LIFTING
THE   BLACK CLOUDS

Abandoned pits flooded, shores sprouting pine forests, beaches born from imported sand, vineyards planted on open-cast lignite mines... Europe's largest artificial lake district is welcoming Mother Nature as she nurtures life back to a scarred land

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I jump out of the van and into a scene of carnage; an open wound in the earth as big as a city and darker than hell. Very little colour, mostly black and shades of grey. Some brown, maybe. I stand slack-jawed and silent. This'll be the pit, then: Welzow-Süd. Bernhard, my guide, has spent much of his working life as a pit planner in mines like this. A dying breed now, they were the engine room of the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR), and in Lusatia — this area, 80 miles south of Berlin and 40 north of Dresden — tens of thousands of people were once employed in mining. I watch as the machines responsible for the sprawling pit devour the land one mouthful at a time. They're digging for lignite, poor man's coal, which will eventually be fed into power stations, stoking the fires that help Germany keep the lights on.

Now retired, Bernhard likes to show visitors where he used to work — but that's not all there is to this area. Leaving the dystopian landscape behind, we drive through mud and onto a quiet public highway that meanders through forests and grasslands. Road signs warn drivers to look out for deer, and kestrels hover overhead. I feel relieved to be back in the natural environment.

Except I'm not. The perfectly spaced trees, the neatly sculpted slopes; these aren't the hallmarks of Mother Nature, but the telltale signs of ever-meddling man. "This was all part of the pit," explains Bernhard.

Straddling the German states of Brandenburg and Saxony — and a corner of western Poland — Lusatia's lignite mines have been in decline since the fall of the Berlin Wall. "Around 70,000 people used to work in the industry," sighs Bernhard. "After the Wall came down there were just 8,000."

The GDR had guaranteed all citizens employment, which inflated the workforce, but the reunification of Germany and prevailing Western ideology — with its market-driven efficiencies — soon put paid to that. As, eventually, did the emergence of new sources of energy. The result was layoffs across Lusatia.

So, what's filling the void? The answer: water. Millions of gallons of the stuff, which are being pumped into Lusatia's empty pits as part of an estimated €10bn (£8.8bn) regeneration project that's already transformed the region into the largest artificial lake district in Europe. Approximately 120 abandoned pits will have been flooded once the project is complete, creating a water surface of around 85sq miles. Work will continue into the next decade, but with 15 of the 25 largest pits now flooded, the project has now passed the halfway mark. Some lakes have been linked by canals, too, meaning it's possible to sail between them. Lake shores, meanwhile, have been beautified with beaches, forests and cycle paths, which wend their way between old mining towns, industrial heritage sites and even vineyards.

One such vineyard is Wolkenberg — named after a village that no longer exists. Meaning 'cloud hill' in German, the original Wolkenberg was built in the 16th century and was, by all accounts, an ordinary, tight-knit Lusatian village, complete with modest homes and a church. The trouble was it sat above large amounts of lignite, which was deemed more valuable than the village. So, in 1991, when coal still dominated the energy mix, they tore old Wolkenberg down and the bucket-wheel excavators moved in, plundering the land and erasing over 500 years of history. Today, a stone memorial sits on the site of the old church: 'Wolkenberg 1503-1991', it reads.

There's no lake at Wolkenberg; instead, the pit was filled with earth and turned into a rural landscape. Grassy meadows, windswept hedges and young coppices hide the scars of industry. On the horizon, wind turbines rotate in the breeze.

A short walk from the Wolkenberg memorial, the vineyard occupies a sunny, 15-acre plot. Looking at the vines and listening to the birds singing, it's hard to conceive that this was once part of an open-cast mine. I ask Bernhard if it's nice to see the landscape recover. "Yes," he says, although I suspect a part of him misses the machines.

Presently, I'm greeted by Bettina Muthmann, who runs the estate with her

Wolves howl in the old mines — a battle cry from nature as it reconquers the land

OPENING PAGES: View from the top of the Rusty Nail, an observation tower between Lake Sedlitz and Lake Geierswald
PREVIOUS PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Bettina Muthmann, owner of the Wolkenberg vineyard; wine tasting at the vineyard; nature reclaiming the abandoned coal mine at Wolkenberg
FROM LEFT: Ammolite, a lighthouse-turned-restaurant in the town of Rust; boatman Hartmut Koning

business partner, Martin Schwarz. Bettina tells me she's from Dusseldorf, but fell in love with Lusatia in the 1990s and decided to settle in the area.

