





AS BERLIN'S
ECONOMY IMPROVES,
CAN THE CITY RETAIN
ITS GRASS-ROOTS
UNDERGROUND VIBE
AND SENSE OF COOL?

MAYOR WOWEREIT
SEEMS TO THINK SO

IS BERLIN STILL POOR AND SEXY?

CHRISTINE KAKAIRE



BERLIN IS AN ANOMALY

in more ways than one. It's the capital of Europe's largest economy, but still crippled by post-war debt. It's dynamic and cosmopolitan, yet dotted with empty apartments and industrial spaces. It is open-minded and hedonistic, in a nation famed for its fastidious character.

Berlin is also Europe's worst-kept secret, widely renowned for its bohemian edge and creative energy. Klaus Wowereit, Berlin's governing mayor, struck a chord – or a nerve, depending on who you speak to – when he said “*Berlin ist arm, aber sexy*” (“Berlin is poor, but sexy”) in a 2003 interview. Like the continental cousin of “I heart NY”, the catchphrase has been immortalised on T-shirts and gift mugs, and in the minds of those who have flocked to the city, seduced by its high-ceilinged apartments, cheap rents, and thriving artistic communities.

Last year Wowereit revisited his famous statement – “We are trying to become richer, but to stay sexy, and it is a great challenge!” – a winking acknowledgement of the change that is active, and more change that is imminent. Shortly after the openly gay Wowereit took office he said that he could not think of a better job than being mayor of Germany's capital city. “Berlin is a young, lively, high-energy metropolis



bursting with urban vitality, drawing to it young and creative people from all over the world,” he said. Then he quoted a young fashion designer: “Berlin gives wings to the imagination.” Today, the city hums with visible, audible regeneration – you're never more than a block or two away from cranes and jackhammers.

In the old Jewish quarter of Berlin's central district, Mitte, Berlin's best-known squatter's community remains in a state of functioning limbo. A former department



Clockwise from here, edgy offerings from alternative Berlin include Lichtblick Kino cinema; Michelberger Hotel (also previous spread); and Tacheles artist community

store, the five-storey building narrowly escaped demolition in 1990, when the Künstlerinitiative Tacheles (Tacheles Artists' Initiative) occupied it two months before D-day. Tacheles is now a major centre of alternative arts, with collectively managed studios housing artists of a range of nationalities and mediums. Tourists and locals mingle in the Tacheles courtyard, and around the improvised bars that change every few months. They meet at its cinema, and wander its staircases, in and out of studios, surrounded on all sides by a riot of graffiti colour. Tacheles' lease with the property's owner ended over a year ago. The future is uncertain, but on any given day it is a hive of noise and activity.

To the north of Mitte is Prenzlauer Berg, a borough known for its affluence and high birth rate. Kastanienallee is one of P-Berg's lively boutique-and-café strips, boasting, at number 77, the oldest surviving *haus* in the area, dating from 1848. One of Berlin's most beloved cinematic landmarks lies within.

Lichtblick Kino, a cosy, narrow sliver of a cinema that seats only 32, is named after the



BERLIN'S
TRANSIENT
NATURE LENDS
ITSELF TO NEW
VOICES AND
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MANIFESTING
THE DIY SPIRIT
OF THE CITY



German expression for “light at the end of the tunnel”. “All workers are paid the same,” says Torsten Frehse, one of the original founders of the cinema’s collective that took over the space – a former artist’s squat – in 1997. “All important decisions are made as a group.” The Lichtblick’s programme favours arthouse auteurs, alternative film movements, and classics like *Casablanca*, which is screened every Saturday at midnight. The political films that defined the Kino’s early years have been scaled back, but still serve as a small but vital ingredient

in the cinema’s programming. “Like the salt in the soup,” Torsten explains.

The former East Berliner is wary of “irresponsible” gentrification, but he embraces Berlin’s new generation of artists and creatives. He detects a commitment to maintaining the city’s unique point of view: “They don’t want to lose this way of life.” As for the Lichtblick, the future looks as bright as its evocative name. “It works better and better every year,” Torsten says with pride.

BERLIN RANKS AS Germany’s largest city and accounts for the country’s highest proportion of foreign residents, around 14% of the nation’s total. With roughly the same amount of cross-border migration into Berlin each year as there is out of the capital, this transient nature lends itself new voices and perspectives manifesting the DIY spirit of the city in new ways and new spaces.

An abandoned community swimming pool in the suburban region of Wedding, >



ALFRESCO BERLIN STYLE

Berlin does the outdoors quite unlike any other European city. Aside from its plentiful parks, lakes, beer gardens and riverside hangouts, there are many unconventional sun spots.

