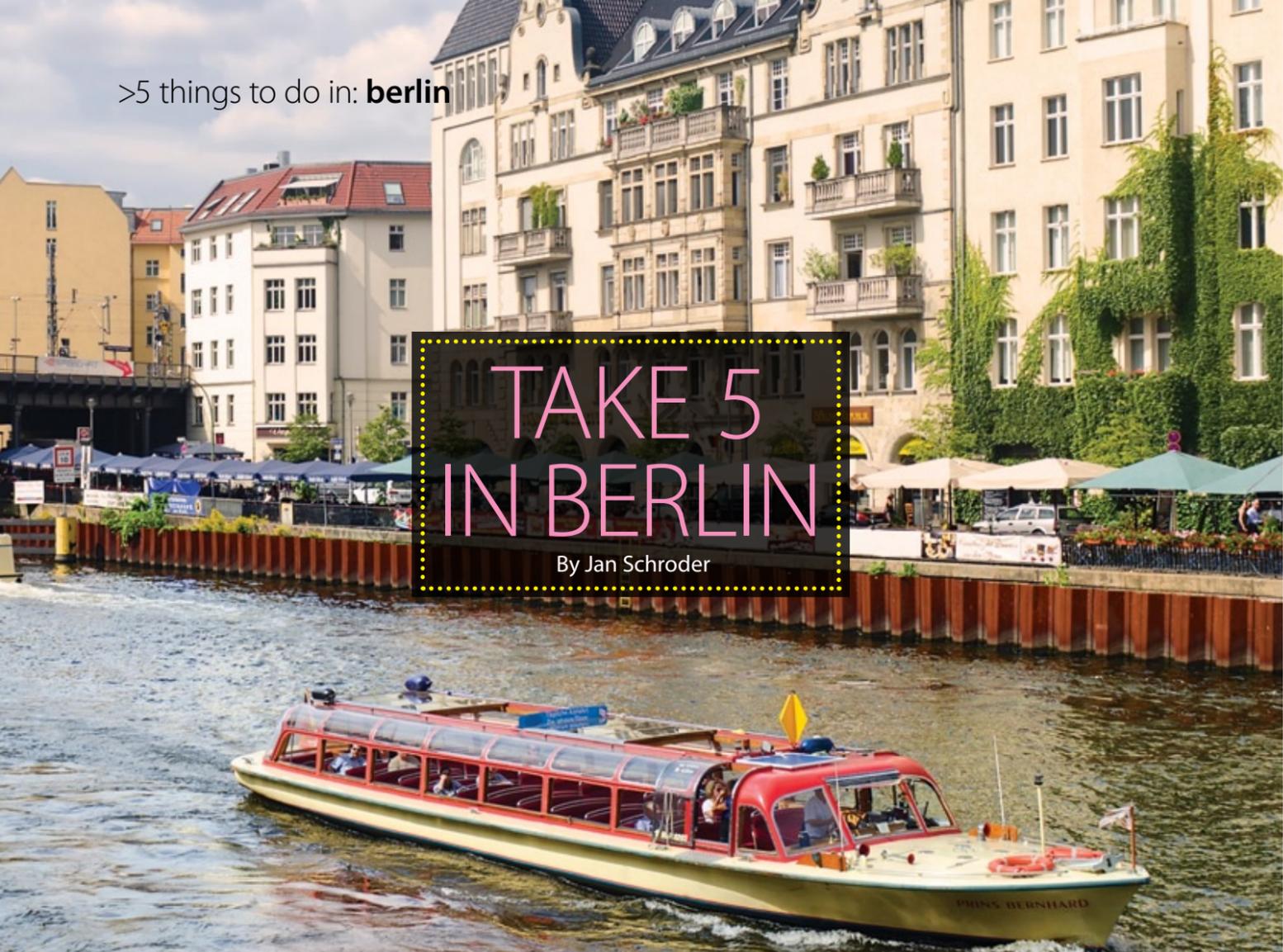


TAKE 5 IN BERLIN

By Jan Schroder



Sometimes it's the little things that grab you. They yank you back decades or centuries into the past and give you chills as you contemplate what happened on the very spot where you are standing. In Berlin, it was two small brass plaques embedded in the gray cobblestone sidewalk. Each was engraved with "Here Lived," followed by a name, the date of transportation to Theresienstadt concentration camp and the date of execution. These particular plaques informed me that Georg and Zerline Marcuse were taken from their homes on this very spot in the spring of 1942, and were executed the following year, most likely by firing squad.

It wasn't my first visit to Berlin, yet I remain fascinated by its ugly, violent history and its stint as a city divided and made one again just 26 years ago. Now the city is a colorful and lively magnet for all types of creative souls, drawn by its relatively affordable rent, and encouragement of all forms of artistic expression. It's a city that is hurtling toward the future as it reinvents itself, without papering over its controversial past.