"I like the nature, I like the people — it's a good quality of life here," she explains, in a plummy English accent that completely throws me. I ask her where she picked her accent up from. "I spent some time living in Margate and Broadstairs," she says, enunciating like nobody I know from Margate or Broadstairs.

Although Wolkenberg has only been producing wine on a commercial scale since 2016, Bettina says the 27,000-bottle-a-year estate is already the largest vineyard in Brandenburg, which, admittedly, isn't exactly known for its plonk.

"Brandenburg doesn't have the best conditions for producing wine," concedes Bettina. "We had to find vines that could stand cold winters and hot summers."

It's for this reason that Riesling and Cabernet Dorsa varieties were chosen.

In a small tasting room on the edge of the vineyard, Bettina pours me a glass of the 2017 Riesling. It's not bad; dry and light with hints of melon and grapefruit. Definitely no hint of lignite. I take another sip and consider what a feat it is to be producing wine on the site of an old mine.

Bettina hopes one day the fruits of her labour will help Lusatia — for so long a place defined by its pits — redefine itself. "I want to give the region another way to look," she says, as hares hop between the vines outside.

Call of the wild
Almost everyone you meet in Lusatia is connected in some way to the pits. Hartmut Koning, for instance, was one of many people employed to turn the abandoned pits into lakes — work funded by the state-run mining company that owned them. His job involved landscaping, tree planting and depositing limestone into the water to reduce its acidity (a common problem when former coal mines are flooded). Today, he reaps the rewards of his work on Lake Geierswalder (one of Lusatia's most developed waterways), where he runs a small cruise business.

"The landscape has changed dramatically," Hartmut tells me, as we drift along in his small vessel. "The trees have become woods. I'm happy; it's good to see these changes."

A dirty mine several decades ago, Lake Geierswalder now looks Evian-clear and
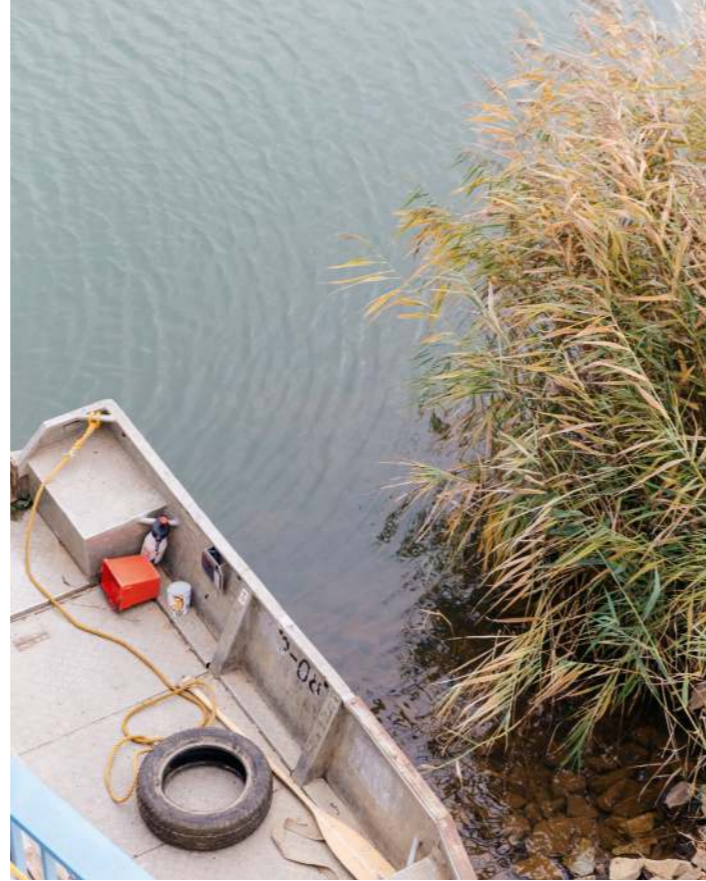
is lined with golden beaches, reeds and adolescent trees. It's a hub for watersports, too, including swimming, sailing and scuba diving, although on an overcast afternoon like today there's none of that going on. I'm here out of season, but in summer, I'm told, the lake throngs with bathers.

