

# BERLIN

## A city full of history and surprises. By Carolina Diaz



Above: The Oxymoron Bar;  
Right: The East Side Gallery.  
Opposite: At the Berlin Wall;  
The German cathedral beside  
the Spree; Students outside  
New Reichstag

void of some of the most obvious postcard charms of Paris, Rome or London, the visitor may wander around Berlin in despair gazing up at the looming high-rise buildings that popped up like mushrooms in both East and West during the reconstruction boom of the 60s and 70s and wondering what the fuss is all about. Hidden behind this, at times, rather unappealing façade though, lie myriad of surprises, hidden treasures waiting to be found. A Lonely Planet may help you make your way through the jungles of remote continents, but this particular cement jungle is often too fast-growing, recreating itself by the week, for guide books to keep track. Tours have helped me find my feet, but to discover your Berlin, crack its abracadabra, you have to follow your own nose.

One of the most obvious reasons why Berlin attracts visitors and what attracted me in the first place, is its incredible history. Needless to say, this place has been witness to some of the key events of the last centuries, which left deep scars on the city landscape. A feeling of déjà vu comes



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over you when visiting monuments such as the Brandenburger Gate, the Reichstag (Parliament) or the Berlin Wall Memorials, recognising the sites you read about in your history books or saw in the news not that long ago. However what makes Berlin unique is that its streets offer themselves to an archaeology of private histories, biographies of anonymous victims and anonymous heroes who left echoes on the stone of each building that is there and each building that disappeared.

Berlin history is often a history of absences that the scrupulous German analysis of its own past has tried to reconstruct with admirable accuracy and respectfulness. To make you stumble with history is precisely the aim of the stolper steine (cobble stones covered in bronze with the names of victims of nazi terror carved on them) which you can find camouflaged as part of the pavement in front of the buildings these people inhabited. This stones are eloquent yet subtle





memorials, sponsored by private donors and thus free from the dubious political agenda behind some of the bigger memorials being built in town.

But Berlin is more than a sum of events in the past, it is a city on the making, a city with a dual rhythm: frantic in reconstruction and growth and laid-back and relaxed in daily life. The best way to start the day here is with Frühstück: Breakfast is no longer the sleepy cup of coffee you almost invariably spill over your freshly washed shirt in the morning, burning your tongue after that. It is a ritual that deserves a long time devoted to it. The breakfast menu, normally brought over by a delightfully unprofessional, artist-to-be-waitress, sporting stripy socks and an ever-patient smile, tempts you with all sorts of delicacies from the 5 continents and a couple more at affordable prices.

Whilst you indolently munch your wholemeal bread with all sort of cheeses and meats towering on top of it you might want to leaf through the selection of newspapers and magazines available in every café. This is enough reason to want to learn German. Actually, you might be wondering when exactly I learn German if my mornings are devoted to a glorified coffee and toast, but, this is the best bit: you can have breakfast any time until four in the afternoon or even til midnight!

This allows for many Berliners to share in the ritual with you and allows me to do my second favourite thing: people-watching in Berlin. Believe me, this is not an idle occupation, but a scientific pursuit. After months in town I still have not solved the riddle of how Berliners can afford to spend the day leisurely breakfasting when, well, they spend their day in cafés with me. Don't this people have jobs to go to?

This is a city WITHOUT a rush hour and where cycling is not operation certain death. Granted, there is a high rate of unemployment



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in the area, but these people, whilst not opulent, hardly look riddled by financial distress either. There is a high percentage of students who (still) have it quite good in Germany. Another high percentage of the population is formed by liberal professionals working in that thing called "the media" and artists of different descriptions who come to town with impossible projects which, they know, can only possibly become true in a city that embraces crazy endeavours.

In this land of Nevermore, the predominantly young population with limited means has forced the enormous cultural offer to remain very affordable. We have to remember that Berlin was not long ago two cities with, at least, two of everything: two opera houses, two national galleries, two concert halls, two state libraries and, of late, exciting new venues (tents, restored beer breweries, old abandoned swimming pools) that encompass all the performing arts. »



This pair of non-identical twins with a common origin cannot decide whether to love or hate each other, so they just ignore one another and get on with their own businesses. This rivalry has contributed to the very reasonable prices which enabled me to discover another of my favourite spots, the Staatsoper. This opera house in the shape of a jewellery-box has an exquisitely kitschy baroque architecture and an ever-changing repertoire of opera classics often with very daring productions. More than the music or the architecture, I have to confess I love waltzing into a Temple of Art having paid a mere €10, little more than I would to go to the cinema.

