

Expat lives *The UK to Germany*

A wonder hinterland

Stephen Ferrada tells *Sue Chester* about the freedom and frustrations of life in Saxony

Car designer Stephen Ferrada relocated from the UK to the Stuttgart region, in southwest Germany, to work for Mercedes and Porsche in 1979. The country's history and what lay behind the iron curtain intrigued him for the next 10 years. "I found the whole historical aspect of Germany both shocking and fascinating," he says.

When his marriage collapsed five years after the eastern bloc disintegrated, in 1989, Ferrada started making forays into the former DDR states, curious to see what the previous 40 years of communism had done to the region.

He found places frozen in time: elegant baroque and imperial homes left untouched for decades with cracked façades sprouting trees from their chimney stacks. There were abandoned factories where the socialist machine had churned out Trabants and Vita Cola; ghostly public buildings piled high with civil servants' paperwork and the notorious rows of Russian-built *plattenbau* prefabs strung across most towns and cities which nowadays are brightly painted and highly sought-after in city centres such as Dresden.

"East Germany was very much in original down-and-out condition five years after the borders had opened," says Ferrada, who was lured by the promise of its magnificent historical properties at depressed prices and a change of scenery.

By 2001 Ferrada started attending property auctions in Saxony, the only former DDR state offering them at the time. "I felt like a child in a sweetshop. The opportunities [to find] zany old properties available for very little money were amazing," says Ferrada, who snapped up a four-storey, 120-year-old manor house for just £18,000

in Oberbärenburg. The village lies 45km south of Dresden, 10km from the Czech border in a bucolic setting at the end of a cul-de-sac in the Erzgebirge mountains.

The Erzgebirge, or Ore mountains, became a country retreat for wealthy industrialists, who built villas to escape the Leipzig and Dresden big smoke at the turn of the 20th-century. By 1945, when the communist party's land reform was introduced, spacious grand properties were confiscated and turned over to the comrades. Hermannshöhe, or Hermann's Heights, as Ferrada's house is called, was taken over for use as a vacation dormitory for the socialist workers' party.

Today, Ferrada's manor house is used by tourists who can rent a self-contained apartment on the first floor to help supplement the house's running costs. Although his holiday guests enjoy biking, walking, cross-country and downhill skiing, Ferrada most enjoys swimming at the local pool.

It's one thing to appreciate the time-worn beauty of the region, but "it's another to move and live amongst it," says Ferrada. Once he'd recovered from the shock of the sub-zero winters (it can take up to three days to dig himself out of his driveway) and the summer electrical storms that burnt out his computer and phone, the next challenge was integrating with the local community. "They hadn't got over the fact that people from the west don't have two heads," says Ferrada. "Although a local friend once told me they'd rather have an Englishman in Hermann's Heights than Wessies [former West Germans], who were seen as materialistic. They came over after 1989 exploiting the business naivety of the Ossies, [former East Germans] quickly earning themselves a bad reputation and adding to the



Stephen Ferrada outside Thurmsdorf castle in Germany, near the Czech border

Hana Jakrlkova

'enemy' concept of the past."

Disbelief that a Brit would choose their unfashionable *heimat*, or homeland, instead of an expat Mediterranean hotspot was palpable. Local press called him an "investor", while rumours spread that he must be on the run with a criminal record or simply up to "no good". Once Ferrada began employing local tradesmen to help renovate his new home, he felt more welcomed. However, over the years, neighbours' reactions have differed "from suspicion to complete indifference", says Ferrada. "Never has anybody asked about my impressions of Saxony and certainly nobody has asked about life in the west," he says.

Ferrada's fluency in German, a skill

that he developed during his time in Stuttgart, was a key factor in his decision to settle in Germany's eastern hinterlands. Ferrada believes that in order to know the soul of a country, one must be able to speak its language. However, he still enjoys the freedom of remaining an objective outsider. "The wonderful thing about living in a foreign country is you don't belong; you have a sense of freedom not to be part of their system, to have to take part in their customs. You are a free being."