On the shore is a small marina, some restaurants and the Lighthouse Hotel, whose owner has plans to open a 'bikini bar', at which punters will be able to quaff cocktails in their swimwear. Some locals, I hear, are not thrilled at the prospect.

There's even something resembling a real estate boom on the lake, which is becoming well known for its fancy floating homes (or 'swimming houses', as they're known locally), which are accessed via a pontoon. Hartmut steers us towards the glass-fronted properties, which we stare into for slightly too long, watching people cook, drink and chat. They soon notice us and start appearing at the windows. Our cue to leave.

Taking a drag from a roll-up, Hartmut tells me the swimming houses change hands for up to €450,000 (£395,000), with many finding their way onto holiday rental websites. He raises his eyebrows at this six-figure sum — an anomaly elsewhere in this decaying

industrial region — but insists he's delighted to see investment in the region. "I appreciate every visitor who comes here," Hartmut says, adjusting his baseball cap. "And there are a lot of visitors coming."

But Lusatia's lake district isn't just for people. Wildlife will also play a key role in the region's rehabilitation, and various habitat-rich nature reserves have been established on former pits to help boost biodiversity. Among them is Grünhaus Nature Park, whose sandy plains, shallow ponds and sparse vegetation could almost belong in Africa.

"We have a mosaic of different habitats here," says nature guide Sandra Stahmann (a research associate at the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union), as she shows me around the reserve. "That's what makes the area special."

While most of Lusatia's post-industrial landscapes have been actively regenerated, Grünhaus has largely been left to rewild itself. It's had a helping hand — the odd tree planted here and there — but most of the new growth has been from seeds carried on the wind or parachuted in on bird poo.

"It's been interesting to see the plants and animals take over," says Sandra, her purple-brown hair blowing in the breeze. "It's a dynamic landscape."

FROM LEFT: New growth in the former mining town of Grossräschen; man-made canal linking two lakes; tour guide Sören Hoika

View from the redundant F60 conveyor bridge, nicknamed 'the horizontal Eiffel Tower of Lusatia'

Visitors appreciate the poetic justice of this old goliath now being used as a nesting site by doves

We stomp through a copse and emerge onto a sandy bluff overlooking a pond speckled with birds. A conspiracy of ravens squabble nearby, wild geese fly above and a marsh harrier is briefly spotted but lost.

Grünhaus is an important habitat for birds and attracts many twitchers, but it's also been reclaimed by one of Europe's apex predators. "We have a pack of wolves living in the area," says Sandra, who's quick to manage any expectations I may have of seeing one. "It's hard to spot them — they're very shy."

Some nights, she tells me, if you listen carefully you can hear Lusatia's wolves howling in the old mines. A battle cry from nature as it reconquers the land.

Wildlife is also reclaiming the machinery that once helped to tear the natural landscape asunder, as I discover at Lake Bergheider, another flooded pit from a former open-cast mine. Looming large over the water is a redundant F60 conveyor bridge — nicknamed 'the horizontal Eiffel Tower of Lusatia' — that was retired in 1992 when the mine was mothballed.

This gargantuan instrument of doom is identical to those I saw devouring the land at Welzow-Süd, but, stripped of power and purpose, it fails to incite the same sense of intimidation. It's become a historical relic and a popular stop on the Energy Route of Lusatian Industrial Heritage, a tourist trail that explores the region's rich mining culture. Visitors can climb aboard the lofty monster, admire the views from its bridge and appreciate the poetic justice of this old goliath now being used as a nesting site by doves.

Nature's capricious hand

The idea of turning Lusatia's lignite mines into lakes was first floated in the 1960s, when the GDR flooded a defunct pit in the town of Senftenberg. The resulting lake proved a hit with holidaymakers and soon became known as Dresden's Bathtub, on account of the many city dwellers who flocked there during summer.

