

## NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

*Monica Frim veers off the beaten path to follow a trail of luxury handmade products from Munich to Berlin. There's not much time for taking in tourist attractions, but a rainy night in Dresden and a ride past Berlin's most eye-popping landmarks stimulates an urge to return.*

*Story and photos  
by Monica Frim*

Travel with us.

German design and engineering have long been associated with luxury, quality and beauty. Think vehicles.

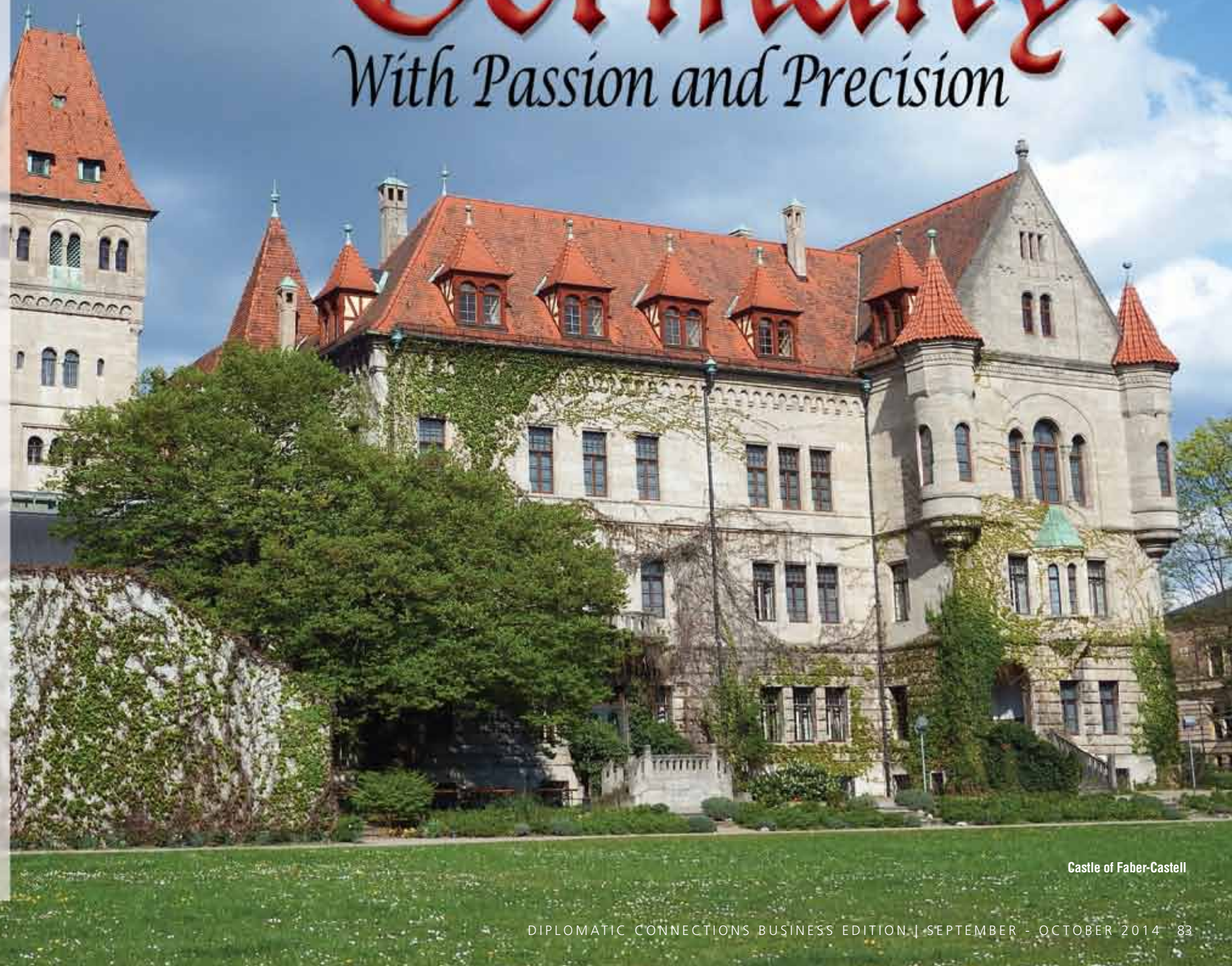
Think electronic equipment. Think pencils.

Yes, pencils! Faber-Castell, maker of opulent writing implements, is one of 250 German “manufactories,” enterprises that rely on hand labor to make products of the highest quality and value. The company has taken the lowly writing tool and elevated it to international renown and luxury on par with cars like BMW and Porsche — with prices to match. A limited edition fountain pen encrusted with diamonds retails for €70,000 (US\$96,000).

