

A symbol of Berlin and German division during the Cold War, Brandenburg Gate is now a national symbol of peace and unity

Glamour & grit

As the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the Berlin Wall approaches, **Darren Calpin** spends a weekend in the German city where east meets west

BERLIN: CAPITAL CITY of Spies' boasts the rather dramatic looking promo poster on the concourse wall. Looking around at the uber-cool young Berliners striding purposefully through Friedrichstrasse Station in their leather jackets, it appears Berlin is also the European capital of hipsters.

I exit the clean-as-a-whistle station to clear sunshine and walk along Mitte's busy yet not particularly noisy streets to my nearby hotel. It's immediately clear that this vibrant, cosmopolitan city of 3.5 million people is as agreeable as it is cool, with bustling outdoor cafés and neatly arranged trees lining the tidy pavements.

And yet, this is a city which until relatively recently was blighted by a huge physical scar that came to be the defining symbol of the Cold War. And before that, it was the epicentre of a vengeful form of National Socialism that embroiled the entire world in conflict and took humanity to its darkest possible depths.

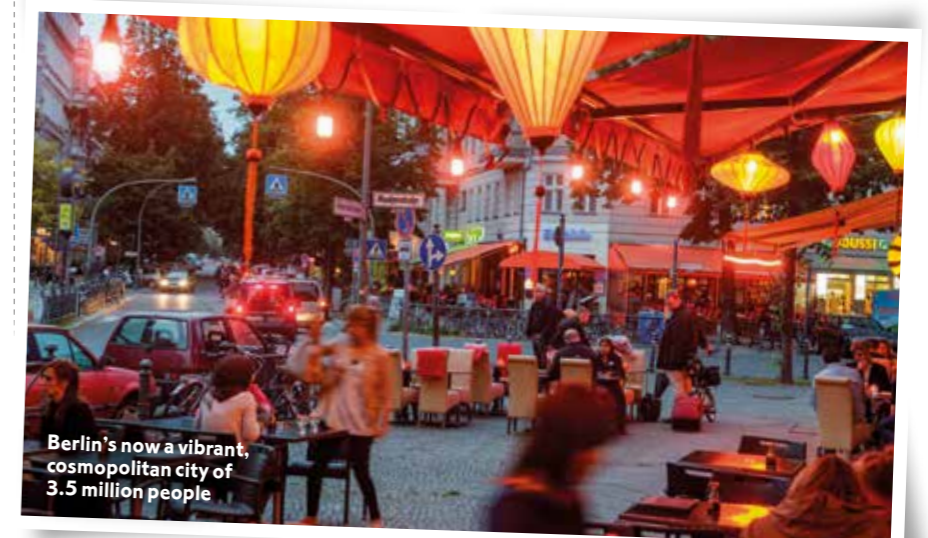
These mind-boggling jolts of recent history pop into my head – as I'm sure they do to most first-time visitors – quite out of nowhere, then disappear again almost as quickly. That was Berlin then; this is Berlin now.

IT'S SHOWTIME

The chief purpose of my flying two-day visit to Berlin is to see a show. And not just any show. Nope; I've got a ticket for the so-called "Hottest show on Earth", the VIVID Grand Show at the prestigious Friedrichstrasse-Palast, which is, quite conveniently, just five minutes' walk from my hotel.

After checking in and freshening up, I head out to grab a casual bite before making my way to the historic 100-year-old theatre. Armed with my 48-hour Berlin Welcome Card (€23) that lets me use any form of public transport, I jump on one of the city's modern yellow trams and head towards the river.

Just 15 minutes later and I'm sitting »



Berlin's now a vibrant, cosmopolitan city of 3.5 million people

outside a quaint little bistro on Schiffbauerdamm with a steaming plate of currywurst and a nice tall glass of Erdinger, watching the pleasure cruisers glide along the River Spree in the early evening sunshine.

BEWARE FRIENDLY LOCALS...

The show blows me away. A bizarre yet irresistible mash-up of Moulin Rouge, Marlene Dietrich, Dirty Dancing, Cabaret, Cirque du Soleil and the Royal Ballet, sprinkled with a dash of David Lynch, Eurotrash, Blade Runner and Stanley Kubrick, just for good measure. Though my body feels tired as I exit the vast 1,895 capacity theatre, my mind and senses are absolutely buzzing.

Thus, I walk straight past my hotel and hit a few bars along nearby Oranienburger Strasse, one of Mitte's livelier nightlife areas.

The vibe is cheery and relaxed and I feel very at ease. As I'm strolling, a stunningly beautiful blonde woman appears, seemingly from nowhere, to tell me (in perfect English) how handsome I am.

A few moments later, another leggy goddess appears, brunette this time. She's very friendly too, enquiring about my general well being with earnest enthusiasm. How friendly the women in Berlin are! I muse. It's only when this happens three more times and a redhead with a deeper voice than mine offers to list some prices that I jump on the tram and decide I'm actually quite sleepy after all.

