

The Berlin Feeling

Berlin is a city that conjures up strong images: Prussians and Kaisers, an outrageous nightlife, Nazi rallies, bombed-out buildings, Soviet tanks, the Wall and the May Day riots. It has risen again from a chaos of ruins, survived 40 years of division and reinvented itself as the capital of a unified Germany. Now the message is “Berlin is poor but sexy”, a shabby-chic city ravaged by graffiti, a place where creativity can flourish, but whose reputation remains dubious. Its past evokes feelings of horror and fascination and the present is a potent mix of glamour and seediness. The cultural scene is diverse and dynamic and the variety of cityscape and landscape is breathtaking.

When Mark Twain came to live in Berlin in 1890 he was struck by its beauty and size. He wrote: “It is a new city, the newest I have ever seen . . . The next factor that strikes one is the spaciousness, the roominess of the city.” Over two hundred years later 21st century Berlin is a fledgling metropolis once again. It is also a vibrant patchwork of boroughs and districts – small worlds that are at the heart of Berlin’s survival and revival.

My own love affair with Berlin started during the Cold War, over a weekend in August 1974. I travelled there by British Military train through the ‘enemy territory’ of East Germany. Our carriages were locked and armed guards stood by the doors. Left on my own for a day, I tried to get a feel for the city. First stop was the Brandenburg Gate with the bizarre sight of the Berlin Wall blocking it off and slicing the city in half. The Reichstag stood just inside West Berlin; a gloomy, blackened façade, stranded on a battle front.

On the barren wasteland of Potsdamer Platz there were tour buses clustered around the makeshift souvenir stands and together with all the coach trippers I climbed the viewing platform to stare across the bleak expanse of the death strip into East Berlin. At Checkpoint Charlie there were still more tourists, taking photos of the border crossing and filing past the escape stories in the museum.



Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche, Charlottenburg

In the afternoon the gleaming splendour of Charlottenburg Palace and its manicured gardens seemed surreal in contrast to the greyness of the morning. There was a lively street market in full swing across the road and the sun shone on the pavement cafés. West Berlin now seemed a light-hearted, happy place. A night out on Kurfürstendamm was a raucous affair, even if the illuminated church ruin seemed to stand in judgment on all the nightclubs and neon signs. I had caught the ‘Cabaret’ mood and knew I wanted to return to this unique city. The streets were wide and tree-lined and there were sparkling lakes and deep green forests on the way in and out of the city centre. Yet behind the Wall there was another Berlin, unknown territory harbouring faded Prussian and Imperial glory, just waiting to be discovered.

Ten years later I got my wish and came to live in West Berlin for two years. My job as feature writer for the British newspaper was a dream assignment; being paid to write about a city I was hooked on. I had free access to East Berlin and was able to explore the suburbs as well as the historic centre. Here were cobbled streets full of pot-holes and crumbling façades that bore the scars of war. I also worked as a tourist guide, accompanying coach loads of visitors to see the main sights of both West and East Berlin. My script included sensational details about Hitler’s Berlin and the



Potsdamer Platz, Tiergarten/Mitte

Communist enemy behind the Berlin Wall. But I found I didn't want to exaggerate the city's dark side. I wanted people to understand it, not fear it. The Berliners I met had a sardonic sense of humour that had seen them through hard times and their city had become mine too.

When I had to move on, in my suitcase was a souvenir given to me by a Berlin friend. It was a small metal bear with one foot in Berlin. Marlene Dietrich famously sang that she still had a suitcase in Berlin, but it was 30 years before she returned to her native city after leaving for Hollywood in 1930. My suitcase has gone back and forth countless times over the years. I was there to see the fall of the Wall and have followed every pang of the German capital's rebirth.

Berlin is still recreating itself, a place where the possibilities are endless and anyone can join the party. In 1800 German novelist Jean Paul described Berlin as, 'more a part of the world than a city'. Today this is truer than ever. If you can embrace the clash of cultures that is the lifeblood of the city, then you will find it endlessly fascinating. That is the Berlin feeling.