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Fritz, Glitz, and Spritz in Potsdam, Germany

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Prussia's King Frederick the Great was one conflicted character, and the Germans honor him, especially in Potsdam where his summer palace ranks as the top tourist site.



Frederick the Great's Sanssouci is the centerpiece of 800-acre Sanssouci Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

“Old Fritz” despised women, talked philosophy with Voltaire for hours on end, loved playing his flute and adored his pet dogs so much he was buried with them. On tours of the “Prussian Versailles,” his lifestyle always comes up, says guide Oliver Gondring. Was he gay? Impotent? Or did he simply prefer intellectual pursuits to pleasures of the flesh?

Certainly, he was no wishy-washy monarch. The boy who was afraid of guns became a ruler known for military prowess, expanding his small kingdom into one of the great powers of Europe in the 18th century.

Born 300 years ago, Frederick and his kin remain much alive for visitors to Potsdam, as do the remnants of the Cold War and the city's current status as the “Hollywood of Germany.”

Don't miss:

Sanssouci: For such a flamboyant character, Frederick the Great built a rather small summer palace. Just one story, you'll nevertheless find it filled with rococo excesses of the king's own design. Women were never allowed here. The rooms of varying décor—Chinese, Italian, French—were for men's enjoyment only, especially the Marble Hall where a meal with the monarch could last five or six hours. Since Frederick thought religion a mockery, the palace has no chapel—a scandal in his day.

For all its 18th-century gilt and glamour, the most expensive work of art in the palace dates from the 20th century. Look for the portrait of Frederick the Great by Andy Warhol hanging in a small gallery just before you exit.

Sanssouci, French for “without care,” is the centerpiece of 800-acre Sanssouci Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site well worth a stroll. Be sure to tour the New Palace, built from 1763-1769 as a showpiece of more than 200 rooms designed to impress visiting dignitaries. Germany’s last kaiser, Wilhelm II, lived here before abdicating at the end of World War I.

Cold War sites: If you’re a fan of spy novels and tales of international espionage, tour the “Forbidden City.” When the Red Army invaded Potsdam during World War II, the Soviets gave residents of this neighborhood just two hours to clear out before they took over their homes and walled off the neighborhood from outsiders. The KGB moved into a private school for girls that still stands with the KGB prison, now a museum, next door.

The Berlin Wall ran through Potsdam and a critical point in this well-guarded border was the Glienicke Bridge spanning the Havel River. Diplomatic negotiations came to a head here where Americans and Soviets met at a barricade at the center of the bridge to trade spies and political prisoners. Now you can drive or bike across the bridge en route to central Berlin, 15 miles away.

Cecilienhof: The last royal palace built in Germany is an English-Tudor-style residence that was the home of Germany’s crown prince and his wife Cecilie, for whom it is named. Unlike much of central Potsdam, destroyed in the last bombing raid of World War II, the palace survived and became the setting for one of the most important meetings of world powers at the time.

During the Potsdam Conference, Joseph Stalin, Harry Truman and Winston Churchill met to divide up postwar Europe, setting the stage for the beginning of the Cold War. Take a tour inside the palace to see the room where the three sat at a round table for days of give and take. Stalin had the advantage, though. He had Truman’s and Churchill’s villas bugged so he knew what they were up to before negotiations began each day.



Potsdam is surrounded by water, so a boat tour becomes a pleasant way to see the sights. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

Bike, bus and boat tours: Potsdamers love to bike and it's easy to join them. Hotel am Grossen Waisenhaus, like many Potsdam lodgings, rents bikes to guests. You can also rent from Cityrad-Rebhan or Potsdam per Pedales, which also offers organized bike tours. Dedicated bicycle lanes and fairly flat streets make for easy pedaling.

One of the best ways to tour Sanssouci Palace is to hop on a double-decker bus for the Potsdam Sanssouci Tour sponsored by Potsdam Tourism Service. Not only do you skip the long lines at the palace, but the guide gives a private, 45-minute tour of the palace with commentary in English that's way better than using an audio guide. The 3.5-hour tour also covers other highlights of Potsdam.

You may not realize Potsdam is an island. The Havel River and a chain of lakes surround it, so a palace tour by boat on Weisse Flotte is a leisurely way to see the city from the water. And the bar is open throughout the 1.5-hour cruise.

Dutch Quarter: You'll find Europe's largest collection of Dutch-style houses outside Netherlands around four city blocks in central Potsdam. Frederick's father, the "Soldier King," encouraged Hollanders to immigrate to Potsdam because they knew how to build on the city's marshy ground. From 1734 to 1742 some 135 red-brick homes were constructed with characteristic shutters and gables.

Now many of them have been converted to shops, galleries, restaurants and pubs. Try the roast pork with red cabbage or calves' liver with baked apples at Fliegenden Hollander, the Flying Dutchman, restaurant.



The Film Museum Potsdam is housed in the former horse stables of the kaiser. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

“Hollywood of Germany”: Germany's largest film studio occupies the district of Babelsberg. Begun in 1912, it has produced films with stars from Marlene Dietrich to Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt and Natalie Portman. Among the modern movies shot here are “The Reader,” “Inglourious Basterds” and “The Ghost Writer.” Tour Babelsberg Film Park and Dreamworks studios and you'll learn some production tricks, see set construction, costume and makeup areas. You can also participate in some 4D action in the Dome of Babelsberg.

For some background on Potsdam's film industry, head back to the central city for a tour of the Film Museum Potsdam, housed what was once the kaiser's horse stables.