

basking in
berlin:
...one travelgirl's journey

by Jan Schroder



PHOTO BY HAROLD HOVER

berlin is the place I'll go if I ever want to spike my hair and dye it purple. I'd wear black fishnet stockings and dresses from recycled antique linen, and live in a "pre-wall" building with a graffiti-emblazoned exterior and a contemporary art-filled interior. And I would fit right in. One of the charming things about Berlin is that everybody seems to fit in.

Berlin is not a beautiful city. There is plenty of street art covering the crumbling facades of old buildings and any greenery had yet to emerge during our late-winter visit. But out of the rubble of World War II and the schism formed by being split by a wall for 28 years, a fascinating city has emerged, bursting with creativity. Fueled by the thousands of young artists flocking to the city, Berlin has taken its place on the European fashion stage alongside Paris, Milan and London, while also becoming a center for contemporary art.

Affordability is one of the key elements to Berlin's ongoing renaissance. It's relatively cheap to live here — a plus for the approximately 10,000 international artists who call the city home. The mayor of this capital city of 3.4 million, Klaus Wowereit, accidentally came up with a slogan that has been proudly adopted by its residents: "Berlin, poor but sexy."

My first visit to Berlin focused on art, fashion and shopping.

The Art Scene: From Nefertiti to Chairman Mao

Our first glimpse of Berlin's art scene was during a driving tour where we stopped at the East Side Gallery, the longest outdoor gallery in the world. This nearly mile-long stretch of the still-standing portion of the Berlin Wall is split into sections, each painted by a different artist. I found this particularly moving, as during the 28 years the city was divided, the East side of the wall was entirely gray. (For a fascinating look at what life was like in East Germany when the wall was up, rent *The Lives of Others*, filmed in 2006.)

The 45-ton Molecule Man sculpture was created by American artist Jonathan Borofsky and has been on display since 1999. He said, "For me, this hundred-foot tall aluminum sculpture composed of three figures meeting in the center, not only refers to the lightness inside our own solid bodies, but also the figures joining in the center, refer to the molecules of all human beings coming together to create our existence. This symbolism is especially poignant for this 100-foot Molecule Man on the Spree River in Berlin since the river marked the division between East and West Berlin."



PHOTO BY BERND BORCHARDT

Street art has gained such popularity here, the city even hosted the Stroke Art Fair last October, welcoming artists from around the world. Here's just one example of Berlin's acceptance of urban art: one young street artist from Belgium painted four 20-foot rats climbing a rope on the side of an apartment building. And the owners like it.

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One of the newer buildings in East Berlin was constructed by Thomas Olbricht, an art collector who wanted to display a portion of his vast collection to the public. Open since last May, me Collectors Room Berlin is a two-story showroom

that also houses a café where we enjoyed delicious homemade fare, including lentil soup that was especially welcome on a chilly, rainy day. Even the tables here are art; the benches are constructed of repurposed pommel horses and the long dining table is constructed of a single tree.

Some of the café food is tied to rotating exhibition themes. Cupcakes were served to coincide with the American exhibition "X-Rated" by William N. Copley. (Sorry, but we can't show you any images!) It was a curious connection that I chose not to delve into beyond looking at the menu. The target audience for me Collectors Room Berlin is people who don't normally attend exhibitions. The home-like setting has plenty of seating.

To soak up more of the city's contemporary art vibe, one afternoon I took Berlin's public transportation, the U-Bahn, to the Hamburger Bahnhof, housed in a former railway terminal. I particularly enjoyed the collection of Dr. Erich Marx, which includes works by five artists of the late 20th century. Andy Warhol's portrait of Mao set against a purple polka-dotted



wall is one exceptional piece.

Museum Island is where you'll find more traditional art, showcased in five museums containing everything from 19th-century art in the Old National Gallery to sculptures and Byzantine art in the Bode Museum. The Pergamon Museum, known for its archaeological holdings, is one of most popular attractions in Berlin. In the Neues Museum, which reopened in 2009 for the first time since being bombed in World War II, you'll find everything from the 3,400-year-old bust of Queen Nefertiti to a portion of barbed wire from the Berlin Wall.

Travelgirl tip: Save money with the 3-Day Berlin Museum Pass, good at 60 museums on three consecutive days. There's even a museum devoted to Berlin's beloved street snack, the currywurst, a pork sausage slathered in a curry/ketchup sauce, often inexplicably served with champagne.

