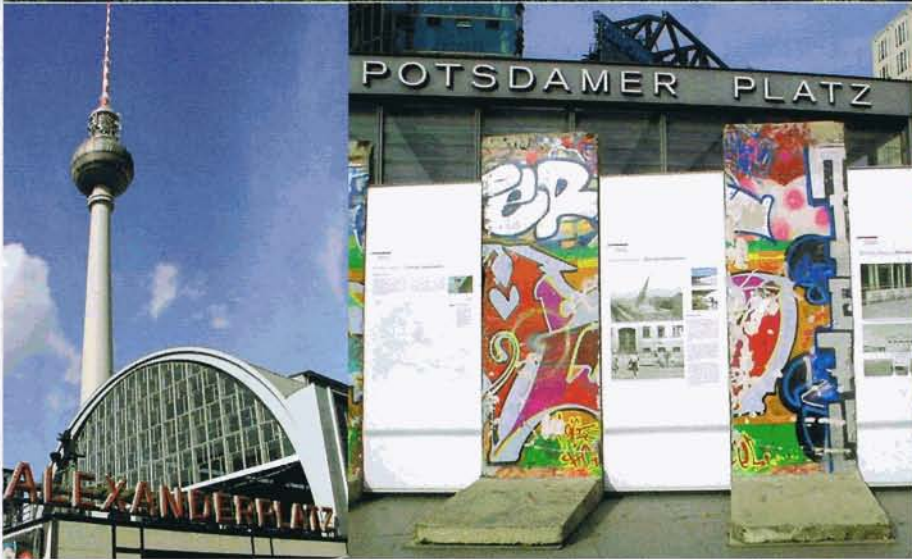


from prussia with love

In 2006 Berlin will host the most important date in the football calendar: the FIFA World Cup. But has Berlin got what it takes to find the back of the net with guests from across the globe? EMILY BALHAM finds out...





Clockwise from the top: The unmistakable Reichstag; Shopping at Hackescher Market; Berlin's heart - the Mitte district; East meets West at the Brandenburg Gate; Another brick in the wall...; Shop 'til you drop at Alexanderplatz

Once a bombed-out city under the control of a maniacal Austrian house painter-cum-chancellor, Berlin has repeatedly risen from history's rubble to become one of the world's most inspirational cities.

Starting life in the 9th century as a small Slavic village (Berolina - "pine forest field") on the banks of the Spree River, by the 14th century it was a burgeoning commercial and trade centre and the seat of the Electors of Mark Brandenburg.

By the 16th century, Berlin flourished as Jews and Huguenots were invited to settle in the city and all went swimmingly until Loki, the Norse/Teutonic God of Fire, thought he'd challenge Berlin's strength by destroying half of the city and a third of its population in 1648.

Over the next several hundred years Berlin survived occupation by Russia, Austria and France and, in 1871, became the Imperial Capital of Prussia. But it was the 20th century that was to have the most impact on the city, seeing Berlin survive World War I, an attempted Communist uprising, World War II and the portentous 155km-long Berlin Wall (1961 - 1989).

But Berlin's fortunes are on the up again; since 1999 it has been reinstated as Germany's capital and today is an innovative political, economical and educational hub. Its lion-hearted inhabitants are vivacious,

intelligent and, despite their stereotypical image, absolutely hilarious (once you learn to understand their acid-tongue sarcasm, that is).

Ich bin ein Berliner!

Despite their tough exterior, Berliners really are an altruistic bunch. A nation of keen recyclers, Berlin is one of the leading European cities when it comes to caring for the environment; new buildings utilise glass and solar power (the UK's Norman Foster's cupola atop the Reichstag being a prime example of both), over a third of the city's area is municipal parkland - providing an abundance of jogging and biking routes as well as boating lakes, bicycles and an efficient public transport system are the chosen modes of transport, and - uniquely - the Green Party (famous for wearing jeans and trainers to parliament in the 1980's) is in the ruling coalition.

