



A Visit to the Lighthouses of the Baltic Gibraltar

By Elinor DeWire

Rügen Island, Germany's largest island, lies at the country's northeast corner surrounded by the chilly waters of the Baltic Sea and stunning seascapes that are part of the western reach of the Polish-German "Pomeranian Coast." The sunny isle is named for an old Slavic tribe known as the Ranen, which possibly means "The Reds," for the color of their hair. Their land eventually became known as the Rugard. But modern-day Germans simply call it "The Baltic Gibraltar."

I was fortunate to see this fabulous place in July 2010 on a mini tour with the U.S. Lighthouse Society. Our small bus, with about 12 society members aboard, left the port city of



Sassnitz Harbor, on Rügen Island's eastern shore, is a busy port with three lighthouses situated on moles, or breakwaters. The light on the east mole, pictured about 1930, is still in service, but with a different daymark. Collection of Michel Forand.

Szczecin, Poland, early one morning and arrived at Rügen Island a few hours later. In this short time and distance, everything seemed to change—the weather, the scenery, the currency, the food, and the people.

At a small convenience store near the bridge from Stralsund to Rügen Island, we were met by our guide, Andreas Heinemann. He was curious about our passion for lighthouses, but it wasn't long before he caught the fever too. "We don't get many Americans touring up here," he said, "and looking at lighthouses with such excitement too... I've never had a group like this!"

My backpack was heavy with books and brochures about this part of Europe, along with a little German dictionary to help me resurrect the German classes I'd taken in college so long ago. Andreas soon added to my treasured collection with a map of Rügen Island and a few local publications. Little did I know I'd also get another, more valuable souvenir from him later in the day—a copy of his wedding picture in front of Kap Arkona Lighthouse!

We were grateful for Andreas' "big picture" approach to the tour, a roundup of information that included not only the lighthouses we had come to visit, but also the local history and natural surroundings. Much of what I'll tell you here came from Andreas and his excellent overview. He was, without doubt, a walking Rügen Island encyclopedia! (This is what makes U.S. Society tours so wonderful, I think—the bigger picture that lighthouses occupy and the fascinating and friendly people we meet along the way.)

Once a far-flung and little-known coastal fishing settlement, today Rügen Island is a popular tourist escape for the residents of nearby cities—Berlin, Potsdam, Bergen, Hamburg, Lubeck, Szczecin, even Scandinavian cities across the Baltic Sea. Ferries arrive and depart for Sweden and Denmark from the Rügen town of Sassnitz. It was our first stop, a jewel of a town showcasing the best of the Baltic. Fishing and pleasure boats were ev-



Rügen Island's strategic position in the Baltic sealanes makes it ideal for lighthouses. It is Germany's only cape and the country's most northeasterly point. Wikimedia Commons.

erywhere in the harbor. The salt air was thick, and the smell of fried fish was pungent in the many ale houses on the waterfront. And there are lighthouses too!

Several lights guide vessels through a maze of moles into Sassnitz, including an odd-looking red metal sentinel that reminded me of the invading aliens in H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. All the lights were built since 1904 and are positioned to help vessels negotiate the tricky entry to Sassnitz Harbor. Mukran Light is on the very lengthy and protective east mole leading into port, and the two Sassnitz mole lights are on the tips of two shorter moles.

We re-boarded the bus an hour later for a drive over the rolling hills of Rügen Island to Kap Arkona. We passed the famous Jasmund National Park with its towering chalk cliffs, the island's number one draw for tourists. Fields of barley, wheat, and rapeseed surrounded us. (Rapeseed was a source of oil for some lighthouses.) Stands of beechwood trees marked small villages, each with a picturesque steeple rising from it. As the bus rolled along, we learned about the various invaders and

occupiers of the island, including the Danes, who conquered the Ranen many years ago; Napoleon's domination; the Prussian rulers; and the more recent Soviet control.

Andreas and I spoke a little "Deutsch" together (his English was far better than my German!), and I told him about studying German history in college. Carefully, I broached the subject of the Third Reich, which had been headquartered not far away in Berlin. "We don't speak of it really," he said, "but there are places here to remind us."

He described the beach at Prora on the east side of the island just south of Sassnitz, where a very modern lighthouse stands today. Near it are remains of a large holiday complex Adolf Hitler ordered built in the mid-1930s for the Nazi party to relax and rejuvenate. This lavish Nazi holiday camp, complete with a six-story hotel and long rows of reinforced concrete



Like siblings, the two sentinels of Kap Arkona stand in close proximity. The shorter, older Schinkelturm probably was adequate for mariners, but the German Imperial Government decided to build a taller, more majestic lighthouse in 1902. Author photo.

dormitories, stretched for three miles along the shore. But it was never finished or inhabited by merrymakers. Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 and the camp was abandoned. Later, it became a Soviet training center during the Cold War.