Create your own free tour of the city's art scene by visiting some of the 450 art galleries that draw collectors from around the world. The galleries are spread throughout the city, but you

can find several on Auguststrasse in the Mitte district, referred to as the "East Berlin art mile."

The Fashion and Shopping Scene: Hip, Hot and Hard to Describe

That's how the Berlin fashion scene has often been referred to and I concur with that assessment. My foray into this vibrant scene was helped by the shopping package offered by my hotel, the beautiful Hotel Concorde Berlin, which included discounts, maps and a "Shopping for the Insiders" booklet. Armed with that and a knowledgeable guide, we set out on foot for a shopping and fashion tour, starting with the small gem C'est Tout. The store

Opposite page: There's definitely an element of fun about the me Collectors Room Berlin. Guests can pile up on big foam ottomans and make seating arrangements in the area above the gift shop. The light-filled room overlooks a small neighborhood park. Above left: A travelgirl could spend an entire day at KaDeWe department store and still not experience everything. End the day sipping in style with a stop at one of four champagne bars. Right: We may think of it as graffiti, but in Berlin it's "urban art" and part of the rich culture of the city since reunification.



was opened in 2001 by the young designer Katja Fuhrmann and her husband Michael Will and is one of two locations for the boutique in Berlin, the second being in East Berlin. The collection is mostly dresses made of gorgeous, soft, fluid fabrics. Put on a pair of Spanx, or two, and any woman would look effortlessly chic in one of these.

“Katya wanted to create dresses for the big entrance as well as the small moving moments of every day,” said saleswoman Anuschka Lemmens, who looks like a model herself. The clothes are all made in Germany, with many silk and hand-painted fabrics. The gorgeous shop is one of those sparingly filled places where you figure one dress will set you back a mortgage payment. So I was shocked to find lovely dresses in the \$120 range.

Our next stop was the queen bee of shopping in Berlin, the 100-year-old KaDeWe department store. It’s hard to describe its massive scale, so here are a just a few numbers: KaDeWe has eight floors, 400,000 different items, 2,000 employees, 64 escalators and 50,000 visitors a day. Oh, and the largest lingerie

and deli departments in Europe.

Making the most of my limited time, I explored the gourmet floor where 150 chefs and 500 staff oversee departments that include the pasta bar, champagne bar, seafood bar, deli, pastry section and creperie. Overwhelmed by the scale of it all, (and its 34,000 items for sale!) I retreated to the first floor, colorfully decorated for spring, where I purchased a small gnome on a stick, a whimsical and affordable souvenir.

To get an insider’s take on the local fashion scene, we took an “Art+Fashion” tour through the Mitte section in East Berlin with Maria, a guide from GoArt!. She explained that the art scene really began when the wall fell. There were a lot of empty spaces in old buildings in East Berlin, which weren’t considered desirable because they had no central heat or private baths, so suddenly a lot of cheap living space became available.

Berlin had been a center for fashion prior to World War II when workers in Berlin sewed many of the couture clothes for Parisian shops. But most people in the industry were Jewish and



left Berlin prior to or were killed during the war. After the wall came down, the fashion industry was reborn, with most Berlin labels also being manufactured in the city.