One place that particularly affected me and captured Berlin's spirit of embracing the present was the hipster hangout Mauerpark. Located in an area formerly known as the Death Strip, a no man's land between the inner wall on the East side and the outer wall in the West, the park draws huge crowds, particularly on Sundays for the weekly flea market. As we strolled through the park on a bright, sunny day we saw thousands of people playing

music, dancing, juggling, bicycling, swinging, painting a portion of the wall — everyone embracing life in an area once marred by fear, and the deaths of those willing to risk their lives for freedom. I said a silent prayer of thanks for the freedoms I enjoy and hope to never take for granted. Tempting as it was to linger and enjoy one of my favorite freedoms — that of sitting and contemplating life — there was so much more to do during my short stay.

1. BERLIN HAS 175 MUSEUMS: SEE SOME Winston Churchill said, "History is written by the victors." While that may be, you can experience plenty of Berlin's history at its many museums. The DDR Museum packs a lot into a small space, depicting what life was like in the GDR through thousands of exhibitions. I "drove" through a housing estate in a real Trabi, the car commissioned in East Germany and the only one available to most families during that time, sat in a typical small flat and listened to a Stasi interrogation. I marveled that the passion for conformity even extended to communal potty training in daycare.

The Jewish Museum Berlin, a landmark of architectural design, depicts 14 historical periods of Jewish history. Beginning with the Middle Ages, the museum presents a vivid portrait of German-Jewish life. The Topography of Terror Museum stands on the previous site of the Secret State Police Office, the

PHOTO: MANUEL HURTADO



central institution of Nazi persecution and terror. The museum depicts the planning and implementation of Nazi tyranny and is an historical testament to the millions of lives lost during the Holocaust. A new Spy Museum, which will focus on espionage and intelligence from the Cold War to the present, is slated to open this spring.

2. VISIT BARS AND BEER GARDENS Peek around a few corners in Berlin and you're bound to discover an inviting beer garden. I'm not a beer drinker, but had to down a pint at a long wooden table at Schleusenkrug, which was uncharacteristically fairly empty during our weekday stop. Not so at the packed Café am Neuen, a lovely waterside spot in the Tiergarten or on the grass at the Ampelmann Restaurant & Beach Bar, which is named for the East German pedestrian traffic light symbols, introduced in 1961, whose hipster-hat wearing man has become a cult figure in modern Berlin.

Just one sip of a signature drink in Berlin, the Hugo, and I was immediately hooked on the refreshing Prosecco, mint, lime and elderflower syrup cocktail. There's no hint of the past at the trendy Monkey Bar, located on the top floor of the 25Hours Hotel Bikini Berlin with views of the monkey cage at the tree-filled zoo. The quiet courtyard at the elegant Das Stue hotel was the perfect place for a relaxing drink after a day of sightseeing.

3. TOUR THE CITY BY BIKE, FOOT AND BOAT My favorite way to tour a city is by bike. I can see more than when I'm touring by car, bus or on foot, and after such great exercise, I feel freer to indulge in local cuisine. While I often tool around on my own, a guided tour is the key to finding a city's hidden gems. Our Oasis Berlin bike tour with Berlin on Bike took us way off the beaten path to hidden courtyards, through a forest-like cemetery where graves still bear the imprint of bullet holes from WW II, and through Volkspark Friedrichshain Park, where we were delighted with the enchanting Fairy Tale Fountain with sculptures of characters from the Grimm Brother's Fairy Tales.

We explored the burgeoning City West area, the commercial center of former West Berlin, during our customized walking tour with Culture Trip. You'll find beautiful, high-end shops along Tauentzienstrasse, a major shopping street. For a view of



a more diverse district we took the Everyday Life in Kreuzberg tour of an area that's home to many Turkish immigrants, and has evolved from one of the poorest in Berlin to one of the trendiest.

It was during these tours that I saw the brass plaques in the sidewalks, just a few of the 27,000 *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones) that have been laid across Europe in 600 places by artist Gunter Demnig. "I know I can't do six million stones, but if I can inspire a discussion with just one, something very important has been achieved," he said. I say he's achieved his goal, one 4" plaque at a time.

You can't walk down the street in Berlin without seeing graffiti. It's everywhere, and rather than being reviled, is accepted, and even celebrated. The graffiti ranges in theme from the macabre to the clever, and in size from miniature to covering entire buildings like the one with three giant rats crawling up its side. My favorite was the darkly humorous Little Lucy series, created by the urban artist El Bocho, which depicts a little girl employing various methods of trying to do away with her cat.

My second favorite way to do just about anything is by boat. One evening, we enjoyed dinner while cruising along Berlin's canals on a Van Loon boat tour for a different vantage point of the city. As the sun set, our guide pointed out highlights such as Angela Merkel's house and Museum Island.