Andreas said that Kap Arkona, our next destination, holds the distinction of being Germa-



The first lighthouse on Kap Arkona, called Schinkelturm, appeared in a Baltic storm engraving about 1830. The cliffs below the tower are steep and bottom out in rocks and shoals. Collection of Kai Homilius Verlag.

ny's only cape and its most northeastern point. Its strategic position in the Baltic convinced the Soviet Union, during its occupation of East Germany after World War II, to make it a base for the National People's Army. Andreas went on to say that he came to the cape at the age of two when his father was assigned to the army post. Andreas grew up in the shadow of the two lighthouses on Kap Arkona and decided to remain there after Reunification of Germany in 1990. He told us we would see buildings left over from the Soviet occupied GDR period (German Democratic Republic).

Meanwhile, our bus rumbled along the island's winding roads and past its many *Boddens* (wetlands created by sea flooding). Andreas said there were many shipwrecks around the island, and it was clear from the shoreline that lighthouses were essential. A German publication about Kap Arkona that I had purchased in Sassnitz mentioned *Frühe Leuchfeuer*, or "early lighthouses," on Rügen Island, some quite crude and built as early as the 11th century. It makes sense that the seafaring lifestyle of the ancient people of Rügen Island would have led them to build bonfires around their shores, especially on Kap Arkona. It juts northward into important shipping lanes today and surely would have been a landmark for mariners of the past.

Today, the lights in Germany are categorized as *Festfeuer* (fixed), *Blinkfeuer* (flashing), and *Blitzfeuer* (quick flashing). About a dozen sentinels, some no longer in service, stand guard around the shores of Rügen Island and neighboring Hiddensee, an enchanting isle to the west that we would view later in the day. The active lighthouses are maintained by the local harbor authority called WSA-Stralsund (Wasser und Schifffahrtsamt, or Waterways and Ship Navigation).

Our bus came to a stop at the quaint village of Putgarten. No vehicular traffic is permitted on Kap Arkona, so we boarded a tram to travel the remaining short distance to the cape. Contrasts were evident: thatch-roofed homes called *katten* next to modern houses, a hand water pump next to a sign for Coca Cola, and the lighthouses themselves, looming ahead of us—stout guardians of the cape. Known locally as the Schinkelturm (Schinkel Tower, for its architect) and Neuer Leuchtturm (New Lighthouse), they are among Rügen Island's most visited landmarks.

As we exited the bus, I spied an interesting sign that gave real-time information on the weather and sea state. The Baltic is fickle, offering a serene face most days but occasionally showing an angry countenance. On this day it was peaceful, with the ethereal quality of a Caspar Friedrich painting. The meteorological sign indicated the air temperature and seawater temperature were nearly equal. But I knew the place was vastly different in winter. The Baltic can freeze, the wind becomes a demon, and drifts of snow bury everything in white, cutting off the cape from all civilization.



Neuer Leuchtturm, the younger of the two Kap Arkona lighthouses, is a handsome structure complete with an ornate red railing. It's probably not the original and may have been installed when the tower opened to tourism. Author photo.

Avid shutterbugs, we hurried to take pictures and climb the two lighthouses. The elder sentinel, Schinkelturm, was funded by the Kingdom of Prussia and constructed in 1826-1827 by Friedrich Karl Schinkel, a Berlin artist and architect, with help from Obertaurat Günther, a hydraulic specialist in the local lighthouse service of the day. Schinkel also designed and built the nearby town of Putgarten and many famous landmarks in Berlin. The Schinkelturm

has many windows and an ornate iron stairway staged in squares—the prettiest I've ever seen in a lighthouse! Each floor has displays about the lighthouse and its history.

Through slow and tedious translation of the displays (the interpreter on duty did not speak English), I learned that materials for construction were brought to Stralsund and then transported to Sassnitz by boat and then to Kap Arkona by cart. When completed and first lighted on January 1, 1828, the lighthouse was the tallest on the Ostsee, as the Germans call the Baltic Sea. Zimmermann Schilling was the first keeper. He and his family lived at first on the bottom floor of the lighthouse and later in a residence next to the light tower. His house served as the area's post office and, according to several guidebooks of the day, as accommodations for travelers. Later it also was used as a cable station for sending and receiving messages from Sweden. Schilling augmented his meager income by running a small tavern in the lighthouse—a side business that never would have been permitted in the United States!