And while you are raising a quizzical eyebrow at these seemingly liberal views it's probably worth mentioning that Berlin has a large - and very widely accepted - gay and naturalist community. So don't panic, if say, you're strolling through Grunewald (Green Wood) and you happen to come across someone in their birthday suit. Remember: it's not against the law, it's perfectly natural...

Miscellaneous characters aside, there are also many facets to Berlin with Mitte ("middle")

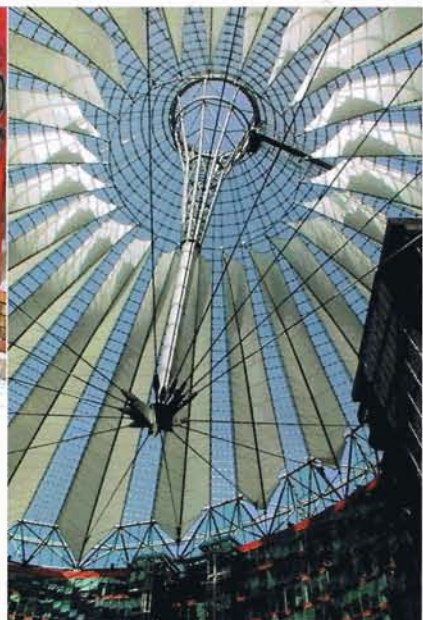
being to many the true heart of Berlin. Beating to the formal way of life are the buildings of architectural, political and cultural significance, such as the Ministry offices, Museumsinsel (Museum Island - UNESCO listed), the theatres and opera. There's historical cadence in the shape of Brandenburger Tor (Brandenburg Gate) - the old East and West boundary - the ominous stelae of the Holocaust Memorial, and the Reichstag parliament building, which from atop provides a stunning 360° view of central Berlin (Skip the notoriously lengthy cues by taking a reservation at the cupola's restaurant - and throw in an element of romance by timing your arrival just before sunset!)

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik

If samba is more your tempo, Oranienburgerstrasse is brimming with cafes, restaurants and clubs. When it's time to play, Berlin has a "no lights out" policy, which means the fun begins and ends when you want, with bars and clubs literally closing when the last person leaves.

Plus, should you need something to wear on your night out, shopping opportunities are nearby at Alexanderplatz and Friedrichstrasse (home to the very swanky Quartier 206).

Or if it's a different kind of animal life you seek, not far from Mitte is the city's largest woodland, Tiergarten (animal garden), and



Left to right: Belsham Center's Parkside Apartments; A different class: East Berlin's graffiti; Modern architecture at the Sony Centre

Potsdamer Platz. This area has evolved as Berlin's own version of a gentrified mini-Manhattan. Here the ultimate in inner-city living (the Parkside and Tower Apartments - by immortalised UK architect Chipperfield) takes place amongst the avant-garde symbols of modern progress: the Beisheim Center, Sony Centre and the DaimlerChrysler building. All the while somehow managing to blend in amongst the history and tradition of the Potsdamer Platz - home of Europe's first traffic signal, for those who may be interested...

Other areas worth spending a day or two exploring are Charlottenburg (Charlottenburg Palace and KaDeWe - Berlin's answer to Harrods, only more elegant and not so elitist); Prenzlauerberg in the old East (Berlin Wall Memorial and Hackesche Höfe, with its eight linked residential and commercial courtyards teeming with artists and up-and-coming fashion designers); and Kreuzberg, where you can visit Haus am Checkpoint Charlie and the emotion invoking Jüdisches Museum (Jewish Museum). With its layout modelled on the broken Star of David, I'd allow quite some time for this museum as it contains 2,000 years of Jewish history, including the 12-year Nazi persecution, art installations and excerpts from personal letters that are sure to have you reaching for a tissue...

There are wurst things

When it comes to dining options, from Michelin starred restaurants through to currywurst stands, Berlin's multicultural population is more than evident in its diverse range of eateries. The old East is a little livelier in character than the refined old West and with so many choices it's hard to know where to start your entrée...

Making this easier, however, is the newly established Berlinagenten (www.berlinagenten.com). Here, the effervescent multilingual guide, Henrik, will take you (along with a small group of other visitors) on a personalised gastronomic adventure through the city, providing a tantalising taste of Berlin's best. As an added bonus, stops are also made en route at some of Berlin's lesser-known landmarks.

