

Travel

BY JEFF KAVANAGH



The last resort

At Prora, on the beautiful eastern German island of Rügen, the beachfront holiday accommodation has a dark past.

The day is bright and warm, the sand bone white and fine beneath my jandals. A couple of seagulls soar pleasantly above the blue-green waters of the Baltic, and my girlfriend and I are on holiday. I should feel much better than I do.

My discomfort is not born of the nudist area a short distance down the beach from where I stand, although its presence does heighten it; no, its source is the massive, six-storey, five-kilometre-long complex crouching menacingly on the other side of the dunes behind me.

When the words "Nazi" and "camp" are combined, the association with the Third Reich's infamous *Konzentrationslager* is obvious: sites of immense anguish and suffering, with names like Treblinka,

Dachau and Auschwitz. Here at Prora, on the beautiful eastern German island of Rügen, however, the remnants of an altogether different kind of Nazi facility lie unused and in a state of disrepair.

Established in the 1930s, *Kraft durch Freude* ("Strength through joy") was an organisation charged ostensibly with the task of promoting National Socialism to Germany's overworked and underpaid population.

Yet, by offering affordable, morale-boosting leisure activities such as theatre visits, holidays and even cruise-boat trips, the Nazi Party was surreptitiously also preparing them for war.

To these ends, the *KdF* initiated a variety of programmes and, along with the production of the people's car – the Volkswagen "Beetle" – Rügen's monumentally

large seaside resort was undoubtedly one of the most ambitious. Occupying a sizeable stretch of Prora's majestic sweeping bay, it was designed both to be capable of accommodating 20,000 holidaymakers and to serve as a military hospital on the outbreak of hostilities in Europe.

The island was an ideal location for such a facility. In the late 19th century sea bathing was becoming increasingly popular among Europeans, and Rügen, Germany's largest island, with its long summer days, calm, shallow waters and proximity to the mainland, soon became a favoured destination.

Pretty coastal towns such as Binz and Sellin quickly developed all the trappings of spa resorts of the period: glamorous hotels, wide promenades, and wooden piers stretching hundreds of metres out

Left, a Binz spa on Germany's Rügen Island. Right (clockwise from top left), chalk cliffs in Jasmund National Park; the beach in Binz; a forest walk.

to sea, much of which remain today.

Like other European spas, Rügen had a history of anti-Semitism, and in the early 20th century a number of its seaside towns proudly proclaimed they were free of Jewish residents and tourists.

Ironically, given its intended purpose as a source of happiness and Nazi pride, and even though most of its construction was completed within a very narrow window – 1936 to 1939 – Rügen's *KdF* resort was never used as a holiday camp – or even finished. Instead, Germany invaded Poland, sparking the beginning of World War II, and the unfinished buildings were left to fulfil their secondary function – that of an army hospital.

Having survived both WWII and the Cold War (during which time it was used as a military base and erased from all official maps of the area), the complex is now historically listed and includes among its occupants an informative little museum, an arts centre and, bizarrely, the "Miami M3 Diskothek", complete with *Miami Vice*-style lettering and party photos of sweaty, scarlet-faced revellers. Such residents only inhabit a fraction of the space, however, and this sense of desolation, married with the prison-like austerity of the buildings themselves (and an appreciation of their original purpose), evokes little in the way of joy.

Eventually, we leave Prora, but not before getting a couple of surprisingly good cappuccinos from the museum's fittingly sad, hospital waiting-room-like cafe. We jump into our car and head up to Jasmund National Park in the north-east of the island.

Once there, and with our moods buoyed by some tasty venison goulash and a beer or two from a local guest-house, we meander contentedly through a still, sun-dappled beech forest towards the park's famous chalk cliffs.

We take a 30-minute stroll from the carpark, the forest's leafy canopy only occasionally interrupted by a glassy pond, then suddenly the trees come to an end, their roots and trunks dangling suicidally high above the sea and its stony shore. Although not as vast as their counterparts in Dover, the white cliffs of Wismar Klinken and Königsstuhl (king's seat) are comfortably higher, towering up to 160m above sea level.

The vistas from the small platforms that creep out over the edges of the cliffs are breathtaking, and we envy the sight-



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seers below us enjoying the types of view that inspired the great romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich. Unfortunately, we are too lazy to make the journey down, and particularly up again.

Not far from the cliffs is a small cluster of prefab buildings, tucked in between the trees, where food and drinks are sold. We get a couple of ice creams and a Coca-Cola, before traipsing back through the forest to our car.

It was only 20 years ago that the luxury of buying an American fizzy drink to quench your thirst was non-existent in this part of Germany, but since the fall of the Berlin Wall the island has quickly reacquired itself with the rest of the world, especially since a new bridge to the mainland has put the island within a two-hour drive of Hamburg.

Later in the day, when we're back in Binz, our base while we're on Rügen, we decide to forgo hiring one of the hundreds of traditional *strandkorb*s, or wicker beach chairs, that occupy large sections of the beach, and walk to

the bay's southern point to catch the last few hours of sun. On the way we pass a group of east German punks. They have set up camp in the forest that fringes the bay, and are drinking beer, smoking marijuana and collecting driftwood for a bonfire on the beach. Their presence is somewhat incongruous against the grandiose white weatherboard villas that line the waterfront in the distance, and the middle-class tourists who stay in them (us included).

It's a reminder that although the island has changed a lot in the past 70 years, Rügen is still very much part of a modern eastern Germany, where unemployment is high and the benefits of reunification are yet to be appreciated by a significant proportion of the locals.

It's fortunate, then, that spots like the ones the punks have found themselves for the weekend, or the quiet, pretty beach near Baabe, in the island's south-east, where we read our books and chill out the following day, remain undeveloped and free for everyone to enjoy, regardless of their backgrounds. ■