The three-story, square, brick lighthouse began operation with an array of 24 Argand lamps and a parabolic reflector system that produced a fixed white light visible about 20 miles. A warning sector covered dangerous rocks off the cape. The apparatus was made by a Berlin company called Goldschmeidemeister Hossauer. Glass for the lantern windows was manufactured by Schickler & Splittgerber of Neustadt an der Dosse. The metal work was done by Königliche Kupferhammer of Eberswalde. Perhaps rapeseed oil was the illuminant, considering the plant was in plentiful supply on Rügen Island.

Several sources indicate the number of



A German Weather Service sign near the Kap Arkona lighthouses provides interesting data on Baltic conditions. On this day a light breeze blew out the west, the humidity was low, and seawater and air temperatures were nearly equal—a fabulous summer day on Rügen Island. Author photo.

lamps was reduced to 17 by 1872 when a kerosene apparatus called Rüböllampen was installed. A guidebook by the famous traveler, Karl Baedekker, described the lighthouse in 1886: "The promontory of Arcona, the northernmost point of Rügen, 206 feet above sea, is crowned with a lighthouse 75-feet in height..." The beacon may have provided excellent guidance for vessels, but it was a bane to the birds of the area. In fall and spring migrations, ravens, crows, geese, and sparrows collided with the lantern or stopped to perch on it before their flight over the Baltic Sea to Sweden. More welcome, especially today, are the gray European cranes, considered bringers of good luck.

The Schinkelturm was strongly constructed, so there were few changes over the years. But increasing traffic in the Baltic and into the busy port of Sassnitz in particular demanded a taller sentinel. As I surveyed the Baltic Sea from the top of Schinkelturm, I could see the Danish island of Møen more than 20 miles away. Møen Banks, called Kriegers Flak by the Germans, is a shallow area off Møen Island and part of the reason the lighthouse was built. Ferries and large cargo ships plied the Baltic sealanes in the distance, and a lone fishing boat bobbed a few miles offshore. The tower probably was adequate, but the German Imperial Government was eager to show its superiority. And so the taller, more majestic Neuer Leuchtturm was planned.

The British Parliament's *Sessional Papers, Vol 93* for the year 1900 noted: "The total cost is estimated at 237,000 marks...The light is to be an electric flashing light; the flashes will last one-tenth second and will appear at intervals of 4 and 9/16 seconds; the light will be visible 22 miles."

Built in 1902 a few feet south of the 1828 Schinkelturm, Neuer Leuchtturm was the dazzling centerpiece of Rügen Island when it flashed into service. The German Emperor, Wilhelm II (famous for his handlebar mustache), was justifiably proud of the new sentinel. The *Baltic Pilot* of the day reported that a fog siren was positioned on the bluff below the new tower, at a height more conducive to sound travel than the lofty plateau of the cape. Ice signals and storm signals were displayed from the light station, and a telegraph office stood near the towers. The lightkeepers also had at their disposal a lifeboat and lifesaving apparatus.

The original optic was an unusual double-lens. Alex Trabas, a lighthouse aficionado in Duisburg, Germany, told me the two bulls-

eye panels originally were affixed opposite each other on a rotating table that turned in a mercury float. Later, the mercury apparatus was dismantled and replaced by a ball-bearing system. At the same time, the double-lens was reduced to a single-mount lens. The original carbon arc lamp was followed by halogen metal-vapor lamps, and finally, the current halogen lamp was installed in 1995. The optic is now on display in a glass-enclosed building at the base of Neuer Leuchtturm.



A unique double lens illuminated the Neuer Leuchtturm when it was first commissioned. The lens panels were situated on a revolving table opposite each other. Today the lens is on display at the base of the lighthouse. Author photo.

During World War II, bunkers were built on Kap Arkona. Most of the beacons along the Baltic Coast were decommissioned or destroyed during World War II. Kap Arkona's new lighthouse was no exception. Its beacon was dark for most of the war and was not restored until 1946. An interesting side note to the war concerns the luxury liner *Cap Arcona*, commissioned in 1927 and named for the famous lighthouse. The liner was converted to a prison ship during the war. Commander of the SS, Heinrich Himmler devised a plan to take the ships out to sea from Lübeck and scuttle them, killing the prisoners aboard. Fortunately, Allied forces reached the city before the prison ship could set sail.



Andreas Heinemann was the tour guide on Rügen Island and a near-lifelong resident of Kap Arkona. He and his wife were married at the base of the cape's two lighthouses. Author photo.

