus architecture and closed down the school, insisting windows were made smaller and outside chimneys added to the Masters' Houses, but they have since been restored.

Part of the allure of the Elbe is that, from 1949 until 1990, much of it was either the border between East and West Germany or firmly behind the Iron Curtain. The legacy of this is an undeveloped and natural-appearing riverbank flanked with flower-rich meadows that flood regularly.

As well as blissful cycling, this landscape was also made for relaxed driving. The Blue Bus loved coasting on the rural roads between fields and woodland and tootling through tidy villages with stalls selling fresh seasonal vegetables.

We drove so few miles we only filled up with diesel once in two weeks and, with no hills and big cities, our Renault rewarded us with a record 39mpg, leaving us more to spend on the excellent German beer!

Highlights kept appearing and Torgau, on the banks of the Elbe, took our breath away. In the main square we sat outside a café with coffee and cake in sight of the bizarre fountain where a trumpeter and bear spouted jets of water.

Winding our way along cobbled streets, we reached Hartenfels Castle, a Renaissance masterpiece with an airy spiral staircase in

its courtyard and plenty of historical links. Luther consecrated its chapel and, in 1945, the castle was an evocative backdrop for the victorious first meeting of American and Russian soldiers. That's how 25 April became known as Elbe Day.

The Romans never settled east of the Elbe and the river still marks a subtle cultural change. We crossed the bridge, into what was historically known as East Elbia, to Mühlberg, a sleepy town that turned out to be a fantastic base.

On our doorstep we had cobbled streets, a candy-pink town hall and a lofty red-brick convent church dating back to the thirteenth century with a stunning painted vaulted ceiling.

From our grassy pitch we watched spectacular sunsets across a small lake.

The Elberadweg is over 800 miles long and, for much of its length, cycle paths follow both banks, allowing us to plan circular day rides.

From Mühlberg the cycling was glorious and mostly traffic-free along the vast floodplain of the lazily winding river. The only hills were the dykes and the only irritation was the sections of bone-rattling cobbles in the villages!

In Lorenzkirch we rang the bell for the passenger ferry to Strehla, where the crew outnumbered passengers. The quiet roads

## INFORMATION

- The Elbe Cycle Route** [elbe-cycle-route.com](http://elbe-cycle-route.com)
- For all public transport around Dresden and the upper Elbe region** [vvo-online.de/en](http://vvo-online.de/en)
- For the Bauhaus building in Dessau** [bauhaus-dessau.de](http://bauhaus-dessau.de)
- For information about the sights in English** [lutherstadt-wittenberg.de](http://lutherstadt-wittenberg.de)
- Visitor information for Wörlitz Park** [welterbe-gartenreich.de](http://welterbe-gartenreich.de)

**LEFT** Attractive marketplace in Lutherstadt-Wittenberg

**BETWEEN** The Bauhaus building in Dessau; Cycling along the Elbe near Meissen

**BELOW INSET** The ornate Gothic House at Wörlitzer Park

and dedicated cycle paths meandered around large timber-framed farmhouses, by delightful churches and a wooden windmill. There was always a picnic bench to stop at and we propped the bikes up often to watch red kites, hunting booted eagles and storks.

In Belgern we checked out replica Roland statues in the park and scoffed ice cream and beer by the town's own exceptionally tall Roland statue. Many towns have armoured medieval Rolands that once signified the town's privileges.

The scenery changed as we neared Meissen, leaving the wide floodplain for a steep-sided valley with vines growing on sunny slopes. Our campsite was on the Elberadweg near Meissen and, as a city that has been on my list for years, we eagerly headed out to sightsee.

We enjoyed strolling through handsome streets to the market where the magnificent Albrechtsburg Castle and church loomed into view.

Steep cobbled streets and gatehouses led us to these imposing buildings and a bird's-eye view over the river.

We peeked into courtyards and watched

a paddle steamer docking before heading back to the market for a glass of chilled local wine and scrumptious freshly baked pretzels. Of course, Meissen is famous for porcelain, known as white gold, but anyone from Staffordshire might be disappointed that it is nothing like the Potteries and there isn't a potbank in sight!

We were happy with Meissen and our campsite pitch and we lingered.

We prefer to travel spontaneously, but becoming aware that two holiday weekends were looming and many German campsites were already full, we used a bit of time to plan and book!

