

Wolfgang Korall & Georg Schwikart

Journey through the

SPREE FOREST



Stürtz

CONTENTS

First page:

The magic of the Spree Forest is only fully revealed to those who brave the decks of the traditional punt. The harbour at Lübben awaits...

Previous page:

No Sorb wedding would be complete without the bridal procession to the church. The bride's dress

is elaborately ornamental and the groom decked out in his Sunday suit with a top hat, seen here at the town festival in Burg.

Below:

On the many waterways of the Spree Forest it's usually pretty quiet - except on sunny days

between Lübbenau and Lehde, when at the weekends the rivers do a roaring trade.

Page 10/11:
In the past Lehde could only be reached by boat. Today the three farmhouses of the museum village illustrate what

life used to be like then. You can find out about the day-to-day lives of the local farmers and fishermen and study traditional crafts.

12

BUILT ON WATER:
THE SPREE FOREST

26

BETWEEN LÜBBEN, VETSCHAU
AND STRAUPITZ:
THE UPPER SPREE FOREST

Page 36

As cool as a cucumber:
gherkins and the like

Page 62

Travelling back in time:
the Slavic fort of Raddusch

68

BETWEEN LÜBBEN AND
ALT-SCHADOW:
THE LOWER SPREE FOREST

Page 74

O sing, my soul:
hymn writer Paul Gerhardt

Page 88

Kings, dragons and will-o'-the-wisps:
Spree Forest fairytales

98

THE CHARM OF
THE SPREE FOREST:
THINGS TO SEE AND DO

Page 122: index

Page 123: map

Page 124: credits



BUILT ON WATER: THE SPREE FOREST

"The Spree Forest is a huge sanatorium for city dwellers of a nervous disposition", were the words used to draw visitors to the area 100 years ago. Even if things may be a little hectic at this river crossing, it's easy to get away from the crowds here.

Local sayings often have an element of truth in them. The one frequently applied to the River Spree, known locally as *Mäuerka* or "little mother", is no exception. "If you manage to drown in the Spree Forest, you're just too lazy to stand up"; with between 150 and 300 rivulets or *Fließe* which have an average width of four metres (13 feet) and a depth of not even a meter, drowning would be quite a feat indeed! The River Spree rises near the Czech border in the mountains of Upper Lusatia and flows into the Havel in Berlin-Spandau after a long journey of about 400 kilometres (250 miles). Between Cottbus and Alt-Schadow it sprawls out across what must be one of the most fascinating marshy landscapes in Europe: the Spreewald or Spree Forest. During the last ice age approximately 12,000 years ago waters from melting glaciers carved out the ancient river valley, its network of waterways now extremely complex and convoluted. The name "Spree" is no accident; linguistically related to German words such as *Spreu* (here: spray), *streuen* (to strew) or *spreizen* (to spread), the association is easy to understand.

According to legend the evolution of the Spree Forest was far more dramatic. It wasn't formed by primeval geological change but by the Devil who ploughed the river bed of the Spree with a yoke of oxen. He'd done quite a bit when his animals grew tired and began to flag. Satan was incensed. In a dreadful rage he hurled his cap at the poor cattle, screaming: "Let my grandmother take you, you lazy beasts!" The terrified oxen bolted, dragging the plough behind them. They ran hither and thither through the ancient forest near Cottbus, creating an inland delta with hundreds of streams and rivers in place of Lucifer's planned orderly canal. And so the Spree Forest has remained: myriad, mysterious and extremely magical.



The little bridges which cross the multitude of rills and brooks which have moulded the area are called *Bänke*. The rivers make up a total length of ca. 1,500 kilometres (930 miles). The *Fließe* are interspersed with low sand banks called *Kaupen*, where the first settlers made their home. The Spree Forest covers an area 75 kilometres (47 miles) long and 16 kilometres (10 miles) wide and is split into the larger Upper Spree Forest or Oberspreewald in the south and the smaller Lower Spree Forest or Unterspreewald in the north. Between the two areas the arms of the Spree are joined for a short stretch at the city of Lübben, the second largest town in the Spree Forest.