STEP BACK IN TIME

After a modest breakfast, day two in Berlin starts with a walking tour. Our guide, an

upbeat German lady with a hefty home-made reference book, meets us outside the hotel. Introductions made, she leads us along Oranienburger Strasse (which has a very different vibe in the day time) towards Museum Island.

On the way, she tells us that – growing up in prosperous West Berlin as she did – the area we are in now was once a run-down part of East Berlin, packed with colourless tenements on the verge of falling down.

Admiring the sleek apartment blocks and luxury flats around us now, that seems almost impossible to believe.

We pass over the river, glinting peacefully in the warm morning sunshine, and are informed that Museum Island – a small outpost of land in the Spree – is home to no fewer than five museums: The Pergamon Museum, Bode-Museum, New Museum, Old National Gallery, and the Old Museum.

With a plethora of treasures including the Ishtar Gate, the Pergamon Altar and the bust of Queen Nefertiti, you could easily spend a whole day delving into the delights of this gilded UNESCO World Heritage site.

We are on a tight schedule though so we breeze on through and stride on to bustling Alexanderplatz, one of Berlin's busiest squares and home of the landmark 368-metre high TV tower (Fernsehturm). The view from the public gallery 204 metres up is well worth the effort.

ON THE BANKS OF THE SPREE

A short S-Bahn (overground) train ride takes us a few stops east to Berlin Ostbahnhof, a



The VIVID Grand Show at the Friedrichstrasse-Palast

main line railway station in the Friedrichshain quarter that's only a few minutes' walk from the famed East Side Gallery. Once part of the Berlin Wall, this 1.3km section of the "Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart" (as The Wall was known in the East) on the banks of the Spree is the longest open-air gallery in the world.

The mesmerising graffiti art, which includes iconic images like Honecker and Brezhnev kissing and a Trabant that looks like it's breaking through the wall, makes an impact. More so now that it stands in the shadows of gleaming retail venues, top end hotels and massive advertising hoardings.

This autumn sees the 30th anniversary of reunification



We cross over the river into what was once West Berlin and find ourselves in the traditionally working class neighbourhood of Kreuzberg. Ironically, this evocative yet rather run-down area is nowhere near as sleek or shiny as the old East side we've just come from.

A quick bus ride later and we're at Checkpoint Charlie, the most famous of the three border crossing points created by the Allies after the wall went up in 1961 (Alpha and Bravo being the other two). The original guardhouse was removed in 1990 but a replica, along with two 'American' soldiers, is on hand to ensure visiting tourists get that all-important photo.

LEGACY OF A DARK PAST

Just around the corner from the tourist packed streets of Checkpoint Charlie is

Wilhelmstrasse, a rather unassuming street that was once the administrative heart of Hitler's Nazi Reich.

The mood among our group turns palpably sombre as our guide shows us, in turn, where Himmler's SS headquarters, Goebbels Ministry of Propaganda and Hitler's grandiose New Reich Chancellery all once stood.

Thankfully, only Göring's Air Ministry (now the Federal Ministry of Finance) remains. Goosebumps appear on my arms as I walk past it. There is something deeply unsettling about being so close to a place where educated men conceived the idea of a 'Final Solution'. We round a corner and come to a non-descript car park that, in 1945, was the bunker where Hitler, along with his new wife Eva Braun, committed suicide. Some of the Führerbunker's concrete foundations are still in the ground but a modest information board is the only thing to confirm it ever existed.



Checkpoint Charlie was the most famous crossing point between East and West German

As we walk away, our guide is asked, rather clumsily: "How do Germans live with a legacy like this?" She pauses for a moment and replies: "Personally, I don't feel guilty. But, I do feel bad." Looking over her shoulder, she adds: "Very bad."

The tour ends, fittingly, at the Holocaust Memorial, a haunting and rather imposing site of 19,000 square metres where you can walk among 2711 concrete slabs of varying height set on an uneven concrete floor. It is a hugely visceral installation which generates different reactions in different people.

I feel moved and a little disoriented as I move alone among the slabs, especially in the centre where the monoliths tower over me. It isn't overwhelming though, and I feel grateful to be there.

THE THEN AND NOW

Strolling rather aimlessly now past the imperious Brandenburg Gate and the handsome boulevard that is Unter den Linden beyond it, I invite the sights and sounds of modern Germany to wash over me.

I soon end up sauntering through the open greenery of the sprawling Tiergarten, a bigger yet more intimate version of Hyde Park, where I finally take the opportunity to sit down and give my feet some time out. Kids are playing catch with their dad, lovers are lying on a blanket by a lake and people of all ages are cycling along the wide pathways, seemingly in no rush. Life is good.

In many ways, modern Berlin is the perfect city break destination. After all, it's vibrant, agreeable and packed with a cacophony of cultural and culinary delights. The fact that it is (and always will be) inextricably linked to some of the darkest chapters in our modern history gives it an added dimension, one that's as hard to pin down as it is to keep at bay. Put these two facets together – the then and the now – and you get a city that is, on a number of levels, well worth getting to know. **GTW**



The stunning Museum Island