



DRAWN TO DRESDEN

by NYX MARTINEZ

Photos courtesy of NYX MARTINEZ, ANKE SEIFERT and the DRESDEN CITY Marketing

Under the glow of a mid-May afternoon, the river Elbe slices through the heart of Middle Europe. It runs from the Czech Republic, connecting Bohemia to Saxony, before curving upwards to meet the North Sea.

Down by its banks, between ore and sandstone mountains, a city's residents embrace the final hours of light. At the "twentieth hour" (8 p.m.), the sun will sink, as a long silhouette of domes and bell-towers spikes the water. A golden angel atop the Academy of Fine Arts will herald the moon.

I gaze, transfixed on Dresden.

Starting Over

The first time I enter this city, it is with Johannes—then my boyfriend—in 2008. His father, a professor of biotechnology at the renowned University of Dresden, resumes his role as city tour guide.

"Everything was destroyed that night," he says, recalling the eve of Feb. 14, 1945.

"Even the Frauenkirche church. Those dark colored bricks in the wall are the only original ones," he says.

I read the details, see the black-and-white photographs of Dresden's destruction, and try to fathom those inhumane events. At the tail end of World War 2, an allied bomb raid killed thousands of civilians and reduced the city to rubble.

But it was also the event that made Dresden a worldwide marvel. The city eventually rose, literally, from the ashes of defeat, and its people found the courage to rebuild their lives after being maimed by war.

Meeting the Masters

In its 18th-century heyday, this grand art capital of Saxony was hailed as "The Florence of the North." Royalty like King Augustus the Strong drew artists and architects here, making it a cultural center of Europe.

We step into the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (Old Masters Picture Gallery), and Renaissance art comes to life. Those



legendary artists I'd loved as a kid had illustrated my first Bible stories. The familiar strokes of Reuben, Rembrandt, Vermeer and van Dyck, are all here; over 750 paintings from the 15th-18th centuries, are encased in this art museum.

I float from room to room, studying the lines, composition, and technique, lingering long over the erotic contours of Giorgione's voluptuous Sleeping Venus.

A voice from behind me calls. "Here, kids, I've saved the best for last."

The professor leads us to a room with a dozen paintings or more. But the frame at the far end is the one that takes my breath away.

There, at its base, perch the world's most famous cherubs. Standing barefoot on clouds above them, peering from an olive curtain, is...

"Raphael's Sistine Madonna," I whisper.

If art can touch the soul and lift the spirit, this timeless piece magically elevates mine. I am officially charmed, drawn in by Dresden.

The Inner District

The next week, we drive across the river for a grittier look at Neustadt (New City). The aroma of Indian and Italian food wafts through the air, beckoning our taste buds down Dresden's funkier streets: the district with a fun factor.

The counterculture generation of Dresden seems not so consumed with its past, but creatively building a brighter future, one fueled by the city's visionary youth, some 75,000 of its population.

We turn into Kunsthof-Passage (Art Courtyard). Here, the bohemian spirit in me begs to dance at the sight of shops like Mrs. Hippie, Feng-Shui and Blue Child. I snap pictures of the sights, like the ingenious Court of Water building, an installation of instruments on a bright blue wall that trickles music when it rains.



A Filipina Mom in Saxony

A year later, I am a wife and mother. Back in Dresden, I push a baby stroller and my shopping loot down Prager Straße. I have let myself be immersed in Germany's strange culture and even stranger language.

I now know how to navigate the train from my home in the countryside to the stimulating city center, and where they sell half a grilled chicken with steamed rice for 3 euros, and most importantly, how to live on time.

We zip along Brühl's Terrace towards Zwinger Palace, whose old courtyard is filled with visitors. Its grassy grounds create a cutout doily of bright green patterns curling around water fountains. Spring is in the wind.

The notion that one day, a very Asian woman would be standing on these grounds, walking the historical streets of Dresden with her half-breed child, must have once seemed hard to comprehend to the older generations of this old city.

But this moment is very real, and I want my son to enjoy it, even though he is too young to be aware of how miraculous it is.

Past to Present

In the days before the Reunification, Communist East Germany was not the seat of art and culture as it had been in its glory days. The German Democratic Republic (GDR or DDR) was an entirely separate country from neighboring West Germany, and had kept its citizens trapped behind walls that banned them from the world.

And then one day in 1989, following a mass revolution, the Berlin wall came tumbling down.

I was eight years old then, and my European Social Studies teacher excitedly read us the news. But from my wooden school desk in Bangkok, it seemed so far away. On the other side of the world, my future husband, then an adolescent, was joining street demonstrations with his father in Leipzig.

Decades later, my gypsy sojourn would see me here.

Today, Germany is a nation of interwoven cultures who live peacefully; a country where I can raise my children in acceptance, like many foreigners like me, who left the comfort of their homelands to reinvent their lives.

Dresden, this December

Come Christmas, I'll be back with two children in tow. We'll skip through snow carpets sampling German fruitcake and hot, spiced wine. We'll roam around Grosser Garten, an immense park I once got lost in while looking for the zoo.

When the winter sun sets at 4 p.m., we'll have moonlight at the medieval Christmas market in Altstadt, the oldest outdoor market in the world, go spinning on the carousel and applaud street performers on the sidewalk. We'll sip hot chocolate spiked with hazelnut and pig out on giant pretzels. We'll do all those silly touristy things.

We'll take two thousand pictures.

I'll tell my children that joy conquers sorrow, and that love triumphs war, and that high walls cannot prevent what was meant to be.

I'll let Dresden draw me back, the way it first did in 2008.

Nyx Martinez enjoyed countless adventures as a fulltime volunteer in East Africa and a travel TV host. She loves painting with wine and cuddling her kids. Find her at www.lifestyleplanet.org and www.nyxmartinez.com

In Dresden? Don't miss:

- Old Masters Picture Gallery
- Zwinger Palace
- Deutsch Hygiene Museum
- Dresden Transportation Museum
- The DDR Museum
- Shop along Prager Straße's stretch of shops and malls

Things to do Near Dresden:

- Prague, in the Czech Republic is just 150 km south.
- Sächsische Schweiz, a national park and range of mountains and cliffs, is fun for a day of hiking. Explore the medieval fortress of Königstein.