Up until the 7th century only the edge of this once impenetrable moorland was inhabited. Slavs then moved west from the region between the Oder and Dnepr to settle between the Baltic and the mountains of the Erzgebirge. It's thought that there were about 20 tribes in all. One of them, the Lusici, gave their name to Lusatia. Another, the Surbi, put down roots between the rivers of the Saale and Mulde; the word "Sorb" is derived from the Surbi. In the 11th century settlers from the west discovered the Spree Forest, moving here from the Rhineland, Saxony, Flanders and the Frankish Kingdom.

A SLAVIC PEOPLE BETWEEN ELBE AND ODER

The cultural landscape of the Spree Forest has largely been shaped by the Sorbs, a West Slavic people who never managed to set up their own state. Their descendants now call themselves Sorbs or Wends; opinion is divided as to which is the more correct term. With the campaign led by the East Frankish king Henry I in 929 they came under German rule; on the founding of the diocese of Meissen in 968 they were officially converted to Christianity. The immigration of German peasants from the west caused the different races to interbreed; by the end of the Middle Ages the Sorbs had been absorbed by the far more numerous Germans – except in Lusatia, where they clung on to their national independence.

The common bond which links the Sorbs is their language. Written Sorbian first emerged around the mid 16th century when Protestant clergy began translating the Bible from German. Sorb newspapers and books, radio and television programmes keep the language

Right:
The Protestant church in
Burg, built in the early
neoclassical style, is the
successor of an earlier
half-timbered edifice
which was consumed by
fire. The church is bright
and airy and has a grand
two-storey gallery.



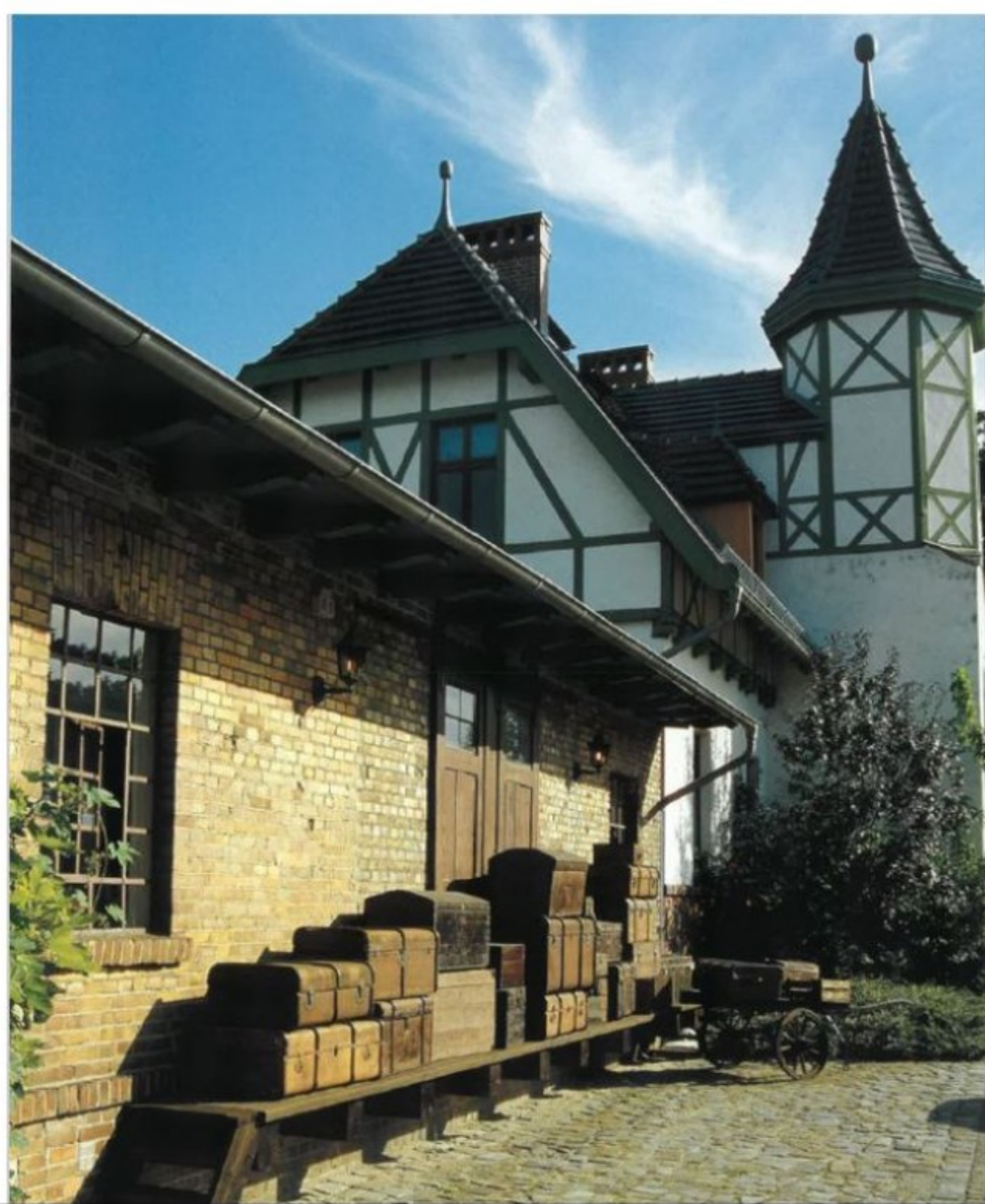
Far right:
The Bismarckturm on
Schlausberg north of Burg
is about 30 m (100 ft)
high. The monument was
erected between 1915
and 1917 and is made of
around 1.5 million red
clinker bricks from
Calau.