Situated next to the infamous all-night-all-day Berghain club, the Kantine (*Am Wriezener Bahnhof*) used to be the break room for workers in the former power plant. Now the Kantine houses an outdoor bistro and beer garden during summer.

Karaoke fans need not huddle in soundproof booths any longer, as Bearpit Karaoke in the auditorium of Prenzlauer Berg’s Mauerpark provides a popular Sunday afternoon spot for wannabe singers to let rip for enthusiastic crowds.

For the adrenaline junkies, rock climbing with an urban twist is on offer at the Cassiopeia complex (*99 Revaler Strasse*) in the city’s alternative east, where you can lounge with a drink, skate, listen to music, or scale the outside walls of Der Kegel, a former bunker. If that’s not enough excitement, head to the city centre for a taste of base-jumping, with a 100m bungee jump off the side of the Park Inn Hotel in the middle of Alexanderplatz.

Thrills with chills can be found at Teufelsberg (Devil’s Mountain, *pictured*), the city’s highest point in the western district of Grunewald, with a white-domed former US spy station at its peak giving it a retro sci-fi feel. In the east, tucked away within Treptower Park (*1–3 Kiehnwerderalle*), the former amusement centre Spreepark is a spooky and overgrown relic of Berlin’s Soviet past.



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Here, from lap pool to pool for creative talent, Stattbad Wedding gallery space; below, "Come on ladies, can I tempt you with anything? Some old mobile phones, perhaps? They're tomorrow's antiques, you know."

west of Prenzlauer Berg, has become one of Berlin's most sought-after new creative spaces. With long-term plans to develop Stattbad Wedding into a permanent art centre, the international directors curating the space will continue their current programme of street exhibitions, parties, and installations. French artist Nicolas Dusollier recently showed a tailor-made exhibit, accompanied by the Icelandic 12-piece orchestra Skark, which played inside one of the venue's empty pools as visitors watched from a balcony above.

French-born Julie Monin lived in Barcelona and London prior to moving to Berlin in 2007 to work in the music industry. A hairdresser by trade, she dreamed of opening a salon that incorporated modern art and music, but never imagined it would be possible. "One summer's day I was riding my bike and the concept came up again. It was evident I



just had to do it in Berlin." Latelier Friseur was born the following year in the eastern district of Kreuzberg. A combination of a hair salon, gallery, and exhibition space, it is as well known for its modern hairstyling as for the artworks that Julie commissions to be painted and stencilled onto the walls. Every quarter the space is returned to white before a new artist takes up residence. The changeover is marked by a party, featuring performances by some of electronic music's élite.

Music is of equal importance to Jo Braithwaite, the creator of We Make Party and its bi-monthly *Flohmarkt* (flea market). "How can you have fun without music?" asks the Londoner. After relocating to Berlin in 2008, and faced with limited work opportunities in her professional field of publishing, Jo looked to her favourite leisure activities for inspiration. With at least one flea market in every Berlin *stadt*, Berliners are accustomed to weekends spent trawling for vintage treasure. "I really love that



Here, taming the frizz and unleashing creativity at L'atelier Friseur; above, the Michelberger Hotel may look pricey but it's actually a budget retreat

people go out and spend the day at these markets," says Jo. "I always come back from a flohmarkt feeling inspired." Over the past year, Jo's Fashion Flohmarkt has attracted bargain hunters to its day-long events that combine elements of German flohmarks and UK jumble sales with a slant on hip vintage fashion, and a roster of musical acts that add to the party atmosphere.

As football-mad Berliners prepare to congregate around screens in beer gardens for the World Cup, the Michelberger Hotel in Friedrichshain will be keeping it a bit closer to home. "We're doing a living room theme in the courtyard," explains proprietor Tom Michelberger. "We'll create little *Wohnzimmers* (living rooms) with furniture and TVs. We're all big football fans!" Praised for his hotel's innovative take on budget accommodation, it's hard to believe that Tom didn't have any experience in the hotel industry. "The idea came quite

by chance," admits the southern German, after living in London and the US for several years, and only visiting Berlin for the first time seven years ago.

Berlin is unique. It is as damaged as the pictures you see, as unpredictable as the stories you read, and as outrageous as the anecdotes you hear. But poor or not, sexy or not, it is, most importantly, abundant with the one thing that will keep the locals, newcomers and tourists falling under its spell: possibility. "Berlin has this amazing chance that you don't find in any other big European city," says Tom, glancing around the eclectic and clashing textures and fixtures in his hand-crafted hotel. "Places like this are the reason I came to Berlin."

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