I was part of a team of 16 international journalists from 11 countries who travelled along Germany's east side, from Munich to Berlin, stopping at traditional towns en route to get a firsthand look at how Germany translates its reputation for exceptional engineering into quality handmade products at a time when the rest of the world is focused on mass production. As guests of the German Federal Foreign Office and the German Manufactories Initiative – Handmade-in-Germany, we visited eight manufactories that made products as varied as gloves, brushes, traditional writing implements, hi-tech



# Made in Germany: With Passion and Precision



Castle of Faber-Castell

audio systems, pianos, manual watches, fine porcelain and mouth-blown glass.

The German Manufactories Initiative (Initiative Deutsche Manufakturen) was established in 2010 as an umbrella organization for medium-sized companies that adhere to classical craftsmanship but in modern workshops. The organization's aim is to pool interests and promote a positive image of German handmade luxury items on an international level.

Germany has no desire to join the bandwagon of bargain brand items that are quickly made, easy, cheap and globally available for mass consumption. Instead German manufactories are targeting a more discerning clientele: moneyed collectors who value individuality, quality workmanship, attention to detail and cutting-edge design that is nevertheless inspired by centuries' worth of tradition and pride. In this vein, the country is also taking traditional workmanship to new technological heights.

In preparation for a week of intense travel and learning, participants rallied together at Ayingers am Platzl near Munich's City Hall for some genuine Bavarian fortification and, possibly, the best soup south of the Baltic — a dense mix of

dumplings, noodles, meat and vegetables followed by platter-sized schnitzel, potatoes and the local specialty of thick, white asparagus spears. Meanwhile, Michael T. Schröder, chair of the German Manufactories Initiative, regaled us with information.

"The manufactories are all from different high-end industry sectors," he said. "Each is unique so they are not competitive. They are joined by the fact that they are all producing handmade items." According to Schröder, most are family-owned enterprises that have been passed down through the generations.

Our first stop was at the glove-making headquarters of Roeckl, where sixth generation CEO Annette Roeckl spoke passionately about the company's focus on authenticity and attention to detail. "That's something that hasn't changed in a hundred years," she said. Items such as deer horn buttons are still painstakingly sorted by hand to ensure perfect color



A touchline glove by Roeckl



Johannes Teucher demonstrates how gloves are propped and sewn by hand at Roeckl in Munich.



Munich City Hall



Glockenspiel in the City Hall Tower



Michael Schröder, Chair of the German Manufactories Initiative and his wife Lea Schröder-Dolinsek



A custom-made da-Vinci brush.

matches, and leather materials are laid out so that the natural markings of one glove correspond perfectly to those of its partner. "As a result, we have fewer products, but those products are perfect," Ms. Roeckl stated proudly. The company uses only premium materials — such as Amazonian peccary leather or hair sheep from the highlands of Ethiopia. The work is finicky and intricate. Gloves can have as many as 2,000 hand stitches and 24 components.

Over the years, Roeckl expanded its line to include hand-painted foulards (silk scarves), bags, belts and knitted wares. The company tried to replace the old sewing machines (some concession is made to hand-operated machinery), but it turned out that the old machines worked better than the new ones. Yet for all the emphasis on traditional methods, Roeckl embraces the future with modern designs and products befitting an electronic age. Their "Touchline" gloves feature a special insert on the index finger for dexterity in handling electronic devices such as cell phones and tablets.

One of Roeckl's retail shops is near Marienplatz where the ornate City Hall draws both local and visiting onlookers with its famous Rathaus-Glockenspiel midway up the City Hall tower. The Glockenspiel's 43 bells and 32 life-sized figures enact stories several times a day including the marriage of a former duke,



The Berliner Dom (Berlin Cathedral) on Museum Island in the River Spree, is the largest Protestant Church in the city. Begun in 1451, the current building was finished in 1905. Damaged in World War II, it remained closed during the DDR years until its reinauguration in 1993.



Left: Count Anton-Wolfgang von Faber-Castell, eighth generation head of Faber-Castell, one of the oldest industrial companies in the world. Right: Faber-Castell Headquarters in Stein.

complete with life-sized jousting knights, and a 16th century coopers' dance. The display is as traditional as the dirndls and lederhosen still worn by service workers in the local Bavarian hotels and restaurants.