The Elberadweg took us south on Tarmac paths lined with châteaux-type mansions and vineyards to Radebeul where we ambled around the village green packed with upmarket restaurants and climbed the hillside among vineyards.

We had a headwind as we cycled north to the wine village of Diesbar-Seusslitz where we rested in pleasant gardens around the castle. Back in Meissen, we joined the hordes of cyclists for ice creams at a café in a London bus. ▶



## THE JOURNEY

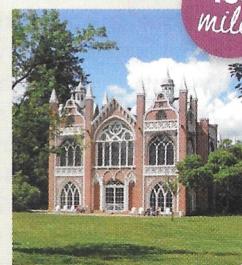
We travelled from home in Morecambe to the Elbe via the DFDS Newcastle to IJmuiden ferry, then through the Netherlands via Lelystad to Magdeburg. We returned to IJmuiden via Bremerhaven and Meppen. Our total trip was a return distance of 1,931 miles, of which this part was 430 miles. On this part of our trip we spent 16 days touring this section of the River Elbe with 15 nights on sites in May

## THE COSTS

Fuel Average 39mpg (mpg is higher than normal possibly due to the lack of hills and stop-start urban driving) £197  
 Ferry costs Newcastle to IJmuiden return with DFDS, including an outside cabin and all meals £705  
 Attractions Two adults: The Bauhaus Masters' Houses in Dessau,

Gothic House and Insel Stein at Wörlitzer Park £29.75  
 Parking There are lots of free car parks in Germany! £0  
 Bus and train fares Trains to Wittenberg, Dessau and Dresden and various ferries across the Elbe £80.25  
 Total costs £1,012

430 miles





We have returned to Dresden since that 1992 visit, but couldn't resist taking the train from Meissen to see this amazing city again. The streets were crowded as a jazz festival was in full swing and we negotiated street food stalls and stages, listening to the jazz classics.

Following the music, we sauntered through monumental buildings, checking out changes since we were last here. The biggest transformation was the Neumarkt where the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche was now complete and the attractive pre-war square recreated.

After queuing to see the Frauenkirche's bright Baroque interior we went in search of my favourite river. Like a blue ribbon tossed across the city, the Elbe snakes confidently through Dresden. We strolled along the bank among the cyclists and watched the boats on our way to the Zwinger.

What never seems to change in Dresden is ongoing renovation work at this Baroque palatial complex. On this visit the central gardens were a building site, but we could admire the numerous stone statues on the high terraces, astounded that not one cupid seemed to be the same as another. Walking back to the station through the festival, we bought delicious fried potato pancakes with a dollop of apple sauce from a stall and climbed onto our train full, tired and happy.

We were as far south as we had time to go

### TOP TIPS

There are plenty of ferries across the Elbe, whereas you can cycle or drive a long way between bridges. Some ferries take passengers only, others take a few cars and they all carry bicycles. Check the operation times before planning a cycle route

We used Part One of the Bikeline cycling guide to the Elbe River Trail for this part of our trip, which is available in English. It has information about the ferries, sights to see and campsites as well as the route and alternatives if the river has flooded

Make sure you have at least 25 metres of electric cable and possibly more!

and, leaving Meissen, we pointed the 'van downstream in the direction of Cuxhaven to see what other sights the river would reveal.

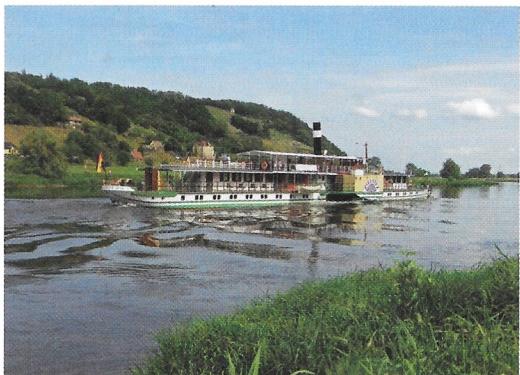
We found the Middle Elbe Reserve, an abundant landscape of wet grassland and forests that stretches around 400km (250 miles) north from Wittenberg. A heavy shower sent us dashing into the café at Pretzsch Castle, where we learned a regular visitor was Martin Luther.

After the sunshine returned, we found the enchanting thirteenth century stone and timber-framed Elbe Mariner's Church, renovated since it was almost submerged in the 2002 flood. I was gazing over the meadows towards the river while Anthony chatted to some German cyclists, when a kestrel swooped into its nest in the church's gable. Heading back to the campsite, we disturbed a group of cranes and one by one they unhesitatingly launched themselves into the air and flew overhead.

An Elbe backwater was used to create the lake in the eighteenth century Wörlitzer Park, a wonderland of follies, gardens and waterways. The bucolic park is free to wander around and we have visited before, but on this trip we wanted to see inside some of the buildings.

At the Gothic House we were surprised to firstly be asked to brush the soles of our shoes in a machine to protect the exquisite wooden floors. With shiny shoes, we ▶

ABOVE CLOCKWISE Dresden has plenty of magical fountains; The streets of Lutherstadt-Wittenberg harmoniously lead to the marketplace; An old wooden windmill on the Elbe floodplain near Mühlberg



### WE STAYED AT

**Heide-Camp Schlaitz**, Am Muldestausee, 06774 Schlaitz, Sachsen-Anhalt

0049 3495 520571

[heide-camp-schlaitz.de](http://heide-camp-schlaitz.de) All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €20 (£17.97) with ACSI card

**Rast-und Campingplatz Mühlberg**, Am Hafen 1c, 04931 Mühlberg, Brandenburg

0049 1757 093606

[wrrs-marina-muehlberg.de](http://wrrs-marina-muehlberg.de)

1 April - 31 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €23.50 (£21.11)

**Campingplatz Magdeburg**, Burgwall 2A/2b, 39218 Schönebeck, Saxony-Anhalt

0049 3914 082435

[campingplatz-magdeburg.de](http://campingplatz-magdeburg.de)

April to October

£ Two adults and pitch: From €21 (£18.86) plus metered electricity

**Campingplatz Rehbocktal**, Rehbocktal 4, 01665 Klipphausen, near Meissen, Sachsen

0049 3521 404827

[camping-rehbocktal.de](http://camping-rehbocktal.de)

End of April to beginning of October depending on the weather

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €32 (£28.75)

**Campingpark & Wohnmobilhafen Am Grossen Lausiger Teich**, 06905 Bad Schmiedeberg, Pretzsch, Sachsen-Anhalt

0049 3492 657475

[lausiger-teiche.de](http://lausiger-teiche.de)

All year (advance booking required November to Easter)

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €27.50 (£24.70)

**Grossparkplatz**, Wörlitzer Park, Saxony-Anhalt £ €5 for 24 hours, no EHU, toilets 7am - 7pm

wandered through an irregular collection of rooms with stained glass windows and elaborate ceilings, inspired by Strawberry Hill in London.

At the Insel Stein (The Isle of Stone), we were ready for the shoe cleaning ritual. Here, an Italianate villa sits on a maze of stone grottos and tunnels.

We emerged at the water's edge from dark passages onto a grassy peninsula with a nesting swan. A coypu was slipping quietly away and a red kite somersaulted in the air before skimming the water. The park is popular and my favourite times at Wörlitzer are the golden hours when I can appreciate uncluttered vistas only disturbed by hares loping slowly across the softly lit grassland.

With the first holiday weekend upon us, we drove back through Dessau. Despite booking, we rejected a campsite that threatened an all-night party and instead were shoehorned into a packed site in Schönebeck on the Elbe's bank. Nearby we took in the Ringheiligtum, a large circular wood henge with reconstructed wooden posts in multiple rings that illustrate how it might have looked 4,000 years ago.

Schönebeck has a tradition of salt production and, like many of the Elbe towns we had visited, has an indicator showing the height of different flood events, the most recent being 2013. The town was celebrating Ascension Day with a fair and we indulged in Hungarian langos dripping with garlic butter that we ate on the riverbank.

We had followed just a quarter of the

**ABOVE** Campingplatz Rehbocktal is on a beautiful stretch of the Elberadweg; Meissen's marketplace

**BELOW** Wörlitzer Park park is a wonderland of follies, gardens and waterways

Elbe's length in 15 nights. Our journey had taken us from bustling Dresden to wildlife-rich meadows with plenty of highlights in between. We had covered almost 125 miles on the Elberadweg and were fitter and ready to tackle the next section to Cuxhaven and the North Sea.