Right:
The recognised spa
of Burg is also called
the "Prussian soul of
the Spree Forest" after
the town fell to the
Brandenburg electors
in the 15th century and
later to the kings of
Prussia.



Right page:
The old Spree Forest
railway was once 85 km
(53 miles) long.
Opened in 1898, it was
closed down, section
for section, after the
Second World War.



AS COOL AS A CUCUMBER: GHERKINS AND THE LIKE

Just in case you were still wondering, the unassuming, common-or-garden pickled gherkin is the food most readily associated with the Spree Forest. Germany's recent box-office hit *Goodbye Lenin!* is largely (but not solely) responsible for its fame spreading beyond local boundaries; even Brandenburg wanderer Theodor Fontane was moved to comment on the vegetable in the 1870s, writing: "The products of the Spree Forest have a most superb depot in Lübbenau, from whence they travel out into the world. Amongst these products the gherkin takes pride of place ... Incidentally Lübbenau does not exclusively concentrate on the sale of one article which



may perhaps encourage ridicule; pumpkin and horseradish are just as evenly matched ..."

Gherkins are to the Spree Forest what fish and chips are to Great Britain or the burger to the USA. Cucumbers have long been cultivated for pickling here and date back to the Flemish immigrants of the 17th century who came to Lübbenau as clothworkers – with cucumber seed stashed away in their bags. They first just grew enough for their own use but soon cucumbers from the Spree Forest were being shipped to Berlin on the Spree where they were sold at market. The damp, humus soil is perfect for the crunchy vegetable. Ingredients added according to family recipes, such as basil, lemon balm, dill, horseradish and onion, vine, cherry and walnut leaves, give the pickled gherkin its specific taste.

Spree Forest gherkins had such a good reputation that they were one of the few East German products to survive the fall of the Berlin Wall – even if at first it didn't look like it. Cheerfully labelled West German goods initially ousted them off supermarket shelves, as the film *Goodbye Lenin!* so amusingly illustrates. Manufacturers of preserves in other regions abused the fame of the Spree Forest gherkin to their own marketing ends, giving

genuine Spreevald picklers little chance. Regional gherkin production reached an all-time low in 2003, with just 2,000 tons of the stuff being conserved and sold.

THE WAR OF THE GHERKIN

Soon afterwards the Spreevaldverein e.V. Lübben petitioned the European Union to make the designation of origin *Spreewälder Gurken* (Spree Forest gherkins) a registered trademark. Competitors side-stepped the ruling by labelling their products up as "gherkins à la Spree Forest" and the war of the gherkin was on. Courts were often forced to wade in and split up the warring factions, one accusing the other of "juggling with names" and "jumping on the band wagon".

The people of the Spree Forest went on an offensive. As cool as cucumbers they whipped out their ancient gherkin recipes, re-cultivated overgrown cucumber fields and organised rip-roaring festivals in honour of the regional gourd. Finally, on March 18, 1999, the Commission of the European Union ordered the protection of the names "Spreewälder Gurken" and "Spreewälder Meerrettich". These geographical locations and designations of origin have since been exclusively reserved for agricultural produce and foodstuffs produced in the economic region of the Spree Forest. This makes the Spree Forest gherkin the champagne of the dill pickle; if it's got "Spreewald" on the jar, it can only come from the Spree Forest. Today cucumber cultivation has increased tenfold; each year an average of 36,000 tons of picklers are processed.



