

Typical Sylt

Lighthouses

Navigational aids for passing ships and coastal landmarks – Lighthouses are not only functional but also fulfil a symbolic role. The oldest lighthouse on the island was built in 1855 in Kampen. Ever since then the 40 metre lighthouse has been beaming its light up to 40 kilometres out to sea. In 1978 the last lighthouse keeper left and it is now electronically remote-controlled from the mainland – just like the other lighthouses and beacons in List, Kampen and Hörnum. At first, the lighting apparatus in the Kampen lighthouse was operated with petroleum, which at that time was such a novelty that it had even merited a place at the Paris World Exhibition a few years previously. The Hörnum lighthouse has been keeping ships on course since 1907. Curious feature: From 1914 to 1933 Germany's smallest school could be found in one of the lighthouse's rooms: Only two to five children were taught here. The Hörnum lighthouse is also the only one which can be visited. Even weddings are possible in the lofty heights of the building.

Dunes

What the Alps are to the Bavarians, the dunes are to the Frisians. The most recent dune formations on Sylt are around 3000 years old, while the oldest date back 8000 years. These fissured hills of sand were formed by strong winds blowing sand from the sea and piling it up into raised land along the coast. The highest dune on Sylt, and with it the highest elevation on the island, is the Uwe dune near Kampen, which rises 52 metres above sea level. The Uwe Dune is named after Uwe Jens Lornsen, a former freedom fighter. To reach the top of the dune you have to climb up 109 steps. It's worth making the effort. The platform provides walkers with a wonderful view of Sylt and up to Denmark. A prominent feature are the two impressive "wandering" dunes in List, which are over 30 metres in height and which move about five metres a year through the effects of the wind. "This remarkable natural phenomenon" made a profound impression on the author Thomas Mann: "You only need to imagine there are four times as many dunes to believe that you are in the Sahara."

Thatched roofs

The thatched roofs adorning the houses lend a unique appearance to the villages of Sylt. Several of them date back to the 18th century, an era of prosperity that inspired a frenzy of building activity on the island. While stone and lime had to be shipped from Holland, the supporting beams for the masonry could often be found close to the doorstep: If a ship ran aground the carpenters of Sylt made good work of their unexpected windfall. Houses were generally built in the prevailing wind direction East-West, so that storms raging from the sea were only confronted with a relatively small face. Humans and animals usually lived under the same roof, animal sheds and barns formed an integral part of the house. The roofs were covered with reed stalks which at that time grew copiously on the island. Today, of course, most of the island's reed beds are conservation areas, which means that thatch has to be imported from Austria, Hungary or Turkey. Thatched roofs not only look attractive, but also do away with the need for an air conditioner. In the winter they store the heat in the house, while in summer they help keep the air cool. The sturdy thatching can withstand the rigors of nature for at least 30 years.

A place in the sun

Around 12.000 basket chairs dot Sylt's beaches in summer. These form an ideal sanctuary for sun worshippers. So much that many holidaymakers do not wish to do without these comfortable means of repose: Basket chairs have long become popular "Sylt souvenirs", which the island's local companies – including two basket chair manufacturers in Rantum and Morsum – have even delivered to New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. It is estimated that a total of 2000 to 3000 basket chairs leave the island each year, to find a new home on a balcony in Bavaria or a terrace in Thuringia. Carpenters, upholsterers, painters and basket makers work in close partnership when making the Sylt basket chairs. The quality pays off: The baskets can withstand wind and weather for around 20 years. In addition to the classic two-seaters, single and three-seaters are also enjoying growing popularity.

Local costumes

Tradition in all its splendour: There is never a shortage of interested onlookers whenever the groups from the Sylt Association perform local dances in traditional dress. What may appear an exotic curiosity in today's modern age was once a custom on the island: The first drawing of a Sylt local costume dates back to the year 1597. The local costumes experienced their heyday in the 18th century: The overall prosperity which seafaring brought to the natives of Sylt was also reflected in their dress: The men wore velvet and silk, while the women wore dresses sown with golden coins for their wedding. But this highpoint was soon followed by its decline. The "bathing director" of Sylt recorded in 1904 that "the national costume has almost completely sunk into oblivion and has only sporadically survived in the odd headscarf wrapped around its owner ". And in 1933 the doctor in Kampen Knud Ahlborn observed with regret: "It would be extremely desirable for the local dress to appear again instead of the plain mass-produced clothes typical of any German town or city."

Wadden Sea

A walk among the Wadden Sea is a real must for all visitors to Sylt. The guided tours, organized almost all year round by the administrative office of the health resort and nature conservation associations, provide an insight into a fascinating ecosystem, which since June 2009 is announced UNESCO world natural heritage. The tidal shallows may indeed look like a lifeless grey mass of silt at first sight. But despite this, the variety of living organisms is astonishing: One square metre is occupied by up to two million organisms – hardly any other ecosphere on the planet exhibits such a rich variety of life. Along with the mountains of the Alps, the tidal shallows represent the last extensive natural landscape in central Europe. In 1985 the entire tidal shallows of Schleswig-Holstein – extending over an impressive 2850 square kilometres – were declared a national park, in other words they were awarded the highest protection status. We advise against exploring the tidal shallows on your own: The narrow channels which run through the tidal channels become treacherous currents when the water rises and have prevented many innocent souls from making it to the safety of the shore.