where east is west

MODERN BERLIN IS AN AMALGAM OF OPTIMISM AND INTROSPECTION, AND NOWHERE IS THIS MORE EVIDENT THAN IN ITS PUBLIC SPACES AND PRIVATE GALLERIES

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BERLIN IS A CONUNDRUM. On one hand, it's all glitteringly new – a metropolis at the cutting edge of Europe; on the other, it's still stolidly socialist, down at heel and graffiti daubed. Palaces pockmarked by war sit side by side with new buildings of sparkling steel and glass. And having demolished its past with relish, the city has now elaborately restored it in belated remorse.

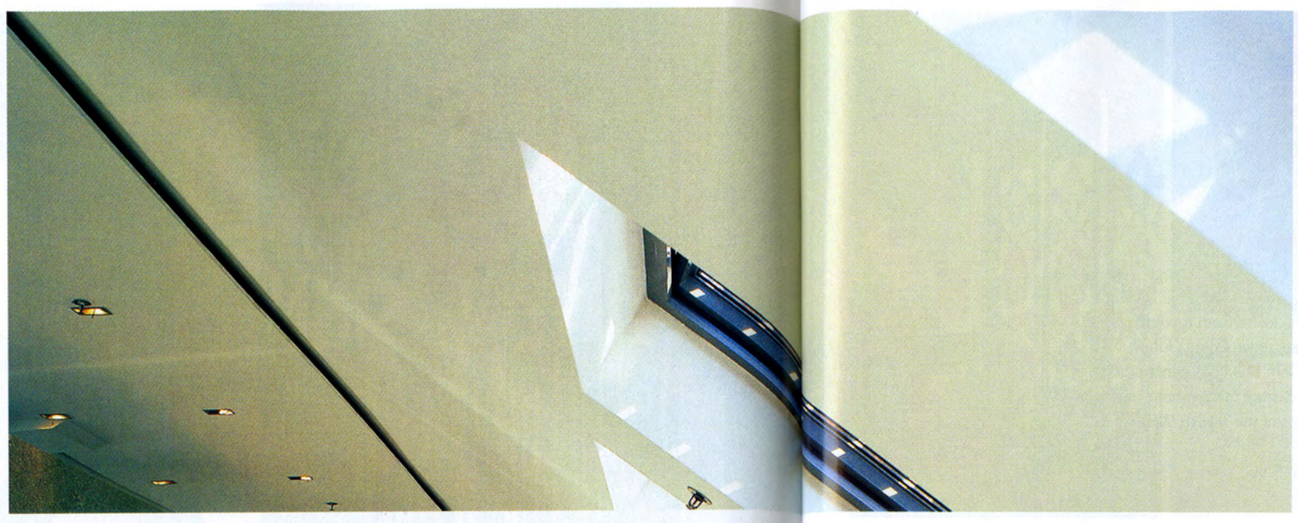
Berlin is also a city where public grandeur contrasts with hidden treasures. For instance, the place to be seen at the moment is a club whose location is only known to members. The recently opened China Club houses a magnificent collection of counter-communist Chinese art. Gorgeous jewel-coloured silks, dark lacquered furniture and windows of painted glass all give the club the feeling of introspection. Cocooned from the outside world, it is a space for private conversations, discreet lunch dates and exclusive parties. But unless you know (or are) a member, you may never find it.

Compare this with Potsdamer Platz. Bombed into oblivion in WWII, the square became a no-man's-land in a divided city, and in the 1990s remained Europe's biggest building site. Now it is a 21st-century commercial centre of soaring glass towers, and is about as open as Berlin gets. Intended as a Times or Trafalgar Square for the reunited city, Potsdamer Platz is a meeting place, a hub for metropolitan life, and is loudly – almost brashly – new.

Berlin's most public treasures include the restored Brandenburg Gate, under which pedestrians can now stroll from the former East's graceful avenue, Unter den Linden; the Reichstag, with Sir Norman Foster's ethereal glass dome; and the museums of the UNESCO World Heritage Museum Island.