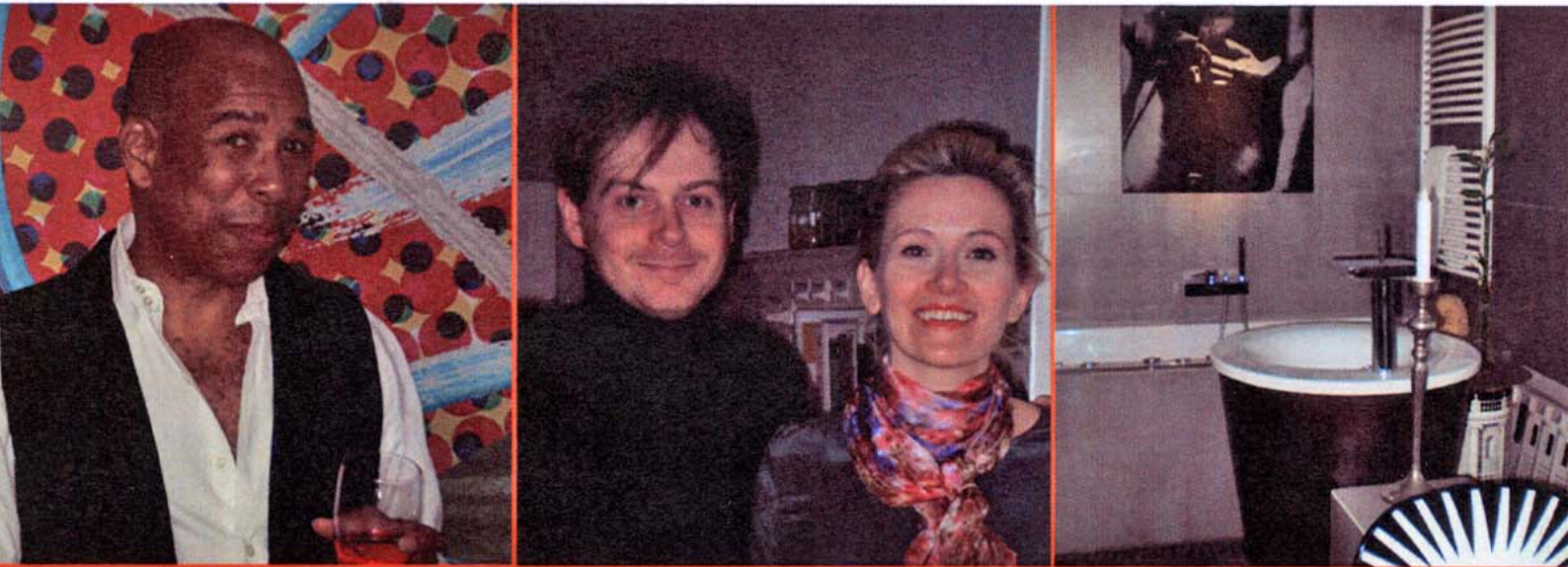
Our tour took us down a street called Mulackstrasse where we visited shop after shop of independent boutiques. After a stop at Mayer, I was ready to shuck my boring American clothes and drape myself in the beautiful recycled clothes made with antique linens. We found a portable knit lamp (Ilot llov); shoes covered in glitter (StarStyling), a shop that sells “contemporary clothing for the twilight zone,” (Butterfly Soulfire) and one that only carried clothes in red, white and black (Firma). In Ha Duong, we saw the Vietnamese-born designer herself working in a back room, where she creates sophisticated evening gowns.

We took a quick detour to peek inside the Clärchens Ballhaus, a proudly unrenovated 100-year-old dance club that survived the war and is open daily, offering dance classes, concerts and dance nights. I’d love to return in the summer and dance the night away, pausing for refreshment in the beer garden in

the courtyard.

When I think of Berlin, I’m reminded of the French expression “jolie-laide,” used to describe an unconventional, transcendent beauty. There was no love at first sight for me, but I was quickly charmed by the city’s wild creativity, sexiness and vibrancy. It’s probably for the best that my time and budget were limited, or I could easily have reinvented myself with the emerging fashions, and shipped containers of contemporary art home.

Opposite page: Every room at the centrally located Hotel Concorde Berlin has at least three windows and a window seat, huge walk-in closet and free wi-fi. This 1200-foot TV tower is a symbol of Berlin. Above from left: Anuschka Lemmens holds up one of the many gorgeous dresses at C’est Tout, a beautiful and affordable boutique with two locations in Berlin. There are no turnstiles in Berlin’s subway, but don’t get caught without a ticket! You’d have to walk almost a mile to take in the entire stretch of the East Side Gallery where more than 100 artists painted sections in 1990, shortly after the rest of the wall came down. Suffering from age and vandalism, the entire wall was restored in 2009. Christian Schulz and David Regehr took over Clärchen’s Ballhaus in East Berlin in 2005 and turned it into a successful dinner and dance club for all age groups. Champagne soup and lobster and risotto with scallop and fried grouper at Balthazar.



Insiders View: Why They Love Berlin

When I visit a city I often find my mind wandering as I am peeking behind the curtains and through the doorways of the homes. How do people really live here? During our Urban Insider Tour of Berlin we got to find out exactly how some people live, as we visited their apartments, and found out why they love Berlin.

Edwin Brown, an outrageously extroverted art collector and media networker from Los Angeles, welcomed us into his art-filled penthouse home in the Schöneberg neighborhood. He lives in an apartment building constructed of the rubble from the bombing on Berlin during World War II that has the tiny elevator, lower ceilings and smaller rooms typical of that era of construction. He shared with us why he splits his time between here and the United States with his partner Louis.

"I just happened to be in Berlin the day the wall came down," he said. "Everyone was screaming, 'We are free, we are free!' and I thought this is where I want to be. And it is so affordable here. I can't buy a garage door in L.A. for what I can get an apartment here. There is a great international community, I don't need a car and there is great shopping, food and culture. What more do you need?"