Journeys that take seven hours by train to Stuttgart and Munich finally defeated Ferrada's attempts at work in west Germany. These days he works from home as a freelance automotive designer. Transport in Ger-

Buying guide

Pros

- Unspoilt, accessible countryside with plenty of forest
- Good healthcare system
- Central location to European cities such as Budapest, Vienna and Prague

Cons

- High health insurance costs
- Church tax: registered Catholics, Protestants and Jews pay a surcharge of up to 9 per cent on their income

What you can buy for...

- **€100,000** A three-storey baroque castle dating back to 1693 and in need of renovation, in Prossen, 25km southeast of Dresden
- **€850,000** A *jugendstil* (art nouveau) villa dating back to 1898 in the Königswald neighbourhood of Dresden. The 12-room villa has 458 m² of living space, with parquet and tile floors, a cellar, balcony and three garages

many's east continues to improve; the Berlin-Munich bullet train, which is due to open in 2017, will reduce the journey from six to four hours.

Although Ferrada says he misses the sea and the UK's architecture, he still favours his Saxony patch, where "doors are held open for you" and people greet each other when out for walks, lending a "lovely laidback feeling" to daily life. Ferrada relishes jumping the now invisible border to the Czech Republic for a bargain haircut or a pork dumpling and red cabbage feast at half the price than in Germany.

"I'd have difficulty finding a place quite like this in west Germany or the UK," says Ferrada. The forest surrounding his manor home abounds with wildlife, including boar, deer and foxes.

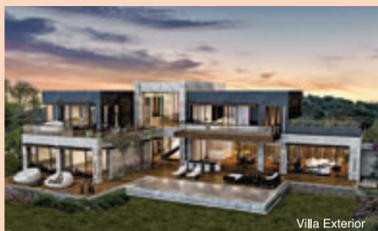
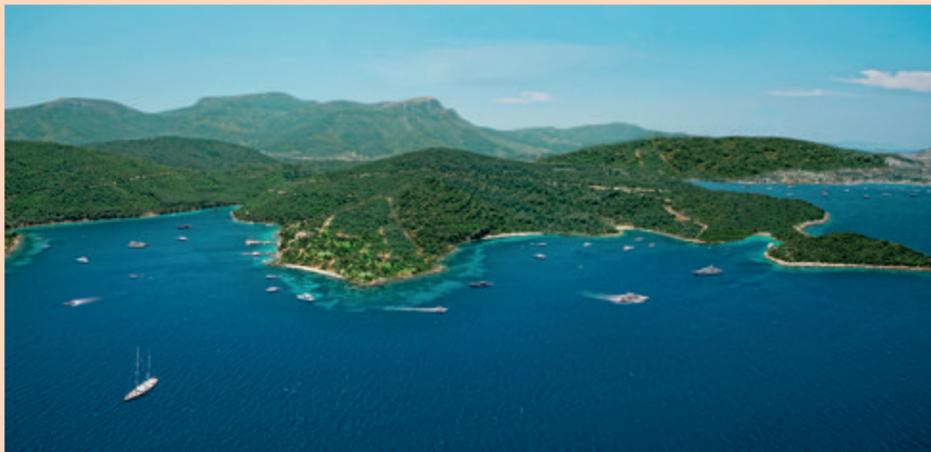
The Wall may have gone, but according to Ferrada, it continues to exist in the minds of some of those who still see large buildings as public property. "People walk into my garden and tell me they had a nice barbecue there in 1975. I say, 'Well, things have changed, there's another system now, I own my plot and it's private,'" says Ferrada, who has all but given up trying to change locals' attitudes to property, whose stock reply is that they wouldn't steal anything.

Despite the occasional innocent intruder, Ferrada wants to stay put: "I'd miss more than I gain if I move back to the UK. I can imagine living here the rest of my days. That's the biggest credit you could ever possibly give to a country."



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