Left, from top: art on the East Side Gallery, one of the few surviving remnants of the Wall; a room at the stylish Dorint Hotel; the Dorint Hotel's day spa. Facing page, *Pietà* by Käthe Kolwitz, in the controversial Central Memorial to the Victims of War and Tyranny, housed in the Neue Wache on Unter Den Linden





PALACES POCKMARKED BY WAR SIT SIDE BY SIDE WITH NEW BUILDINGS OF SPARKLING

STEEL AND GLASS ... PUBLIC GRANDEUR CONTRASTS WITH HIDDEN TREASURES







In addition, the nearby Kulturforum includes the Neue Nationalgalerie, an airy glass pavilion designed by Mies van der Rohe. But some of the most exquisite treasures are to be found in Berlin's smaller and newer galleries. Take Olaf Lemke's shop-cum-gallery in the Schöneberg district, which researches, collects and restores only antique picture frames. More than 2500 rare specimens from the 1400s to the 1800s line the walls. The collection is unique in Europe and one of the largest in the world. Wander in through the unassuming shopfront and Lemke himself will guide you around.

Two new Berlin museums, both sublime in architecture, are the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for the Present, housed in a former railway station, and the Jewish Museum, designed by Daniel Libeskind. Under a great, arching glass roof, the Hamburger Bahnhof is drenched with light and white. Displaying works by Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly and Anselm Kiefer, the museum embraces painting, film, photography, graphic arts and sculpture, some of it simply upstaged by the elegance of the space it inhabits.

At the Jewish Museum, the atmosphere is more austere. Designed to represent a Star of David torn asunder, the building is an attraction in itself, with angular steel walls, angled staircases and passageways just off level, intended to impart a sense of disorientation. Deep black scores on the outer walls represent Jewish lifelines: intersected, interrupted, or simply stopping dead. The museum houses two millennia of German Jewish history, and is a unique piece of Berlin not to be missed.

Left, Dorint Hotel day spa. Facing page left, from top: *Berlin Circle* by Richard Long, at the Hamburger Bahnhof, a piece inspired by this converted railway station; Anselm Kiefer's work, *Schechina*, at the Hamburger Bahnhof modern art museum; one of the East Side Gallery images, suffering from exposure to the elements

Facing page, clockwise from top left: interior of the secretive China Club; one of the modern buildings constructed next to the Reichstag; the symbolic paving and wall designs of the Jewish Museum

COURTYARDS HAVE BECOME THE MOST AVANT-GARDE SLICE OF THE FORMER EAST – TODAY AN AREA OF TRENDY CAFES AND SMART BOUTIQUES

The stylish suburb of Mitte contains Jewish history of a different kind: the maze of interconnecting courtyards off Rosenthaler Strasse and Oranienburger Strasse was once the city's Jewish ghetto. Tiny brass plaques stud the cobblestones, commemorating Jewish victims of the Nazis.

After the fall of the Wall, the courtyards became the most avant-garde slice of the former East, a subversive quarter of squalid squats, graffiti and radical art. Today, the area is home to trendy cafes and smart boutiques, tucked away in convoluted spaces. The Hackesche Höfe, a complex of courtyards beautifully restored to their former art nouveau glory, houses a variety of restaurants, galleries and design establishments. One of the best is shoemaker's store Trippen, which displays each handmade item as a work to behold. Around the corner at Hut Up in the Heckmann Höfe, Christine Birkle makes art of a different kind from hand-shaped felt, crafted from boiled merino wool. The result is a fanciful collection of bags, clothes, hats and shoes, with every item unique. Birkle's showpiece is an elegant, feathered dress made of delicate peach-coloured felt.

Mitte also has good food. Cibo Matto, a breezy Italian-inspired restaurant, does fabulous breakfasts and has a fish specialty night each Thursday. At the other extreme is the unsicht-Bar, which is a full-on sensory experience. The unsicht-Bar, which means "invisible" in German, is completely and profoundly dark. Mobile phones and illuminated watches are banned, and guests are served by blind or visually impaired waiters. It still has a fashionable image – even if you don't go there to be seen.

On a lighter note, try the Tadshikische Teestube, a Central Asian treasure tucked away in the Gorki Theatre building in the Palais am Festungsgraben. A gift from Tajikistan to the GDR in 1972, this tearoom is done out in intricately carved sandalwood, draped with luxurious carpets and fabrics, with walls decorated with fairytale scenes. With a small menu of Tajik and Russian specialties and a vast selection of teas, this is an exotic, atmospheric place to while away the hours.