Now, cinema is another Berlin must. Not only is "Gestern bin ich ins Kino gegangen" an easy way out for the thorny question "what did you do at the weekend?" that language teachers almost always pose on Monday morning, it is usually also true. The film listings are overwhelming and comprise everything from Hollywood blockbusters to hallucinatory Bollywood fantasies or obscure Icelandic productions. Germans have yet to discover the joys of films in the original language, but Berlin has a fairly large selection of O.V. cinemas. These cinemas are also incidentally the coolest places, tucked away in squatter houses or in old churchyards, they are the best setting to enjoy a good film in the company of a cold

bottle of German beer. One of my favourite regular cinemas is *the fsk*, in multicultural Kreuzberg. For €4 on a Monday night, *the fsk* not only shows excellent films, in *fsk 1* as a prelude for the film they activate a fountain located just under the screen, which flows for a few seconds, teasing last-minute toilet-goers. In *fsk 2* they show a real-time projection of the man in the projector room loading the film. *fsk* regulars look forward to these two atmospheric event often more than they look forward to the film.

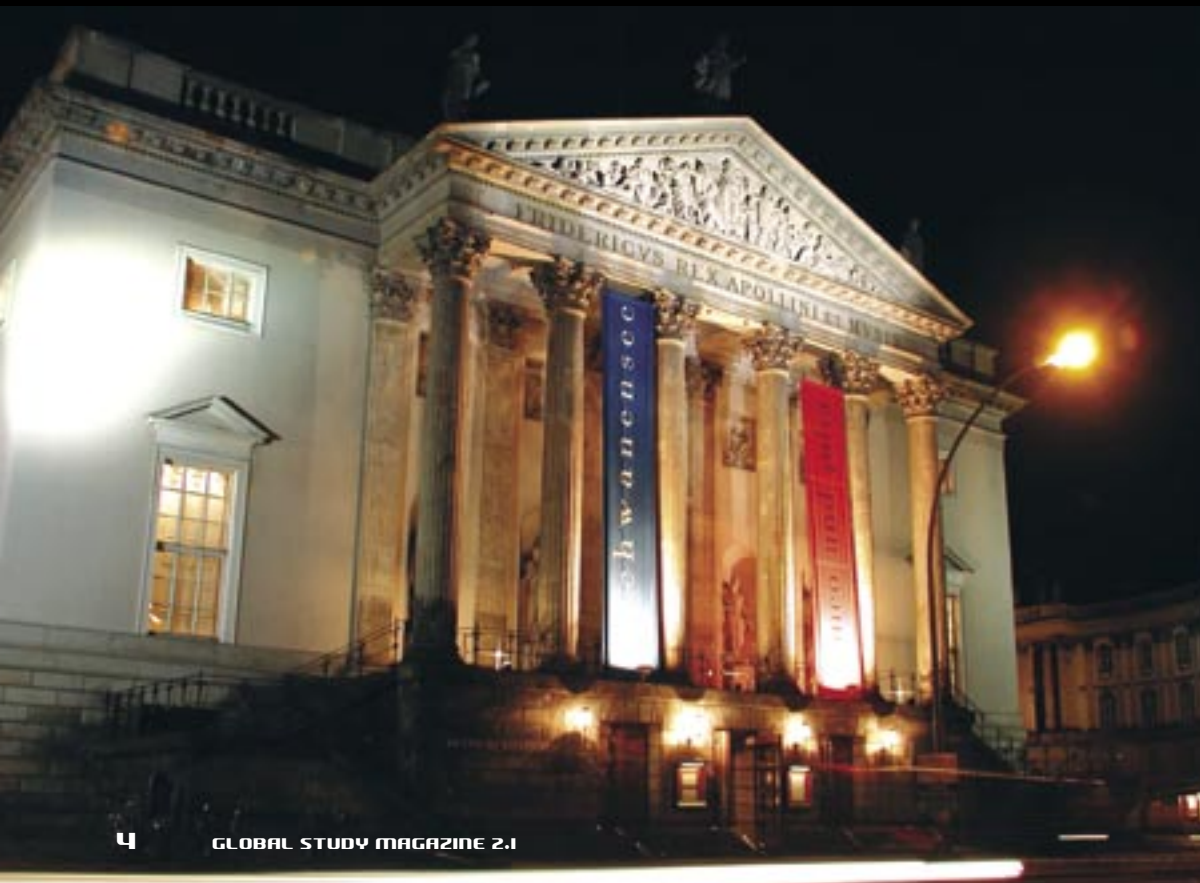
If you are a film fan, specially into thrillers and espionage and you decide to come to Berlin, don't forget to book your flight to Tempelhof airport. A mammoth of a building, this relique was where the air lift organised by the Allies to prevent west Berliners from starving during the boycott was coordinated from. Despite its massive proportions it has a quaintly small check-in area cum arrivals lounge cum departures-hall with original 1950s neon signs. Waiting for your flight, you have the sneaky feeling someone will be handing you a microfilm over any second. And when you make your successful escape and board the plane to, say, Rio de Janeiro you will take off so close to the surrounding buildings of the neighbouring district of Schöneberg, you will instinctively duck your head and say a little prayer.

