

TRAVEL





BERLIN

A City That Has Shaken Off Its Heavy Past



Government offices

Escape the sticky heat of Seoul this summer and head for Europe's coolest capital, Berlin. Also one of Europe's youngest capitals, Berlin has a unique maturity that enables it to embrace both its history and its future. In contrast to its heavy past, Berlin today is stylish and trendy with something to offer every visitor: museums and art galleries; opera, theater and dance; shopping, restaurants and nightclubs; historic sights and monuments. Summer is a good time to visit Berlin not only because of the beautiful weather but also because it is less crowded due to Berliners leaving town for their own holiday.

There are a variety of ways to see Berlin: by foot, river or canal, cruise, by bicycle, or by bus and train. But because Berlin is laid out on such an epic scale you may want to divide your sightseeing into geographic clusters to save time and your legs. A good way to get a feel of the city is to take the local Bus 100 that runs between the Zoological Gardens and Alexanderplatz. This provides an overview of the city including several major monuments. At the end of the route continue on local Bus 200 to complete your self-guided tour. Now you can decide where you want to explore more completely. I chose a stroll in the Tiergarten which was once a Prussian royal hunting ground.

Crisscrossed with footpaths leading to tranquil lakes, mature woodlands and English-style gardens, the park's calm composed me for the landmarks of Germany's darker history. The most prominent were just minutes from the Tiergarten and yes, I refer to the Reichstag, the Brandenburg Gate and the Siegessäule victory column; all illustrations of the triumphs and tragedies of German hubris.

Berlin was created in its present form only in 1920 when the Weimer Republic was proclaimed and the Greater Berlin Act was implemented. This Act united dozens of suburban cities, villages, and estates around Berlin into an expanded metropolis of about 4 million people. Sadly, the city did not have time to bloom before being devastated by war. World War II was followed by the Cold War and the building of the Berlin Wall, that vast concrete and barbed wire topped barrier that cut Berlin in half. Reminders of those dark days are still seen throughout the city. Tourists queue daily for photographs beside the Checkpoint Charlie replica with its famous sign "You are now leaving the American sector." And who can forget November 1989 when the world watched on television as the wall fell?

Close by Checkpoint Charlie is the most familiar site in Berlin,



Reichstag dome view

the neo-classical Brandenburg Gate. This potent symbol of German reunification is very beautiful at dusk when the light bathes its Doric columns in gold. Locals gather here for special events such as when U.S. President Barack Obama recently gave a political speech. The majesty of the inspiring Roman Quadriga and goddess of victory on top made me pause and look up every time I passed by.

A somber Berlin landmark is the Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe. Just a short walk from the Brandenburg Gate these 2,711 dark concrete slabs, in gloomy, narrow alleyways, are a moving tribute to victims of the Holocaust. Underneath the site an extensive information center tells the history of the Holocaust through photographs, personal documents and film. After this emotional experience I took a contemplative walk to the Reichstag.

Do not be disheartened by the long lines at the Reichstag because Germanic efficiency will move you through the entrance within an hour and you can stay as long as you like. There is no admission fee, and it is well worth the wait to take the lift to the crystalline dome for a 360-degree aerial view of the city. The Reichstag, which mirrors the turbulent German history of the

last 100 years, was originally built to represent the newly-founded German Reich. It saw the transition of Germany from a monarchy to a Republic in 1918. In 1933 it was partly destroyed by a fire that was used as evidence by the Nazis that Communists were plotting against the government. The Reichstag regained its original significance with Berlin's appointment as the new capital in 1990 after unification, and the German Parliament sits there today.

But Berlin is not just landmarks, parks and culture. If you visit in early July you can join the famous "Loveparade." Festive floats are created by club and party organizers who bring their own DJs. They create a musical cacophony for the people who, often wearing little more than body paint, dance alongside, blowing whistles. The first parade of just 150 revelers was held in Berlin in 1989. Now you will join more than a million fellow revelers if you choose to follow the floats in celebration of Love, Freedom and Techno!

If you prefer more traditional music you should book a night at the Staatsoper (State Opera). Commissioned by Frederick the Great it has had a somewhat troubled past having been burned down in 1843 and completely destroyed not once, but twice,





Friedrichstrabe Canal



Berlin Philharmonic

during World War II. But the building was restored and its columned façade and opulent interior embodies the grandeur of its origins. I saw an excellent production of *Tristan and Isolde* under the baton of Berlin resident Daniel Barenboim, and felt very much a Berliner as I mingled with the locals at intermission munching on huge warm pretzels.

A contrasting architectural delight is the unique, pentagonal-shaped, 1963 structure that is home to the Berlin Philharmonic. Hans Scharoun, the designer, described the auditorium as a landscape where banks of angled seating become “vineyards” sloping into the “valley” of the stage and the ceiling a “skyscape” floating above. Because none of the seats is more than 100 feet from the stage it is quite intimate, and boasts the finest acoustics in the world. Current U.K. director Sir Simon Rattle is admirably filling the shoes of his illustrious predecessors Herbert von Karajan and Claudio Abbado. However, if you want to see Sir Simon conduct it is best to book online before you arrive because his performances sell out quickly.

If you just want the experience of a performance in this iconic concert hall, you can join the Tuesday afternoon queues for tickets that can cost as little as €20. The orchestra ends its

season with an open-air concert in June. Berliners bring champagne, salmon and caviar; light candles then lie on rugs listening to popular classical pieces. Berliner Luft is traditionally sung last and so passionate is the audience the orchestra is barely audible as all join in. So, if you are in Berlin this June include this superb night under the stars with the Berlin Philharmonic.