A hundred miles north of Munich, Nuremberg was historically one of two great trade centers between Italy and northern Europe (The other was Augsburg). Later Nuremberg became the center of the German Renaissance, a movement inspired by German artists and free thinkers who had traveled to Italy. Today, the da Vinci Künstlerpinselfabrik champions the city's artistic past with its fine brushes, painstakingly bundled, combed and tested by hand. Different hairs are used for different applications: soft Siberian squirrel hair for gilders' dusters, hog hair for oil painting, goat hair for shavers and cosmetics, and even synthetic brushes for those looking for a more affordable, but still good quality, brush. The company's most exclusive brush is a size 50 Kolinsky sable brush, used for watercolors, that retails for €1,200 (US\$1,635).

To an outsider walking among tables laden with hairs, glue stuffs, tweezers and gum Arabic (for starching bristles into shape), the work can seem achingly tedious. Yet skilled workers with keen eyes and adroit fingers take an inordinate amount of pride in their tasks. After undergoing a three-year apprenticeship, they earn the title of "master" — an honorific that can refer to any accomplished artisan or technician in a variety of fields.

It's that kind of workers' enthusiasm that drives Germany's economy. Forward-thinking employers recognize the value of loyal, skilled employees and provide them with special benefits that, in the end, prove advantageous to all.

They also contribute to community enrichment. Da Vinci offers scholarships to emerging artists that include free materials and brushes plus exposure of their work at a Nuremberg museum.

In the case of Faber-Castell, company benefits at its subsidiary in Peru include free breakfasts, lunches and medical treatments. Count Anton-Wolfgang von Faber-Castell, eighth generation head of the pencil dynasty headquartered in nearby Stein, says, "If you treat people well, it comes back to you." This sentiment was first implemented by his great-great-grandfather Lothar von Farber, whose sense of social responsibility in the 1800s extended to providing the community with schools, libraries, nurseries and banks.

For German companies, profit goes hand in hand with social and environmental responsibility. Toward that end, Faber-Castell engages in tree-planting projects in South America, Roeckl integrates recycled bottles into their handbags and da Vinci uses only wood from sustainable European forests. "You can only do social good if you are profitable," says Count Anton-Wolfgang von Faber-Castell.

There seems to be a synchronicity between profit and passion. In Waldsassen, near the border with the Czech Republic, Reiner Meindl's enthusiasm for mouth-blown glass shines through in novel ways. Meindl is CEO of Glashütte Lamberts, a world leader in mouth-blown architectural plate glass, with a penchant for whimsy. He and his wife, Gudrun, hosted our team for an evening buffet with tables set amid the glass-burning furnaces of the workshop. We tucked into potato or garlic soup — which Meindl explained as typical fare for a region that was historically impoverished — fol-

lowed by pork, ham, rice, knödl (dumplings), potatoes, rice and lasagna. Nearby, fires turned sand, soda and lime into liquid glass. After the meal Reiner asked for volunteers to pull glass from the furnace so it could be tested for color. A few intrepid souls were shown how to insert a long metal rod into the oven, pull out a dollop of molten glass and flatten it into a disk. The rod is then reinserted to soften the disc so it can be pulled like taffy into a dripping glob or “zapfen,” hardened, broken off the rod, then taken to the company laboratory for a color check.

The actual mouth-blowing of glass into cylinders takes place in the morning. Once cooled, the cylinders are cut from top to bottom, reheated to unfurl and pressed flat with a large wooden mallet. The glass may be made the old-fashioned way but its applications are among the most innovative in the world. With more than 5,000 colors and textures to choose from, internationally renowned artists such as Brit-

ish architect Norman Foster and Danish-Icelandic sculptor Ólafur Eliasson favor Glashütte Lamberts' glass for its creative possibilities. The company exports 80 percent of its products, most for modern architectural impact, such as the colorful ceiling and columns of Taiwan's Kaohsiung Train Station, but also maintains a foothold in tradition with its conventional window replacement in Dresden's most famous church, the Frauenkirche.

A 10-minute walk from the glassworks, Waldsassen's most famous tourist attraction is its 12th century Cistercian Abbey. The intricately carved figures and ornate ceiling in the abbey's library and the bejeweled skeletons in the basilica, to which the abbey is connected, make Waldsassen a worthy stop for travelers along the Munich to Berlin corridor. But if you have time for only one waypost, Dresden wins hands down. Our team managed to squeeze in a “dark and stormy night” (with apologies to Edward Bulwer-Lytton)

when Dresden's emblematic, blackened baroque and rococo buildings were blacker than usual owing to a downpour that kept the saner members of our team warmly ensconced in their hotel rooms. Your humble scribe, in the company of three intrepid teammates, opted to shiver and trudge through puddles in a downpour, under



Fine-adjusting a piano by hand at C. Bechstein, makers of upright and grand pianos in Seifhennersdorf.



Glashütte Lamberts Waldsassen is the only one of its kind to make decorative mouth-blown sheet glass in Germany.