Edwin appreciates that most everyone speaks English and because of the city's history, he believes it is a tolerant place. "Berlin is very open and progressive. Berlin, she's a party girl!"

Caroline and Sam Hopkinson moved from Sam's native London to live in the Kreuzberg neighborhood of Berlin, where they live with their daughter Emilia and are expecting a second child. Sam, a documentary filmmaker, and Caroline, a food artist, welcomed us into their lovely older apartment. Located on the "belle etage," it is on the first floor, considered the most desirable in the years before elevators. The approximately 1700-square-foot apartment features two bedrooms, a small front garden, 14' plus ceilings and an enormous kitchen that still houses the tile oven originally used to heat the flat.

Caroline who is from Cologne, told us why they love living in Berlin. "We fell in love with Berlin. The flats in London are the size of chicken pots. We wanted a bigger flat but couldn't afford one in London. It was a joy to come to Berlin and have a blank canvas to furnish," she said of their furnishings that they bought on their honeymoon in India, found at local flea markets or were constructed by her architect father.

Another attractive element of Berlin is the affordable child-care. "You get a year paid leave when you have a child, children can start kindergarten when they are six months old, and it costs very little. And you are guaranteed a job for three years," she said.

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Above from left: Edwin Brown entertains frequently in his art-filled Berlin apartment. Caroline and Sam Hopkinson in their flat. The updated bathroom in Edwin's post-World War II apartment.

Berlin 411

See

Berlin Tourism

This well-designed site has all the latest information. Find out about the Berlin WelcomeCard here, which includes unlimited public transportation, a guidebook and discounts. www.visitberlin.de/en

This summer marks the 50th anniversary of the construction of the 99.4-mile-long Berlin Wall, with several events and exhibitions to commemorate it. www.50jahremauerbau.de

Getting Around

Berlin has a reliable public transportation system with the U-Bahn, (the underground) and the S-Bahn, (above ground.) Taxis are readily available and in the warmer months, consider renting a bike. www.bvg.de

Urban Living Tour

www.berlinagenten.com

me Collectors Room Berlin

www.me-berlin.com

Berlin Museums

www.smb.museum

Fashion Tour

Mitte "Art+Fashion" with GoArt!
www.goart-berlin.de

Stay

Hotel Concorde Berlin

Located in City West, the art-filled, Green Globe-certified Hotel Concorde was within walking distance of major attractions. (For more on Hotel Concorde Berlin, please visit *Travelgirl's* blog at travelgirlsblog.wordpress.com) www.berlin.concorde-hotels.com

Shop

C'est Tout

www.cesttout.de

KaDeWe

www.kadewe.de

Mayer

www.mayer-berlin.com

Ilot Ilov

www.ilotilov.com

Starstyling

www.starstyling.net

Butterfly Soulfire

www.btfsf.com

Ha Duong

www.ha-duong.com

Dine

Literaturcafe

Set in an old brick villa, this café is perfect for a light lunch. In nice weather, try to score a table in the gardens. Be sure to order a

glass of the delicious ginger lemonade, a perfect antidote for jetlag.

www.literaturhaus-berlin.de

Cookies Cream

Located in a back alley behind the Westin Grand, this small restaurant features an all-vegetarian menu with an ultra-hip vibe. The website features minidress-clad girls strolling through the alley to direct you there.

www.cookiescream.com

Hasir Kreuzberg

Legend has it that döner kebabs, a mixture of Turkish and German traditions, were invented here. No matter where they are from, these huge pieces of pita bread packed with shavings of roasted skewered meat, salad and garlic sauce offer a real taste of Berlin.

www.hasir.de

Balthazar

For elegant dining, try the cuisine described as "metropolitan" by Chef Holger Zurbrüggen at Balthazar. The beef and morel risotto was a rich, delicious accompaniment to a perfectly cooked filet, topped off by a dessert of chocolate cake with cherries served with sour cream ice cream with lemon.

www.balthazar-restaurant.de

Brasserie Le Faubourg

Located in Hotel Concorde, this Parisian-style brasserie serves French cuisine. Stop off in the lobby Lutèce Bar for a freshly made cocktail before or after dinner. Even if you're not a beer drinker, try the Berlin Beauty, a raspberry-flavored beer cocktail.

berlin.concorde-hotels.com

Clärchens Ballhaus

www.ballhaus.de