Opposite page: Touring Berlin by boat on the Spree River. This page from top: Located on the river by Museum Island, The Ampelmann Restaurant & Beach Bar is popular on sunny days; The extension of the Jewish Museum was designed to secure an identity for Jews in Berlin; Stumbling stones embedded in sidewalks honor victims of the Holocaust who lived at that location.



4. DINE, BERLIN STYLE On my first visit I had to indulge in the requisite currywurst, Berlin’s fast food street food of steamed then fried pork sausage, but this time I could pass in favor of other flavors. My favorite restaurant was Neni Berlin, on the 10th floor of 25Hours Hotel Bikini Berlin across from the Monkey Bar, where our group shared everything from falafel to tuna sashimi to grilled lamb shank and hangar steak. The food is no frills with a choice of two four-course meals daily at Der Han Ist Tot (The Rooster is Dead) where I opted for the always-available coq au vin.

During our tour of City West, we stopped for a selection of delectable pastries and tea at the elegant Patisserie L’Oui at Grosz Restaurant, which I deemed to be worth the calories. Be sure to step out back to see the romantic courtyard. Late one night, we enjoyed desserts on an enchanting terrace at Katz Orange, located in a back courtyard of a former brewery.

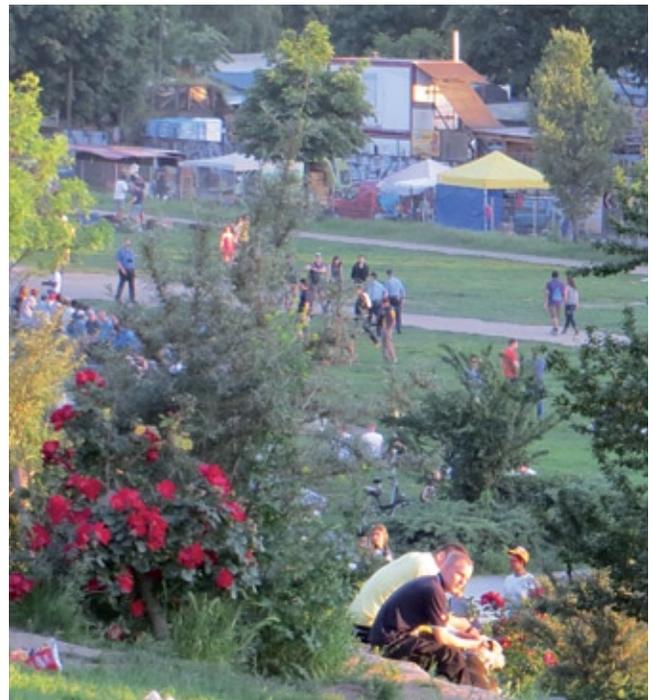
5. STAY AND SHOP When I first checked in at the 25Hours Hotel Bikini Berlin, I was immediately entranced by the lobby, with its colorful Scandinavian-style décor and hammocks overlooking the zoo. There is no trace of old Berlin here. Guests stay on either the zoo or city side, where I was in a loft-like room with urban touches like a mattress on the floor, a bicycle mounted on the wall and a black-tiled bathroom. It’s exactly the kind of place I’d want to live if I were a young bohemian moving to a large city for the first time — none of which applies to me. But isn’t that part of the fun of travel? We can try on different personas, and in this case, I was an unencumbered artsy type.

A stuffed monkey provided to keep me company patiently awaited my return each day, and a handcrafted piece of jewelry was laid on the floor, available for me to wear during my stay. Adjacent to the hotel is the Bikini Berlin, which bills itself as a “concept mall,” a combination of boutiques, flagship stores and Bikini Berlin Boxes, small wooden modular structures housing short-term tenants. I strolled through and took the stairs to check out the new green rooftop terrace. Now about that name: the hotel and mall were built in the Bikinihaus, a name Berliners gave it when it was built in the 1950s. It had one upper and one

lower area, which reminded them of the exotic new swimwear, the bikini. Yes, it’s a department store, but KaDeWe is the largest department store on the European continent and worth a visit to roam around the mouth-watering food hall on the 6th floor.

Berlin remains for me one of the most fascinating cities in the world. And during one of our many strolls, I noticed something astounding about Berliners. No one was talking on a cell phone. No one was working on a laptop or gazing at an iPad. The people of Berlin were enjoying this gorgeous day to the fullest — they were living in the moment. And the ability to do that is another thing I hope never to take for granted.

For more information: www.visitberlin.de/en 



PHOTOS FROM TOP LEFT: JAN SCHROEDER; PHOTO COURTESY 25HOURS BIKINI BERLIN; BOTTOM: PHOTO: JAN SCHROEDER

From Top: Sasha, a tour guide with Berlin on Bike, took us to hidden areas of the city; view from the popular Monkey Bar overlooking the zoo; Mauerpark on a Sunday afternoon, a hipster hangout where thousands enjoy a weekly flea market on Sundays.