The Waldsassen Basilica is known for its display of jeweled skeletons.

cover of night, in hopes of catching the “jewel box” spirit of old that was supposedly resurrected with the rebuilding of the city after the devastation wrought during World War II. Alas, the Semper Opera House, the Zwinger Palace, the multi-domed Frauenkirche and about 13,000 itemized cultural monuments were missing the jewel box effect — either out of reach or shrouded by the nighttime deluge. I could almost hear Richard Wagner's delirious passages from “Tristan and Isolde” pinging with the raindrops. Thomas Mann referred to the opera as “a perfumed fog shot through with lightning” in his 1901 novel, “Buddenbrooks.” Perhaps he had penned those words on a rainy night.

I thought of Wagner again the next day in Seifhennersdorf, where the C. Bechstein Pianofortefabrik once customized a piano for him. Franz Liszt and Claude Debussy were also favored clients and, more recently, the Beatles, David Bowie, Freddie Mercury, Paul Simon and his brother Eddie.

The company uses cedars from the Italian Alps for its soundboards, and the finely honed skills of piano technicians with dexterous fingers and acutely tuned ears, to handcraft upright and grand pianos in the price range of €11,000 (US\$15,000) to €130,000 (US\$174,000). Leonardo Duricic, Chief Technical Officer, explained that the company was founded in 1853 to provide pianos to aristocratic and royal families. “Kings, queens, popes, emirs ... many had Bechstein pianos,” he said.

Duricic leads us through the building process, from fitting cast iron frames to soundboards, through staining, lacquering and damping processes, to voicing, tuning and final inspections. “Piano workers undergo an apprenticeship. For five years they are considered to be journeymen, and only then do they earn the title of master technician,” he says.

The fact that Germans are willing to spend years honing their skills says something about the pride, passion and devotion with which they view their jobs. Whether sewing a glove, voicing a piano or fine-tuning a watch, the precision and extreme focus demanded of the artisans is what gives the end product its superlative quality and staying power. There's a cost to this type of quality and it seems discerning buyers are willing to pay it.

In the watch-making town of Glashütte, Moritz Grossmann creates timepieces that cost as much as a Bechstein concert grand. Company CEO Christina Hutter revived the name Moritz Grossmann after a 19th century master watchmaker, built an ultra modern headquarters above the town and within five years of launching the company in 2009, produced four models of manually operated wrist watches, last at the rate of 200 watches a year. The number may seem small, but it's impressive considering the design stage for a simple watch is 1½ years and assembly consists of 200 to 250 components. An innovative element is a stop-seconds mechanism made of human hair. This is one industry where manual dexterity cannot compete with the precision of robotic machines. And while robotics can also mean faster delivery, the company aims to cap future growth at 1,000 watches per year. “We want to expand, but still keep the watches exclusive for collectors,” says Hutter.

Collectors items are the mainstay of many manufactories. At KPM (Königliche Porzellan-Manufaktur) in Berlin exclusivity comes through historical connections with royalty. Frederick the Great bought the porcelain company from a Berlin merchant in 1763. Other companies, like Burmester Audiosysteme, are first-generation newcomers who perceive an idea, then pour their hearts and souls into making it the

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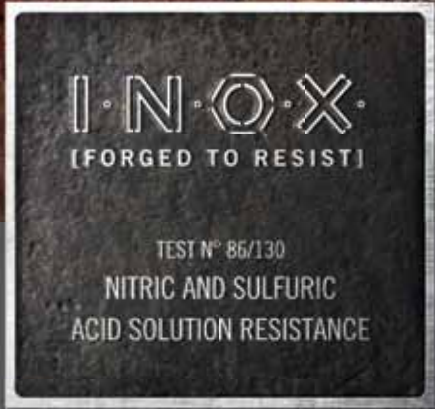
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best there is. Both rely on precise craftsmanship, rigorous quality control and sophisticated aesthetics.

Dieter Burmester calls his handmade sound systems “art for the ear.” It’s a fitting descriptor given that the products look like pieces of art and project sounds with concert hall perceptibility. You’d almost believe Elvis was alive and living in Germany after listening to an analog recording from the 1960s burned onto a CD.

Burmester started the company in 1977 after building himself a pre-amplifier finished in gold leaf. “Since I intended to build only one, for myself, I wanted it to be the very best both in materials and the quality of sound.” But when he demonstrated the system to his friends, they wanted the same, and so began the story of Burmester Audiosysteme, now a world leader in luxury home audio systems with exports to more than 50 countries. Burmester compares his style to Bauhaus style, clean and sleek, with polished chrome fronts inspired by the glass and chrome tables of Eileen Gray. A complete system can cost as much as a car, but with a good chance of no further maintenance costs. Quality control and testing are the most extreme that Burmester knows. Speakers are set to vibrate nonstop for a week before they are put on the market to soften the rubber and test their endurance. “No other company does this,” says Burmester. “If a drive survives this type of testing, it will not break in your house.”