At a previous time in its tenure, Neuer Leuchtturm was painted in a handsome daymark of red and black horizontal stripes. It appeared in this dress in my *Frommer's* guidebook from the 1990s, and it was painted this way on a tavern coaster Andreas gave me as a gift. He remembered its fancy dress but not the year it was sandblasted and made a less ostentatious daymark. Even so, it really isn't plain today. Colored stonework forms stripes at the top and bottom of the conical tower, and its octagonal base is darker stone than the tower itself. A bright red lantern provides a colorful and distinctive contrast.

A highlight of the visit to the cape was viewing the wedding stones at the base of Shinkelturn. Andreas told us betrothed couples travel from all over Germany to be married on this picturesque cape. He pointed to one of the polished square stones, and we were surprised to see his name and his wife's name, Ramona. The Heinemanns were married at the lighthouse on May 5, 1999. Today, they live in a townhouse on the seaward side of the two lighthouses.

Also displayed on the cape is the defunct, 21-foot tall, iron light tower of Ranzow, which once perched on a 180-foot high cliff on the shores around Lohme on Jasmund Peninsula. It was built in 1905 and relocated to Kap Arkona in 2002 after a modern light on a pole replaced it. The original Ranzow Light was a Julius Pintsch apparatus with a group flashing white beacon visible for 19 miles. Pintsch, a Berliner, began his business supplying gas and lights primarily for rail cars, but after his

death in 1884 his sons got into the lighthouse business. Several Rügen Island sentinels were Pintsch lights.

Following the visit to Kap Arkona, our tour bus took us south down the west side of Rügen Island through the village of Wick and onto a small car ferry to cross the opening of *Breetzer Bodden* (a flooded inland area at the center of Rügen Island). Andreas produced a large thermos of strong German coffee his wife had made and served us, saying: "Kaffee Zeit!" (coffee time).

Once off the ferry, he directed the bus driver onto a narrow back road, taking us through fields where cows grazed contently and wildflowers showed off their brilliant colors. We parked at the end of a dirt road. In the distance we could see the magical isle of Hiddensee, where two more lighthouses stand.

Hiddensee is where the rich and famous go to vacation. Its nickname, appropriately, is *Das Söte Lännekan*, or "The Sweet Little Island." Rügen Island and Hiddensee are both so clement in summer and so tranquil and bucolic year-round, they have been dubbed the "Brighton for Berliners." Albert Einstein loved the area, as did Thomas Mann, Johannes Brahms, Otto von Bismarck, and Gerhart Hauptmann. These well-known personalities came to the area to rest, swim, sail, and escape the city heat and bustle.



Ranzow Lighthouse once stood several miles southeast of Kap Arkona but was moved to the cape when a modern light replaced it. This design is typical of many small, hut-style lights in Germany. Author photo.

Andreas told us Hiddensee forbids vehicular traffic, but its two active lighthouses at Dornbush and Gellen are open to visitors as part of Vorpommersche Boddenlandschaft National Park. The 1888 Dornbush Lighthouse is lofty, shining from atop a hill called Bakenburg (Beacon Hill), with a focal plane of 312 feet. The surrounding hillside is covered in thick thorn bushes, giving the light its name. The younger



Dornbush Light is the sentinel of the enchanting isle of Hiddensee, on the west side of Rügen Island. The tower was round when first built in 1888. In 1927 it was encased in an octagonal wall to strengthen it. Bird repellents can be seen on the cupola. Collection of Michel Forand.

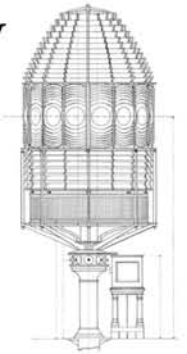
and shorter Gellen Light—its name means "shrill"—was built in 1905. It is a small cylindrical iron tower on a stone base with a bright red lantern. It's another Julius Pintsch lighthouse, a replica of many other small cast iron lights on the Baltic Coast of Germany.

As we drove south to end our tour and drop Andreas at his car, we played a game of "Twenty Questions." Andreas quizzed us about all we had learned that day and then asked with a mischievous grin, "Is there anything like Rügen Island in your country?"

The resounding answer was: "No way!"



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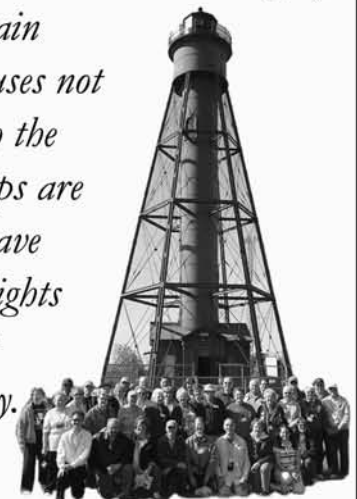
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