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# Hot Water Below Brings Pleasures Above in Germany



Andreas Meichsner for The New York Times

The nine pools, from 64 to 100 degrees, at Spreewaldtherme in the town of Burg are fed by a hot spring tapped about 10 years ago.

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ABOUT 55 miles southeast of Berlin, the gentle landscape of Brandenburg unfolds: a patchwork of forests and flax fields. Like other parts of rural Germany, villages in this eastern state pop up every few miles. But here, distinctive flat boats float in river harbors. Country roads, lined with tall trees, cut through cucumber farms and marshes.

This is the Spreewald (Spree Forest in German), a region near the German-Polish border where the River Spree turns into an inland delta, with miles of shallow rivulets flowing through the countryside. In 1991, Unesco designated the 105,000 acres of the Spreewald a Unesco biosphere reserve, assuring the preservation of the forests, wildlife and canals that have long made it a popular attraction for domestic travelers.

But it turns out that one of Spreewald's greatest treasures lies underfoot: a hot spring discovered more than a decade ago sits about 4,400 feet below ground, with minerals and salts at levels similar to those in the Dead Sea. When the spring became accessible to the public in 2005, Brandenburg named Burg, a sprawling rural community of 4,500 in which the waters were discovered, a kurort, or a certified [spa](#) destination.

Since then, overnight stays in Burg have increased by about 40 percent, according to municipal authorities, and the town attracts more visitors than anywhere in Brandenburg except Potsdam. They are catered to by a number of new hotels and pensions — some of which offer spa treatments on site — in addition to standbys that now stay open all year instead of only in the warmer months. A road that has been renamed the kurortroute (spa route) winds through the community past farmsteads and on bridges over canals; a bike path follows most of the way for those visitors who balance out their spa treatments with physical activity, and Burg's public harbor for punts, or kahns, has even been updated and beautified.

At the heart of Burg's redevelopment as a spa destination is the Spreewaldtherme, whose pools draw from the hot spring. It opened its doors five years ago, sealing Burg's designation as a kurort. In a modern building tucked into the forest, nine pools from 64 to 100 degrees Fahrenheit cover 8,310 square feet, offering varying degrees of mineral and salt content. Guests pad around the extensive sauna zone in slippers and bathrobes between sauna sessions that include hourly steam infusions made with local herbs. Treatments include massages with native-grown flax seed oil and Spreewald algae packs.

Stefan Kannewischer, the Spreewaldtherme's Switzerland-based investor and operator, values the setting beyond the waters that his spa draws on. Mr. Kannewischer, whose family business has outfitted baths in Baden-Baden and Bad Kissingen, recalled his first time here. "I thought, 'Why am I going to this town near the Polish border?' But as soon as I arrived, I realized that this place is magic," he said.

At the time, Mr. Kannewischer took a canal tour in a kahn. "As soon as I got in, I was in another world for two or three hours."

Burg retains the tranquillity that exists throughout the Spreewald. The region, home to a Slavic ethnic minority that calls itself (and its language) Sorbian, relies in part on agriculture and exports of its trademark thick spicy gherkins flavored with mustard, dill or garlic, in addition to tourism, which first blossomed in the late 1880s.

Local oarsmen who regale visitors with historical details, guide the kahns — once the primary means of transportation in the area — through shallow channels teeming with river life. Dragonflies land on water lilies, weeping willows brush the water's mirrored green surface, and everything suddenly becomes very, very still.

Christine Clausing, who owns Zur Bleiche Resort and Spa with her husband, Heinrich Michael Clausing, was also taken with Burg's charm when she arrived. "The Spreewald is a place where you can relax very quickly," she said. "Every time we leave and return, we notice how it's a little utopia."

So is Zur Bleiche. The 90-room resort, with a 43,000-square-foot spa and a Michelin-starred restaurant, 17fuffzig, is a wellness world unto itself. The complex of buildings date from 1750, when King Frederick the Great had his soldiers' uniform shirts produced and lightened here. (Bleiche means bleach.) Other buildings were constructed during the Communist era as holiday lodging for the association that oversaw around 15 labor unions in the German Democratic Republic.

The Clausings, who came in the early 1990s from southern Germany, have managed to transform the place into an opulent yet casual paradise. Outdoor and indoor pools beckon everywhere. Even in summer, a fireplace crackles invitingly in a room whose soaring ceiling

reveals its origin as a barn. The extensive sauna area — an entire floor devoted to treatments, a women’s spa zone and a warren of rooms filled with pillows, hammams, books or Buddhas — offers seemingly endless nooks to curl up in. Even the smallest guest room has its own suite-like seating area. The nine restaurants offer Spreewald specialties like a freshwater pike fillet topped with a light vermouth sauce. The resort has its own kahn, moored behind the glassed-in breakfast room on the canal behind the hotel.

With recommendations whispered like a secret password among harried Berliners (and, increasingly, Dresdeners and Leipzigers), the resort, which opened in 1997, has steadily gained in popularity, even beyond Germany’s borders. “From the beginning, we were geared toward attracting both German and international guests,” Ms. Clausing said. “Now, interest in the area just keeps growing.”

Burg still has some attractions to come. In the works is an 83-room hotel, scheduled to open in summer 2012, that will connect via tunnel to the Spreewaldtherme facilities.

“At first, people were skeptical about Burg, but now they make special trips here to come to the baths and see the area,” Mr. Kannewischer said.

There might be moments when service seems slow, but then you realize that the whole point of visiting is to slow down and enjoy the laid-back pace, friendliness and natural beauty. Stop at a farm to pick some strawberries, or have a huge pickle straight from the barrel; linger in the Spreewaldtherme’s inhalation chamber or get a salt scrub at Zur Bleiche’s day spa.

“In other resort towns, you might have to be beautiful. But you don’t have to be anything here,” Ms. Clausing said. “You can just relax. It’s like taking a ride in a kahn. You don’t even have to paddle.”

## WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

**Zur Bleiche Resort and Spa** (Bleichestrasse 16, Burg; 49-356-03-620; [hotel-zur-bleiche.com](http://hotel-zur-bleiche.com)) has doubles starting at 130 euros, or \$164 at \$1.26 to the euro, per person, including use of all spa facilities and a five-course evening meal. At its **17fuffzig** restaurant, which earned a Michelin star in 2008, the acclaimed chef Oliver Heilmeyer creates Spreewald specialties like regional venison. Entrees average 35 euros. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

**Landhotel Burg** (Ringchaussee 125; 49-35-603-646; [landhotel-burg.de](http://landhotel-burg.de)) is a more affordable hotel with spa service, several restaurants, a kahn harbor and petting zoo for children. Doubles start at 98 euros.

Near the Spreewaldtherme, **Spreewald Kur und Wellness Haus** (Ringchaussee 154, Burg; 49-35-603-759-490; [spreebalance.de](http://spreebalance.de)) is a new hotel with 20 spacious rooms. Doubles start at 95 euros. **Konrad’s**, the hotel’s restaurant, offers health-oriented dishes like local trout or cucumber soups; entrees from 15 euros.

## WHERE TO INDULGE

A day pass at the **Spreewaldtherme** thermal baths (Ringchaussee 153; 49-356-03-18850; [spreewald-therme.de](http://spreewald-therme.de)) is 23 euros (hourly admission also available).

**Zur Bleiche’s** spa offers day passes for 50 euros.