

## The Elbe River -- Porcelain Teacups And Sandstone Crags

After rising in the Giant Mountains along the Czech/Polish border, the Elbe River crosses the northwestern Czech Republic before entering Germany at the town of Schmilka, on the edge of the [Saxon-Switzerland Nature Park](#).

It continues northwest across Germany, all the way to [Cuxhaven](#) on the [North Sea](#).

From the moment it enters “Little Switzerland” and [Saxony](#)’s Elbsandstein Mountains to the moment it disappears into the North Sea, the Elbe covers approximately 780km or 540 miles and five [German states](#).

The Elbe River’s course covers an unimaginable diversity of attractions. They range from the massive river-carved sandstone formations of the *Bastei* near Schmilka, rising nearly 1000 feet/305 meters above the riverbed, to [Dresden](#)’s incredibly fragile Meissen porcelain.

The gateway to the Saxon-Switzerland Nature Park is at the river town of [Pirna](#), a medieval trading center with the architectural styles of five centuries. This entire area has inspired generations of German artists, including Richard Wagner. His opera *Lohengrin* is supposed to have been set here.

Augustus the Strong (Friedrich August I) built a spectacular 18th-century summer retreat, Pillnitz Palace, along the Elbe on the northeastern edge of Dresden. He would arrive, as befits a ruler named Augustus, aboard a Venetian gondola.

The Palace’s prize attraction is a 240-year old camellia imported from Japan to complement its pagoda-like design.

At Dresden the Elbe flows through a city three-quarters of which was destroyed in a horrendous [World War II](#) firestorm. Dresden’s *Aldstadt* (Old Town), however, has been restored to rival its former glory as the “Florence of the Elbe.”

Dresden offers gemstones belonging to the Saxon electorate, Augustus the Strong’s massive art collection, and the *Festung Königstein* where alchemist Johann Böttger was imprisoned in 1709 until he created the formula for porcelain. Thanks to Böttger’s genius, Meissen porcelain has been manufactured in Dresden since 1710.

Saxon royalty would once promenade along the riverside *Brühlsche Terrasse* with its unforgettable views of the Elbe. They would no doubt be amazed by Dresden’s almost transparent Volkswagen factory, a glass behemoth devoted to building the luxury Phaeton!

Flowing downstream from Dresden, the Elbe passes ancient wine-growing estates at [Radebeul](#),

continuing on to the soap-making town of [Riesa](#). Next is [Torgau](#), the spot at which the American and Russian armies linked up in April of 1945.

At [Lutherstadt Wittenberg](#) is the Schlosskirche tower with its distinctive crown-shaped dome, and the church door on which Martin Luther began the Reformation by posting his 95 Theses in October of 1517.

In [Magdeburg](#), the next station on our Elbe river cruise, are one of Germany's most important examples of Romanesque architecture, the Monastery of Our Lady, and the *Magdeburger Reiter*, Germany's oldest free-standing equestrian statue.

The Elbe now curves northwest towards [Hamburg](#). Sandwiched between the [North](#) and [Baltic Sea](#)'s, Hamburg has been a port of trade for more than a thousand years. Today, 13,000 ships arrive annually through the Old Elbe Tunnel. At the harbor is the *Speicherstadt*, the world's largest warehouse complex.

Hamburg's Sunday morning *Fischmarkt* sells far more than fish at bargain basement prices. The 132m/433-foot tower at the Church of St. Michael has both Germany's largest clock face and unsurpassed views of the city. Guided boat tours are available from the *Alsterpavilion*.

Before reaching Cuxhaven and the North Sea, the Elbe passes by the oil terminal at [Brunsbüttel](#), and the start of the North Sea-Baltic Canal. It's the world's busiest in terms of traffic. Cuxhaven itself is right on the open ocean, with a constant stream of gigantic vessels passing through on their way to Hamburg.

None of them, however, are as impressive as the *Bastei*, which the Elbe itself created as it began its journey across Germany!