Or if you fancy discovering Berlin's secrets for yourself, don't be put-off by Berlin's long, tongue-twisting street names, as navigation is relatively simple. Make use of the U-Bahn (underground), S-Bahn (overground), trams and buses www.berlin-tourist-information.de offers visitors to the city to take advantage of the WelcomeCard which provides 48-72-hours of travel on public transport and up to 50% off cultural highlights).

That said, if Berlin's fresh air leaves you feeling energetic, do as the locals do and jump on a bicycle.

Take my breath away

When it comes to choosing where to rest your head, the suave 5-star Ritz-Carlton (www.ritz-carlton.com), located on the esteemed Potsdamer Platz is the choice. From the outside the building is reminiscent of the Roaring 20's and the Art Deco period, yet the interior reflects Berlin's historical splendour. Its location is superb, being close to local infrastructure and a mere stone's throw from Mitte (a 20-minute amble through Tiergarten will get you there).

There are over 300 guestrooms at the Ritz-Carlton but for the ultimate experience I recommend that you make your stay in a suite on one of the premier Club Floors. These opulent suites indulge guests with city and park views and entitle them to utilise the private library and club lounge, with three food and drink presentations throughout the day.

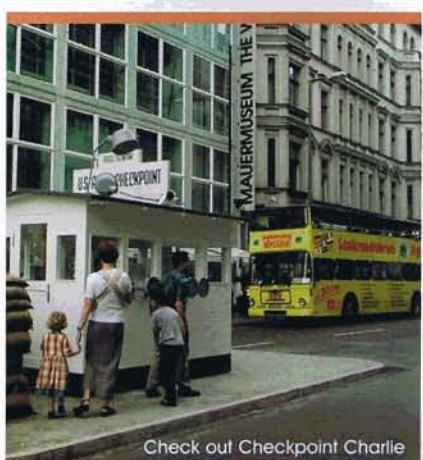
However, for guests in need of something more substantial than 'food presentations' the Ritz-Carlton also boasts Desbrosses, a traditional French brasserie, who's 19th century atmosphere makes it ideal for a relaxed breakfast, lunch or dinner. Or for a formal meal, Vitrum is the RC's Italian-inspired gourmet restaurant, a haute-cuisine menu featuring European influences and a focus on fresh fish and herbs.

After dinner, if the Berlin evening is a little on the moist-side, evening entertainment can be found at the RC's debonair Curtain Club. Here guests can soak up the ambience with fine liquors and wines, with the final sink or swim factor being determined by their extensive choice of Schnapps (over 400 on offer).

Other facilities include a fully equipped gym, swimming pool, sauna and steam room. But for something a little more relaxing, I recommend a visit to The Art of Beauty La Prairie Spa.

Let the games commence

While the dichotomy of Berlin is still present, the gap that once separated East from West is clearly being bridged. Luckily, the free-thinking Berliners aren't all for tearing down and masking their past. Instead its history is left intact and preserved, so that the world may learn from its scars. Having proven time and time again that it's not an ephemeral city, not only will Berlin be able to withstand the hordes of football fans primed to descend on it next year, but it's bound to seduce many of these visitors into becoming fans of it's own too. ■



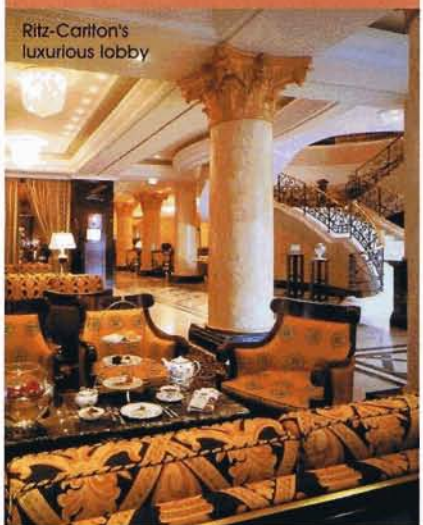
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