



# Toyland

A QUIANT TOWN VERY CLOSE TO THE ORE MOUNTAINS IN THE FREE STATE OF SAXONY IN GERMANY, SEIFFEN IS FAMOUS FOR COLOURFUL WOODEN TOYS AND CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS THAT ARE FAMOUS ALL OVER EUROPE. **ARUNA RATHOD VISITS THE SCENIC TOWN AND COMES BACK MESMERISED.**

It was a cold morning with biting wind when we headed from Dresden, located in south-west Germany, to the town of Seiffen. It is a little over an hour's drive away, tucked very close to the Ore Mountains which lie in the vicinity of the Czech border. Our German guide mentioned that it could be snowing in Seiffen, as it is situated at a height of 645 metres above sea level. As we drove past the historical city square of Dresden, we saw the countryside landscape and also spotted beautiful homes with sloping roofs along the winding roads. Not a soul in sight but the chimneys that gently spewed white smoke reminded me that it was still cold for people to step out, even though it was daylight. The upward climb brought us closer to the mountains and we were thrilled to

see the first sight of snow sprinkled on the leaves of the trees. The grass, too, was a fusion of white and green, a thin layer of snow in some parts, with green peeping through. The drive kept getting more and more picturesque with the blue sky above, deep valleys below and hills, snow and wooden toys to look forward to.

## THE JOURNEY UP HILL

Driving past, we also spotted some houses with the candle arch (Schwibbogen)—a cut-out of a winter landscape with candles. The Schwibbogen placed on windows, in between lilly lacy white curtains, was a reminder of the Christmas season. The guide told us that the Ore Mountains were a mining region more than a century ago and the miners would trudge back home to Seiffen after work. During



A MUSICAL HAND-MADE ROTATING SHOWPIECE



LEARN HOW OUR LOCAL FRIENDS CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS BY VISITING THE MUSEUM



WOODEN TOYS ON SALE

winters, when it turned dark after 4 pm, the lit candle arch on the windows would show them the way. Over a period of time, the tin reserves depleted by 1849, and the miners had to look for alternative occupation. Handmade toys were always a hobby in Seiffen with its easy access to wood. The miners decided to explore this opportunity and so their hobby soon turned into a source of income. Seiffen gradually became a major industry for wooden toys and Christmas decorations. Today, Seiffen has over a dozen workshops that display and sell their wares making it a much-

favoured destination for Europeans during Christmas.

## A VISIT TO THE MUSEUM

We alighted into the cold, wrapped our coats around us and started walking towards our first stop—the Erzgebirge Toy Museum that traces the history of wooden toys. A modern grey structure, the museum offered a visual delight with 25,000 wooden creations made over the centuries. The ground-plus-one storey building took us through a chronological journey of the toys. We learnt how,



A SCENIC VIEW OF SEIFFEN



INTRICATELY CRAFTED WOODEN TOYS



A MINATURE WOODEN TOY

with the passage of time, tools became more sophisticated and the toys more exquisite. One can take a museum guide there or browse through the various exhibits that have placards with information. The exquisite, small and intricate exhibits displayed a farm or village on a large area; there was also one display that showed Seiffen during Christmas with snow! As we moved from one display to another, we saw farm animals, angels, trains, miniatures, flowers and lots of figurines, all carved from wood. The first floor had a few more; it is from this level that one can admire a few creations that rise from the ground to the first level—a couple of chandeliers and pyramids. Our guide mentioned that approximately 40 Christmas chandeliers and pyramids have been exhibited in the museum and each one tells a different story. These

objects were originally created to meet the decorative needs of local families.

### MORE ON FOLK ART

We learnt that this folk art that brought together different forms, colours and materials served as a harbinger for the Christmas festival. These were more than just a symbol for religious festivities. Most creations that used lights had a reason. Light played an important role in the lives of miners. During the long days in the mines, light served not only as an essential component of their equipment, but also as a symbol of their religious beliefs, longings and hope. Once they began making toys, miners crafted chandeliers, candle stands and other artefacts that use lights. Once the first round of the toy museum was over, we waited in the lobby to find that there is an

THE LOCAL CHURCH



FINISHING TOUCHES TO A WOODEN TOY IN THE TRADITIONAL WOODEN TOY SHOP



THE BRZGABRIEL MUSEUM



### MUST-DO ACTIVITIES IN SEIFFEN

- Summer sledging
- Visiting the Mining path
- Visiting the Parish Church
- Visiting the Spielzeug Museum
- Visiting the Erzgebirge Toy Museum
- Attending the Schauwerkstoff workshop
- Shopping in Seiffen

educational corner for children too. It had a variety of teaching materials and special tours for kids. The museum is considered a centre for the documentation and research of the area's toy production. A small library and an archive of historical texts, photographs and pictures are also available for scholarly research. Indeed, the museum cooperates with other museums in Germany as well as other countries for the preparation of special exhibits.

### THE WORKSHOP WONDER

After the visit to the museum, we stopped for coffee and paid a quick visit to the little yellow church in the vicinity. We were told that the church was consecrated in 1779. Eight columns make up the symmetrical eight corners and carry the cupola and the tower with its two-metre high cross. We visited the workshops in the church that looked warm and welcoming and smelled of fresh wood. A variety of works such as musical cribs with the star, scenes of Christmas, well-crafted Christmas trees and many more colourful toys, wall-pieces and desk pieces were on display. A friendly guide took us through the workshops and showed us the various stages that the wooden toys had to go through. The apprentices and their supervisors looked up and smiled at the visitors. They laboured patiently and painstakingly on every piece. Some made spare parts of the toys, others assembled the toys, and yet others painted them in vivid colours. The final products stood proudly together in a corner. The most famous one was the outcracker—a creation of Seiffen. A gentleness standing next to it demonstrated how the outcracker's

mouth is used to break open walnuts and how the smoking man relaxes as the incense stick billows out smoke from his ears or pipe!

### A HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

The Seiffen outcracker has been famous since the 19th century in the grim form of authority—a soldier, policeman, king, or foreman. Later the 'Räuchermann' (smoking man) was made to represent the rapping and sympathetic folk type. Fine smoking, in the cold winters and even in other seasons, had almost become a folk custom.

At the end of these workshops in the area where you are tried their hands at assembling wooden toys. Our guide asked us to select the toy we would like to make. There were various choices: a house shaped like a mushroom, a outcracker and a smoking man. We tried our hand at a few things and even painted our own creations. Those became our souvenirs to be carried back home. Holding them with pride, we left for a musical performance at the Bunter Haus. The Seiffen cake (the most famous cake of Germany) and coffee served at the performance was an enjoyable experience. A stroll around the stores located along the winding backstreets, selling Christmas decorations, was simply great. It was there that we experienced the real feel of shopping in Seiffen. Shopping over, it was time for a sumptuous German dinner! The next day, we boarded the flight back to India. Nevertheless, we brought back some of the best old-world memories of Christmalaad.