Left:
In the olden days every family in the Spree Forest grew their own pickling cucumbers, with gherkin soup a typical meal.

Far left:
This historic postcard pokes fun at a very different kind of "gherkin" – people's noses!



Above:
"Love of your homeland amounts to more than a pickled gherkin!" German chancellor Angela Merkel may be right – but without the gherkin something would be lacking...

Top right:
Of the various specialities of the Spree Forest the pickled gherkin is the clear winner – whether sweet or sour, salty or peppery.

Right:
Another Spree Forest tradition is the yearly election of the gherkin queen.



Regardless of their eating habits, cyclists in the Spree Forest are also well advised to take to the gherkin – namely along the new Gurkenradweg or gherkin bike trail opened in 1999. This circular route is about 250 kilometres (155 miles) long and marked (yes, you've guessed it) by a merrily cycling cucumber. Well away from main roads it traces the line of *Fließe* and canals through forest, meadows and sleepy villages, past seemingly endless fields of pickling gherkins and luscious red strawberries. Along the trail there are many sights to see, including Lübbenau with its old town and Schlosspark, the church by Schinkel and the Dutch windmill in Straupitz, the white stork centre in Vetschau and Rad-dusch with its reconstructed Slavic fort. In the lagoon village of Lehde the farmhouse and gherkin museum describes what life was like for the local farming community and stages regular gherkin tastings. As a calendar from 1907 once patriotically quipped: "Exotic fruit may come and go; the pickled gherkin is for ever."



Below:
Vetschau is one of the
oldest Sorb settlements
on the edge of the Spree
Forest. Its first castle was
begun in the 10th century

in the wake of German
infiltration by Teutonic
knights. The moated
palace of Vetschau, the
Stadtschloss shown here,
was erected in 1540.

Top right:
Although Vetschau was
first mentioned in 1302,
the oldest house in town
– on Schlossstraße – only
dates back to 1710.

Centre right:
Architecturally the
Wend-German twin
church is extremely
unusual and probably
unique in Germany; it
has two naves directly

next to one another which
share the same steeple.
The Sorb half goes back
to the 14th century, the
German to the 17th. The
latter is shown here.

Bottom right:
The listed baroque
Ratskeller in Vetschau
is one of the oldest
buildings in town.
The cellar now houses
a restaurant.





Above:
At the open-air museum in Lehde three farmsteads from three different parts of the region – Lehde, Burg and Suschow – illustrate how the people here once lived. The Suschow farm even has its own dovecote.

Right:
Sorb Easter eggs at the Lehde museum. Eggs like these were first mentioned in c. 1700; the decoration of such is still a fixed item on the traditional Sorb calendar.



Far left:
On public holidays at the Spree Forest museum in Lehde men and women demonstrate traditional crafts and chores. Here a Sorb at her spinning wheel.

Left:
This cooper shows how vats and barrels were once made of wood, many of which were used to pickle gherkins in.

Below:
This is how people used to do their washing in the Spree Forest.





Above:
The village pond in Schleiz, first mentioned in 1004. The Wend place name Sloupisti means "stil" or "pole" in reference to the fact that the first village was built on stilts.

Right:
Wickerwork has a long tradition here in the Spree Forest thanks to the many pollarded willows which thrive in this area. The year-old branches are used to make baskets, furniture, prams, lamps, beehives and fish traps.



Above:
The Zur Reuse pub in Schleiz. The Slavs moved into the huts abandoned by the Teutons near the present village in the 6th and 7th centuries.



Left:
At the village fair in Schleiz women dressed in Sorb costume demonstrate the dying art of spinning.

Page 78/79:
The Spreewälder Privatbrauerei 1788 in Schleiz makes Pilsner, dark, bock and wheat beer, all with natural products processed by hand at the microbrewery. Here you can "enjoy beer made to perfection", as the blurb confidently proclaims.





Above:
At the Baruth open-air museum you can study the interesting but harsh lives of previous generations of glassmakers and other craftsmen. The various exhibits provide an insight into old tools and techniques.

Right:
Smoked fish at the village fair in Schleipzig. In the Spree Forest food has long been smoked to preserve it; where this was once a necessity, today it's a question of taste.