Not so KPM’s fine china, although the company’s delicate giftware has withstood the test of time with centuries’ old place settings still in private and museum collections.

A tour of the KPM factory is like a walk through porcelain history. Beginning with the flowery place settings of Frederick the Great, visitors stroll through corridors of rococo exuberance, intricate china sculptures of the Schinkel era and on through Art Nouveau, Art Deco and the sleek New Objectivity collections. Old kilns have been turned into display areas that showcase various stages of the manufacturing process. You can watch artisans hand paint pieces in the workshop, stroll through the Boccherini Hall, with its lavishly set table, and finish up in the company showroom. There you can check out a porcelain Bugatti commemorative of KPM’s partnership with the car company. Bugatti was the world’s first car to sport porcelain components.

Bugatti is also one of three car companies that have contracted with Burmester Audiosysteme for high-end sound systems. I sat in on a demonstration of an audio system in a Porsche with

From top: A few components of a Moritz Grossmann watch; a Moritz Grossmann watch; Christine Hutter, CEO of Moritz Grossmann Uhren, a modern company that still makes manual watches by hand.



Dieter Burmester, CEO of Burmester Audiosysteme in Berlin.

a surround sound system of 1,000 watts and 16 speakers including a sub-woofer, then repeated the experience in a Mercedes with slightly less oomph. In both cases the concert quality — as good as the company’s living room version — needed to be experienced to be believed. I am still waiting for a test blast in the Bugatti with anticipatory goose pimples ...

Or perhaps I am just remembering the drive into Berlin and the excitement of our two guides, proud as artisanal masters, as they pointed out their city’s prime attractions: green spaces; lakes; the longest remaining stretch of the Berlin wall, known as the East Side Gallery, with its depictions of the works of artists from all over the world; the Berlin TV tower; Marienkirche; the Berliner Dome; the River Spree; nightclubs; theaters and Soviet-style apartment buildings known as “Plattenbauten” after their prefabricated concrete slabs. We skirted Alexanderplatz, the former central square of East Berlin, now lined by shops and



Burmester Audiosysteme is now also producing powerful sound systems for Porsche.

a world clock. Everywhere graffiti. Everywhere construction cranes. The futuristic sky-blue Humboldt Box serves as a museum and information center for the reconstruction of the



An old kiln at KPM is now used for displaying colorful dye powders used in the hand painting of porcelain products.



The Altes Museum on Museum Island in Berlin houses antiquities. It is one of several internationally renowned museums on the island in the River Spree.

Berlin City Palace. The palace, once the home of Prussian kings and German emperors, was razed in the 1950s by the East German government for a parade ground.

We followed Unter den Linden to Berlin's most famous site, the Brandenburg Gate, then traced along one side of the 2,711 concrete blocks that make up the Holocaust Memorial, over to the Bundestag (parliament) and along the Kurfürstendamm with its avant-garde shops and cinemas. Berlin screamed for attention and deserved more than a quick drive-through.

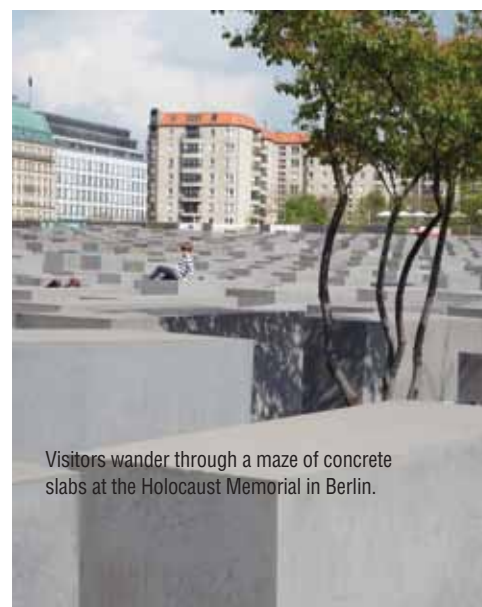
But the purpose of this trip was not tourism, although I welcomed the reprieve that swept me up in momentary excitement. It gave me something to look forward to for a future visit. ■



KPM showroom



The historical Reichstag, the neoclassical parliament building offers 360-degree views from its modern glass dome designed by Norman Foster.



Visitors wander through a maze of concrete slabs at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin.



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