Then there's VÄU near the Gendarmenmarkt, one of the city's prettiest squares. VÄU earned a Michelin star in its first year of operation, and offers some wonderful dishes, such as warm marinated lobster with mango, and an unusual desert of lavender gnocchi with apricot and almond ice-cream.

Finish the evening at Green Door, behind an unassuming exterior in an undistinguished street of the former East. An eclectic bar with an inch-thick drinks menu, Green Door is unpretentious, hip and hidden: another facet of private Berlin.

Also on the Gendarmenmarkt is one of the best places to stay in Berlin. The Dorint Hotel was once a drab guesthouse for the voiceless Christian Democratic Party of the GDR. Now beautifully renovated, this small hotel, with its day spa, sepia colours and warm but restrained design, aims to be as personal as possible. One unusual touch is a bedside switch to play a lullaby from a hidden music box.

The Bleibtreu hotel across town, just off the famous shopping street Kurfürstendamm, is another hidden gem. Set back from the street behind a courtyard housing its restaurant and espresso bar, the Bleibtreu has styled itself as an "eco-hotel". Everything from the paint to the carpets to the food served in the restaurant has been chosen to minimise exposure to chemicals. And, being a member of the international Design Hotels group, it has been done with utmost style. One Bleibtreu highlight is the in-house florist, specialising in rare rose varieties from around the world.

No visit to Berlin would be complete without a pilgrimage to the Wall. However, such is the city's penchant for reinventing itself that, 14 years after reunification, visitors are hard-pressed to locate remaining fragments. The longest-preserved section forms what is known as the East Side Gallery, a 1316m swathe beside a busy road in a run-down industrial area of the former East. Here, recently restored art mingles with peeling old graffiti. Tourists come and gawp, but Berlin life, seemingly oblivious, passes on by. Elsewhere through the city, the route of the old wall is marked simply by a double line of paving stones, barely visible beneath the bustle of a busy metropolis.

Perhaps this is the most eloquent symbol of hidden Berlin: the Wall itself, so long a tragic emblem of the city, has retreated from public view, reduced to just a whisper from a troubled past.







travel details

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WHERE TO STAY

Dorint Hotel am Gendarmenmarkt, Charlottenstrasse 50-52, phone +49 30 20 37 50, www.dorint.de.
Hotel Bleibtreu, Bleibtreustrasse 31, phone +49 30 88 47 44 44, www.bleibtreu.com.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Cibo Matto, Rosenthalerstrasse 44, phone +49 30 28 38 51 70, www.cibomatto.de.
Green Door, Winterfeldstrasse 50, phone +49 30 215 25 15, http://greendoor.de.
Tadshikische Teestube, Palais Am Festungsgraben, phone +49 30 204 11 12, email info@restaurant-moewe.de.
unsicht-Bar, Gormanstrasse 14, phone +49 30 24 34 25 00, www.unsicht-bar-berlin.de.
VÄU, Jägerstrasse 54-55, phone +49 30 202 97 30, www.vau-berlin.de.

MUSEUMS, GALLERIES AND SHOPS

Christine Birkle's Hut Up, Heckmann Höfe, Oranienburger Strasse 32, phone +49 30 28 38 61 05, www.hutup.de.
East Side Gallery, along Mühlenstrasse between Warschauer Strasse and the Hauptbahnhof (main station).
Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for the Present, Invalidenstrasse 50/51, phone +49 30 39 78 34 11, www.hamburgerbahnhof.de.
Jewish Museum, Lindenstrasse 9-14, phone +49 30 25 99 33 00, www.jmberlin.de.
Neue Nationalgalerie, Potsdamer Strasse 50, phone +49 30 266 2651, email nng@smb.spk-berlin.de.
Olaf Lemke, Eisenacherstrasse 7, phone +49 30 212 2087, email info@antike-rahmen.de.
Trippen, Hackesche Höfe, Hof 4&6, Rosenthaler Strasse 40/41, phone +49 30 2804 9359, www.trippen-shoes.com.