A great place to go to for a stroll and to spot young Berliners carefully cultivating a particular look, may that



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**“The Staatsoper in the shape of a jewellery-box has an exquisitely kitschy baroque architecture and an ever-changing repertoire of opera classics often with very daring productions”**



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be naïve, punk, sporty etc. are the Flea-markets (Trödlmärkte). Whether it is environmentally-friendly fresh pasta, wacky designer clothes at very democratic prices, the kinder egg surprise you always wanted or some retro lamp for your new apartment you will be sure to find it. My personal favourite is Treptower Hallentrödlemarkt. It is Berlin's largest, most bizarre bazaar selling the unimaginable (from 1984 remote controls to industrial-size waffle makers) and sits by the river next to the very popular Treptower Park. This park contains an enormous Soviet Memorial to which I always end up head over after market-browsing, indulging in a wave of OSTalgia.

Ostalgia, from the word ost, east in German, is Berlin's own brand of retro. Retro, funky furniture, the type that looked so uncool in our parents' living room is a popular feature of night-time hangouts around the world these days. What gives Berliner



Szeneclubs like Klub der Republik or Café Moskau (these might not be their names next week) their own flavour is the playful recreation of the brave new world that came to an end with the fall of the wall. Bars and clubs take for their décor the icons that were a holy trademark of the fallen regime which after 1989 were there for the taking (original murals, busts, food brands only found in the east) and heretically empty them of any political or negative connotations, bring to life a colourful GDR that never really existed.

One of the icons of east Berlin which cannot be fitted into any bar has to be the TV tower (Fernsehturm). This enormous construction was built in the 1960s as a challenge from the GDR authorities to the western world, trying to prove that they could also attain incredible technical feats (unfortunately, they had to call in Swedish engineers to finish off the works). Visible from almost every part of town its friendly big brother, relentless presence gives you the feeling you are always close to home in a city of 50 km<sup>2</sup>. Its rotating restaurant may serve mediocre overpriced coffee but its kitschy charm as well as the awesome views make a visit worth every cent. I am sure to take a candle with a TV tower motif back home when I leave town as foundational stone for my own ostalgia corner. That is, if I leave, and don't get caught up in some insane enterprise.

My favourite spot to cross over from east to west (and vice-versa) is the Oberbaumbrücke. This very disneyesque red brick construction, topped by spiralling pointy turrets is one of many bridges over the Spree (Berlin's river). Crossing over it you can enjoy marvellous views of the old Berlin docks and the little-visited old industrial river banks and some breathtaking sunsets. As if that was not enough, whilst you catch your breath you might want to stop and follow a game of neon 'scissors, paper, stone.' Each of the neon contesting hands that make up this wacky artistic installation represent one of the two vibrant districts joined by the bridge: Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain an up-and-coming eastern area with a population with an average age of around 25. Not more than 15 years ago this bridge was a cul de sac, all accesses blocked by the Berlin Wall.

Very close to the Oberbaumbrücke is the East Side Gallery, the largest remaining section

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Opposite: Staatsoper; IMAX Cinema. This page: Brandenburger Tor; Fernsehturm; Students on Oberbaum Bridge

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of the wall. Reputed, as well as unknown artists, have left their mark along the wall with graffiti-like paintings inspired by the terrible destiny of a divided city and the hope brought by reunification. Along the wall you can also get a GDR stamp on your passport by a man dressed like a border policeman if you fall for that sort of touristy nonsense (I got mine last week). If it is the real wall you are after you will not find it in the east side gallery, though. To visit a well-preserved section, you will have to head to Bernauer street. There you will find an intact section of the wall and an example of a watch tower but also the beautifully simple Church of Reconciliation. This temple, constructed using exclusively ecological materials, such as adobe and wood, was built a few years ago to replace the original building which got trapped in the death strip between both walls. Access to it denied to the devout for decades and the GDR army blew it up towards the end of the Regime.

If there is something that the wall could not keep out was snow which fell and continues to fall on the east and the west alike. West Berliners claim it is colder in the east but I am sure that is a psychological after-effect of the cold war. I guess for Berliners from either side of town, it would be nice to spend winter somewhere that was not just slightly warmer than the surface of

Mars, but coming from Madrid the atmosphere of a silent, enigmatic city covered in an immaculate blanket of white, just adds to the atmosphere. When temperatures rise and the sun peeks out, hundreds of those idle young Berliners fill the streets. They stubbornly decide that the sun shining shyly means spring is here and they invade outdoor cafés with beaming smiles probably frozen into place. Once it gets warm Berlin offers a great variety of open-air activities. Not being very sporty I could not tell you exactly what you can do to get rid of those extra kilo you put on during those winter days and nights spent hibernating in cafés and bars. I personally will opt for trying to melt them away lying in the sun on the shore of one of Berlin's innumerable lakes.

I am sure with time I will discover many more favourite things about Berlin with time. In very few other places there are so many articles and literature devoted to a city as there are in Berlin about Berlin. This constant self-analysis will sooner or later have a lethal effect on the freshness of this big project called Berlin, so, if you don't want to miss out on one of the most happening spots in not-so-lonely planet Europe, pack your suitcases and come over before it is too late. You may help to ruin the place, but if you don't, someone else will, and you might even add to its multicultural flair. 