If you like what Frederick the Great did with the Staatsoper, then journey by train from the city center to Potsdam and spend the entire day at Park Sanssouci, the neo-renaissance summer palace of Frederick the Great. Here he created his own Versailles. One of the highlights of my stroll through the 700 acres of landscaped gardens was the circular Chinese Teahouse. I was drawn to this lustrous, gilded pavilion from a distance and enjoyed discovering how it started out as a tea room and summer dining room.

After a day of sightseeing why not sample some typical Berlin food? Perhaps try Havel-Zander, a pan-fried perch with a vegetable sauce and onions? Or try Brandenburger Landente, stuffed duck served with red cabbage and potato dumplings. Eating out in Berlin is expensive but I started most days at the



Potsdamer Platz

local bakery buying warm Schrippen (bread rolls) then picked up fresh items from a local supermarket. I rented a modern apartment within walking distance to the main boulevard, Unter den Linden, so that I could live like a Berliner. Many evenings I strolled to a Kneipe to mingle with Berliners and eat excellent, reasonably-priced meals. These dark-panelled beer houses serve excellent beers and popular meals are Kasseler Nacken (salted and dried pork) served with cabbage and potatoes and Eintopf (a rich stew of broth, green vegetables, potatoes, and meat or sausage). If you are in Berlin in September you may be lucky enough to experience the local Oktoberfest celebration. This Holy Grail for beer lovers offers the chance to enjoy a beer with succulent, hot chicken for only €5. While there try Berliner Weisse mit Schuss, a lager that continues fermenting in the bottle and is served with raspberry cordial.

Yes, the German food is as heavy as it sounds but you can become "ein Berliner" and bicycle to balance out the calories. Berlin is eight times the size of Paris but very flat and caters to bike riders. Explore on your own, or join a local guide who will choreograph the tour to allow for photographs and exploring. This is an excellent way to see monuments such as

communism's founders, Marx and Engels, as well as the area where Jewish businesses were destroyed during the infamous Kristallnacht (the Night of Broken Glass). The imposing Treptower Park Soviet Cenotaph with its Stalinist propaganda reliefs is the site where more than 5,000 Soviet troops are buried. One of the most popular bike tours is to Hitler's bunker but this was to be permanently closed after my visit so check first if it is on your list.

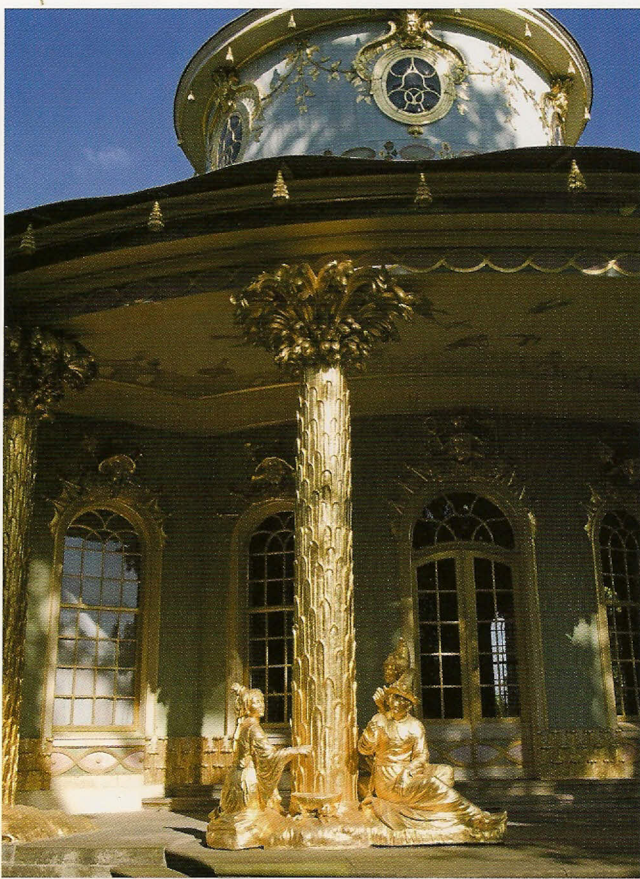
I was in Berlin for a week before I felt ready to visit Sachsenhausen Memorial. I was unsure how I would feel about Germany's first concentration camp. However, after travelling independently by local train and bus I walked for many hours through the complex that started housing prisoners in 1933 and became a place of mass murder including the shooting of more than 10,000 Soviet prisoners-of-war in 1941. Interactive multimedia detailed stories of the prisoners and a 20-minute film related what happened here to the broader historical developments between 1933 and 1945. It brought back how I felt as a child watching movie screens in horror as the war stories from Germany devastated us.

Next day was sunny and enticed me on a boat cruise that





Oktoberfest Tent



Chinese Teahouse

crisscrossed Berlin—a relaxing alternative to busy streets and crowded buses. Advised that the English commentary was not particularly good, I opted for a German language cruise because it was somewhat cheaper and more extensive. Armed with an excellent English map I was nonetheless able to follow each landmark. It was memorable to glide past the Bauhaus-Archiv with time to take in the harmony of the streamlined buildings that illustrate the most influential art institution of the 20th century. The highlight of the cruise was Museumsinsel (Museum Island). The island got its name from the internationally renowned museums that occupy the island and the cruise offered a wonderful view of the neo-baroque Berliner Dom. Originally a residential area dedicated to art and science the collections were turned into a public foundation, the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), in 1918.

Berlin is such a wonderful place to be. It has world famous universities, research institutes, sporting events, orchestras, museums, art galleries and personalities. The city is recognized for its festivals, diverse architecture, nightlife, contemporary arts and high quality of living. According to the guidebooks it is a global focal point for young individuals and artists attracted by a liberal lifestyle and modern zeitgeist. I was captivated and am already planning a return visit. *Bis Später* **A**



Humboldt University



Sachsenhausen Memorial



Neue Synagoge



North Berlin Dance Club