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Dresden

By GISELA WILLIAMS

WHY GO NOW There aren't many cities that deserve to celebrate a birthday as much as Dresden does. Nearly destroyed by Allied bombs in World War II, Dresden, a historic city on the Elbe River in eastern [Germany](#), has reclaimed its splendor. Six decades after its devastation, Dresden is turning 800 this year with great fanfare and a newfound confidence that is evident from the city's rebuilt skyline to its rapidly evolving night life.

Since German reunification, Dresden has been undergoing a significant restoration of its Baroque architecture, art collections and museums — once celebrated as some of [Europe's](#) finest. Finished just in time for the city's anniversary is the iconic Frauenkirche, the solid stone Church of Our Lady (fondly nicknamed the Fat Lady by locals), whose \$218 million reincarnation is now the centerpiece of the rebuilt Altstadt, or Old Town.

Frauenkirche's rebirth, along with the opening this month of the historic Green Vault, home to one of Europe's most storied treasure collections, also allows the city to catch its breath and dream about the future. Dresden's main train station is being restored by Norman Foster, and the Dresden Military History Museum is getting a peacetime makeover from Daniel Libeskind. While the museum will examine the city's wartime devastation and Germany's military past, it is already being promoted as a modern landmark for a shiny new Dresden.

WHERE TO STAY Along with freshly restored churches and palaces, the revamped Altstadt is home to many of the city's top hotels. In the center of Altstadt is the grand Taschenbergpalais Kempinski (Taschenberg 3; 49-351-49-120; www.kempinski-dresden.de), the obvious choice for travelers who don't blink at spending, say, 300 euros (\$387 at \$1.29 to the euro) or more for a room. The 18th-century yellow palace was recently renovated and now has 214 rooms with large windows and classic furnishings. The charming courtyard becomes a skating rink in the winter.

Just as central but more affordable at 119 euros to 149 euros is the new Steigenberger Hotel de Saxe (Neumarkt 9; 49-351-43-860; www.desaxe-dresden.steigenberger.de). Built on the site of an 18th-century hotel, many of the 185 rooms have views of the Fat Lady and the unfinished Neumarkt.

Across the river in Neustadt, or New Town, is the artsy and family-owned Raskolnikoff

Pension (Böhmische Strasse 34; 49-351-80-45706; www.raskolnikoff.de). Although named after the Dostoevsky character, you won't find any crime and punishment here. The six newly renovated rooms are affordable (starting at 32 euros) and cheery. There is also a contemporary art gallery, a cozy restaurant and a courtyard garden. Ask for one of the two rooms with private bathrooms.

WHERE TO EAT It's best to avoid the Altstadt, where restaurants and cafes tend to be crowded, pricey tourist traps, and head across the Elbe for more authentic dining. Serious foodies should make a reservation at Das Caroussel at the grand-style Hotel Bülow Residenz (Rähnitzgasse 19; 49-351-80-030; www.buelow-residenz.de). Tucked in Inner Neustadt (more upscale and polished than the buzzing Outer Neustadt), the restaurant recently enlisted the rising young chef Dirk Schröer, who is eager to make his mark with Mediterranean accents. Favorites include peppered halibut with lardo on sweet potatoes, lamb with a bean gremolata and goat cheese cannelloni, and couscous with yogurt mousse and wild blueberries. A three-course menu is 68 euros.

Mediterranean flavors also make their mark at Villandry in Inner Neustadt (Jordanstrasse 8; 49-351-89-96724; www.villandry.de). Dishes like wild bass with chanterelles and peppers (14 euros) and tuna with red beets, pumpkin and wasabi (7 euros) are served in a modern and relaxed atmosphere. You won't find many tourists here — just the city's coolest crowd.

For views of the Elbe and the Blue Wonder Bridge, you can't beat Schillergarten (Schillerplatz 9; 49-351-81-19922; www.schillergarten.de), among the oldest restaurants in the city. It tends toward hearty dishes like goulash with sesame gnocchi and red cabbage (10.60 euros) and roasted pork with crust, beans and almond spätzle (11.20 euros). On warm days, customers dine on a terrace overlooking the river.

For a sugary pick-me-up while sightseeing in the Altstadt, stop by the new Grand Café at the Coselpalais (An der Frauenkirche 12a; 49-351-49-62444). With prime views of the Frauenkirche, the grand-style cafe sells an impressive assortment of cakes and tarts.

WHAT TO DO DURING THE DAY Forget about the double-decker tour buses. For a quirky city tour, rent your own Trabi, the tiny plastic cars manufactured in the former Communist East Germany. A company called Trabi Safari, (49-351-89-900110; www.trabi-safari.de) recently started giving driving tours of Dresden, complete with guide. Tours last 90 minutes and cost 30 euros per person for a group of two.

It's impossible to miss the Fat Lady. Some 250,000 people came out last summer to witness the completion of the Frauenkirche's rebuilt exterior (An der Frauenkirche 12; 49-351-65-60656; www.frauenkirche-dresden.de) and marvel at its jigsaw-puzzle facade of black (original) and tan (new) stones. The church is open to the public every day (audio tours are 2.50 euros). But to experience its full glory, take part in one of two Sunday masses (11 a.m. and 6 p.m.) or check out the concerts on Saturday nights (10 euros to 42 euros).

Talk about bling. Three centuries ago, Augustus the Strong, king of **Poland** and elector of Saxony, amassed one of the world's flashiest collections of treasures, with diamond-encrusted swords and the one-of-a-kind 41-carat Green Diamond. But the collection, called the Green Vault, was broken up after the bombings of World War II. Earlier this month, for the first time in 68 years, the 4,000 precious objects were back together again at Dresden's Royal Palace and opened to the public (Taschenberg 2; 49-351- 49-192285; www.skd-dresden.de).

To soak in the city's architectural and natural treasures, take a cruise on the Elbe. One trip, offered by Sächsische Dampfschiffahrt (49-351-86-6090; www.saechsische-dampfschiffahrt.de), goes from Dresden to the fairytale town of Meissen, surrounded by excellent vineyards like Schloss Proschwitz. The round trip takes five hours and costs 10.90 euros.

WHAT TO DO AT NIGHT After a day touring the beautifully restored but touristy Altstadt, you might begin to wonder where all the locals are. The answer is across the river in the Neustadt, which is divided into two distinct neighborhoods: the upscale, more polished Inner Neustadt and the grittier, more bohemian Outer Neustadt, which is filled with bars and clubs. Of course, you're welcome to explore them on your own, but it's more fun with Anna the transvestite — one of the guides from Nightwalk Dresden (49-351-80-13361, www.nightwalk-dresden.de; 12 euros per person), which offers three-hour bar-hopping tours.

After the night life primer, you'll want to continue exploring the area's lively bars and lounges. One of the trendiest is Wohnzimmer (Jordanstrasse 27; 49-351-56-35956), where a trendy crowd sits on thrones while drinking mojitos. Another cool spot is Scheunecafé (Alaunstrasse 36-40; 49-351-80-26619), which features live music and tasty Indian food. Last call is around 3 a.m.

If you prefer arias to lounge music, don't miss the stunning, world-famous Semper Opera House (Theaterplatz 2; 49-351-49-110; www.semperoper.de), an elaborate 19th-century neo-Renaissance landmark by the architect Gottfried Semper. Verdi's "Otello," featuring the soprano Anja Harteros, will have several performances in October.

WHERE TO SHOP The best shopping, like the best eating and drinking, can be found in the Neustadt, especially along Königstrasse, the refined main promenade. The upmarket boutique Anna G. (Königstrasse 11; 49-351-80-29328) sells trendy women's and children's clothing. Antik & Design (Königstrasse 6; 49-351- 80-25307) specializes in modern furniture and home accessories like trash cans made from recycled billboards for 15 euros to 36 euros.

Younger, more affordable shops are found in Outer Neustadt. Check out funky independent stores like Mrs. Hippie (Görlitzer Strasse 25) where you can pick up a groovy ensemble for less than 100 euros. Inside the Kunsthof Passage — a series of linked courtyards styled by travel.nytimes.com/.../24goingto.html...

local artists — is the new-age emporium Feng Shui Haus (Görlitzer Strasse 21; 49-351-81-05498), which sells everything from handmade soaps (14 euros) to eco-friendly wooden bikes (170 euros).

There are good buys on the other side of the river, too. The Christmas Market, held in Altstadt's Old Market Square, is known throughout Europe. During the rest of the year, the square is filled on Thursdays with street vendors selling everything from grilled sausages for 1 euro to the city's famous Christmas stollen.

ON YOUR FIRST TRIP OR YOUR 10TH On a clear day, there's no better way to explore the Dresden Elbe Valley than by bicycle. (Act fast. A plan to build a road bridge over the Elbe is putting the valley's status as a World Heritage Site at risk.) Some hotels will organize rentals; alternatively pick out a comfortable bike at Antrieb der Fahrradladen (Könneritzstrasse 7; 49-351-85-82059) for 11.11 euros a day. Ride east past the Altstadt for about an hour until you reach the Pillnitz Palace, a former summer residence of the Saxon royal court. A five-minute ferry across the Elbe will get you there. The park has beautiful flowers and rare trees, including a famous camellia imported from [Japan](#) in 1776.

HOW TO GET THERE Most flights from New York connect through Frankfurt. A recent online search found round trips from Kennedy Airport to Dresden, with a short Frankfurt stopover, starting at \$685 on United Airlines.

GETTING AROUND The Altstadt is best navigated on foot — it's no bigger than most [Manhattan](#) neighborhoods. Walking across the Elbe to the Neustadt is also doable, but riding the efficient public transportation is faster — 4.50 euros for a day ticket on any of Dresden's trams or buses.