Above:
Smoking turns ordinary sausage and fish into a delicious delicacy. The process is explained at the open-air museum of Baruth – and of course you're welcome to savour the goods!

Left:
The Baruth museum also has artists' studios, a museum guest house with an eco swimming pool, inline skate and cycle hire, a herb garden and shop, boutiques selling felt, linen, antiques and natural cosmetics and a smithy.





Above:
The overburden conveyor bridge F 60 in Lichterfeld near Klettitz. This machine used to remove the spoil or overburden from the top of the coal seam. Since its closure in 1992 it has been an industrial monument and can be visited.

Right:
The brown coal mine of Cottbus-Nord. In the background are the cooling towers of the second largest brown coal power plant in Germany, Jänschwalde, where the coal mined here is turned into electricity.

Page 108/109:
The other side to Lusatia: the brown coal mine of Cottbus-Nord.



Left:
The Briesnig mine near Jänschwalde. Mining turned Lusatia into one of the first industrial regions in Germany, particularly after the introduction of the first conveying bridge in 1925.

Below:
Neupetershain is one giant coal mine. Visitors to it get an good impression of what the industry of open-cast mining is like: fascinating and intriguing yet also dangerous and harmful to the environment.





Above: The 25 m (82 ft) water slide tower at Tropical Islands is a sensation for visitors of all ages. Four separate slides provide hours of fun, with the more sedate tyre ride for families with small kids and the turbo slide – with speeds of up to 70 kmh (44 mph) – for those with more daring!

Right: Up the stairs and paradise awaits! Air temperatures of 26°C will tempt you to don that swimsuit and abandon yourself to a day of leisure and idle relaxation...



Above: White sandy beaches and sparkling water at a temperature of 32°C tempt visitors to the huge man-made lagoon at Tropical Islands. For the more discerning customer there are also a gneiss Turkish bath, a tree sauna, themed showers and an ice fountain.

Left: Sandstone, wood and palms line the shores. Balinese huts, a lookout (watchtower) and the Monkey Rock are reminiscent of the island which gave the lagoon its name: Bali. In the evenings and at night the pool is bathed in romantic light which subtly changes colour to create a number of different moods.



Index	Text	Photo
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Alt-Schadow	12, 68	91
Baruth		17, 94
Bergheide	63	
Branitz	98	21, 103-107
Briesnig		111
Burg	20, 26, 88	9, 26, 30-34, 41, 56, 64
Calau	98	103
Cottbus	12, 15, 16, 18	21, 30, 41
	19, 26, 98	98-101, 103, 110, 113
Goyatz		116
Jänschwalde	98	110, 111, 113
Kletzwitz	63	19, 110
Krausnick	68	92, 97, 116
Lehde	20, 26, 37	9, 50, 54-61
Leibsch	68	80, 83-87, 91
Lripe		41, 64, 65
Lichterfeld		19, 110
Lindenau		124
Lubolz	68	92
Luckau	98	103
Lübben	13, 15, 19, 26	8, 39
	36, 68, 73	68-73, 83
Lübbenu	19, 26, 36, 37, 89	9, 18, 44-49, 54
Märkisch Buchholz		90
Neuendorf am See		91
Neupetershain		111
Niewitz	68	92
Peitz	98	112, 113, 115
Raddusch	26, 37, 62, 63	41, 63, 80
Schlepsig	19, 68	76-79, 86, 87, 91
Schwarze Pumpe	98	115
Seese	62	
Spremberg		115
Straupitz	26, 37	21, 30, 31
Suschow	20	56
Vetschau	26, 37, 62	42, 43
Waldow		91
Wehlberg		91
Werben		31
Wotschotka	26	
Zerkwitz		21, 61



SPREE FOREST



Dominated by water the unique natural and cultural landscape of the Spree Forest is absolutely magical. The numerous streams, meadows, fields and woods provide a diverse array of plants and animals with the perfect natural habitat which can be best enjoyed by punt on the river. Castles and palaces, churches and museums bear witness to a turbulent history. In charming villages the ancient customs of the Sorbs live on, with plenty of traditional crafts to admire and regional culinary specialities to savour, the most famous of which is undoubtedly the pickled gherkin.

Over 200 photographs show the Spree Forest in all its glorious variety, with four specials focussing on the Spree Forest gherkin, the Slavic fort of Raddusch, writer of hymns Paul Gerhardt and the region's many sagas and fairytales.

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