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For Sale: Vacation Condos With a Nazi Past

By [Dalia Fahmy](#) on May 16, 2013

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The vacation flats for sale in the German town of Prora, on the Baltic island of Rügen, featuring private saunas and sea views, can be had at a steep discount to similar properties nearby. The catch? They're part of a dilapidated complex of identical, unadorned blocks built by Adolf Hitler to house 20,000 workers on Nazi Party-sponsored vacations.

Developers this spring began marketing apartments in the [Colossus of Prora](#), as it's known, for as much as €700,000 (\$900,000) each. They've stripped the grimy plaster off facades, smashed through walls to create spaces big enough to appeal to modern tastes, and added balconies, wood floors, and glossy kitchens. "It's better than letting the whole thing crumble," says Uwe Heuer, a banker from Hamburg, as he tours a model apartment. "When I'm here I don't think about the Nazi history."

Begun in 1936 and abandoned when Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Prora was the largest project of the Nazis' "Strength Through Joy" organization, created to keep workers busy with patriotic activities in their leisure time. More than twice as long as the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris, the complex consisted of eight buildings with a total of 10,000 rooms. The design, with its vast swimming pools filled with seawater and a column-lined meeting hall reminiscent of ancient Rome, won a Grand Prix award at the 1937 Paris World Exposition.

Four of the eight blocks are being renovated. Since the first was sold almost a decade ago, resistance from hoteliers fearing a glut of rooms has delayed construction, according to Rolf Hoffmeister, chairman of Inselbogen Strandimmobilien, an investor group that bought a block in 2004. A youth hostel is in a fifth block, and the three others are in ruins.

Backers of the projects are betting on a continuing property boom that has lifted German home prices by 23 percent in the past five years. Prices per square foot are about two-thirds those in nearby resorts, and developers hope to draw young vacationers with spas and tennis courts. "It's a location that can't be duplicated," says Gerd Grochowiak, co-founder of IrisGerd, a Berlin developer that bought a 1,250-room block last year, which it plans to turn into 250 apartments by 2015.

Prora's architectural style is considered Bauhaus, with straight lines and repetitive structures that reflect the modernist leanings of its architect, Clemens Klotz. Its size and location are typical of the Nazis' use of architecture as propaganda, according to Jürgen Rostock, director of the Prora Documentation Center in Berlin. "It's important to remember that these were not luxurious buildings," Rostock says. "They were very modest."

During the war, the half-built structures were used as housing and training grounds for Nazi policemen later involved in the siege of Leningrad and war crimes such as transporting Jews from the Netherlands to Auschwitz, Rostock says. In the decades that followed, parts of Prora were used as barracks by East German soldiers and then turned into vacation homes for police officers. After the Wall fell, the hostel, a museum, art galleries, and an archive were added.

Although the government considered razing the complex shortly after German reunification in 1990, it's since been given landmark protection and the developers have received a tax break to renovate it. Axel Bering, founder of developer Bering Consulting, says the landmark designation has made it difficult to

adapt the buildings to modern standards. “It took us many meetings with local officials to come up with this design,” Bering says, showing potential buyers a sparse, floating balcony suspended by steel ropes. Bering began renovations in February and plans to finish by mid-2015.

Thousands of people come to the site each year, riding bikes along the path that separates the six-story buildings from the town. Many stop at weed-choked gardens strewn with rubble to check out colorful banners advertising the developments. “I’m glad something good is happening here,” says Wilfried Roessner, a visitor who has been vacationing on Rügen for eight years. “Everything has its time.”

The bottom line: *Developers are asking as much as \$900,000 for beachfront condos in a complex built by Adolf Hitler for workers’ vacations.*

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