"This is the blueprint for the rest of the lakes," explains Sören Hoika, a local guide, who joins me one morning for a bike ride around Senftenberg. The lake is still popular with visitors, including — on my visit — many Czech tourists, who appear to have a penchant for rollerskating around it.

Rusty Nail, a viewing platform on the Sorno Canal

Cycling past pine-scented forests, beaches made from imported Black Sea sand and reed beds that chirrup with birdsong, Sören recalls what the area was like when he was growing up. "Everything was dusty and everything smelled of coal and sulphur," he says. "Sometimes when you swam in Lake Senftenberg you came out dirtier than when you went in." But as more and more mines were shut down, the black clouds started to lift. "The water of Lake Senftenberg is now almost good enough to drink," he claims.

The closing of the mines, however, has taken its toll on the local population, which has been declining for decades due to a lack of employment opportunities. "Of the 65 people I did my *Abitur* [A-level equivalent] with, only 10 stayed in the area," says Sören, ruefully.

The population has recently started to stabilise and tourism is bringing new opportunities to the region, although it can't support anywhere near the same number of jobs that the extraction industry once did.

Sören decided to stick around in Lusatia after his father, Eckard, a former pit worker, saw the region's tourism potential and founded IBA Tours. "He started the business in 2003 and there was almost nothing to show people," he says, as we ride past fellow cyclists and those rollerskaters. "This has changed."

Since those desolate days, more empty mines have been flooded, hundreds of miles of cycle paths have been laid and the region now has a burgeoning portfolio of accommodation, which runs the gamut from campsites to treehouses, floating homes to hotels.

A property built in the 1920s to house Polish pit workers is now the Seehotel Grossräschen, which overlooks a new lake in the eponymous former mining town of Grossräschen. The walls of the hotel's basement are, weirdly, festooned with copies of iconic paintings, including the Mona Lisa, as well as tributes to Monet, Picasso and Van Gogh. These creations are the work of the Posin brothers — Mikhail, Eugeni and Semjon, from Russia — who've made a name for themselves by replicating famous art from their Berlin studio. Untrained eyes might struggle to discern that their paintings are fake.

The same can be said for Lake Senftenberg, which, from the saddle of my bike, looks every bit the real deal. I scan my surroundings for the hallmarks of our species — the sort of evenly spaced trees and landscaped hills I'd spotted earlier — but the capricious hand of nature appears to have blurred man's straight lines. The lake and its surrounds look natural; the transformation — here, at least — is complete. ▢

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around
EasyJet flies to Berlin Schönefeld Airport from Luton, Gatwick, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow. *easyjet.com*
Ryanair flies there from Belfast, East Midlands, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stansted and Manchester. *ryanair.com*
Average flight time: 1h 50m
The train to Senftenberg takes two hours, with a change in Berlin-Schöneweide. *bahn.com*
Alternatively, from Schönefeld it takes an hour to drive to Lake Senftenberg. An extensive network of cycle trails makes Lusatia a joy to cycle around, but a car is advisable if you plan to visit industrial heritage sites such as the F60 or Welzow-Süd. Bikes can be hired through IBA Tours. *enterprise.de avis.de iba-tours.de*

When to go
May-September, with temperatures in the low to mid 20Cs, but expect crowds and higher prices in July and August. May and June are best for birdwatching.

Where to stay
A stay at Seehotel Großräschen comes with lake views. Alternatively, book one of Lake Senftenberg's treehouses or the floating homes of Geierswalder. *seehotel-grossraeschen.de senftenberger-see.de lausitz-resort.de*

Places mentioned
Welzow-Süd. *bergbautourismus.de*
Wolkenberg. *wolkenberg-gmbh.de*
Grünhaus Nature Reserve. *naturerbe.nabu.de*
F60. *f60.de*

More information
germany.travel
brandenburg-tourism.com
saxonytourism.com
lausitzerseenland.de

How to do it
IBA TOURS has a three-day lakes itinerary including guided tours and bike rides, plus two nights' B&B in Seehotel Grossräschen for €279 (£245), excluding flights. Bespoke packages are also available. *iba-tours.de*

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER