

Berlin Today

Growing pains in the German capital

The fifth of February 2018 marked the day the Berlin Wall had been down for longer than it was ever up. As the Wall becomes just another attraction for an increasing majority of tourists too young to remember 1989, and as the last traces of war and division are tidied away into museums, Berlin faces a new challenge. Can the city bring the same courage and imagination to bear on the challenges of the present, as it has shown in grappling with the trials of the past?

Reborn as a single entity in 1989 – with formal German reunification following a year later – Berlin has revelled in its role as the rebellious, anarchic teenager among major European cities for nearly three decades. Undoubtedly, it still retains a sense of rule-breaking freedom, vanishingly rare elsewhere on the continent. Clubs – with their wonderfully unpredictable door policies – never seem to close. You can still smoke in bars. You can still buy alcohol at any time of day or night. You can still sunbathe naked on a summer's day.

MAGNETMANN

BERLIN

IMM DIR WAS
DU BRAUCHST.



WUM LIEGT
R ALLES AUF
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WERKRAFT,
MAMA



I ♥
BERLIN

At the same time, however, the city's popularity as both a tourist destination and a place to live is driving significant change. The decades-long redevelopment of the Museumsinsel is slowly nearing completion; the nearby Staatsoper reopened in 2017, and the rebuilt Berliner Stadtschloss is due to open in 2019 (see p33 Return of the Stadtschloss), rounding off a breathtaking city-centre showcase of cultural institutions – though one, perhaps, that would be more familiar to residents of 19th-century Berlin than to anyone who grew up here in the 1980s or '90s.

Berlin is maturing into a world city, as most people would have it, and the evidence is visible everywhere: in the quantity and quality of the city's cultural offerings; in the number of languages heard on the streets (Berlin is home to half a million foreign nationals, hailing from 185 different countries); and in the sheer range of restaurants opening every week. Having confused *Currywurst* with gourmet cuisine for so many years, the city has now developed into a genuine 'foodie' destination, with fabulous restaurants that reflect an increased multiculturalism opening every week to sit alongside the perennially popular Vietnamese and Turkish establishments (see p44).

And that could be the end of the story. Indeed, visitors on a short trip may well conclude that, while remaining true to its progressive traditions, Berlin is nonetheless a serious international city. Returning visitors, however, might notice that things are not quite so rosy. For a start, they might wonder where all the space has gone. Ten years ago, Berlin was still a city of abandoned buildings and empty lots. No one talked about property the way they did in London or Paris. Everyone rented, and the people who lived in the coolest spaces, in the coolest locations, were there because they were the coolest people, not because they were the richest.



Smoking, graffiti and *Currywurst*: despite gentrification, some Berlin customs endure.

Return of the Stadtschloss

Recreating history

First built in the 15th century to establish the authority of the Margraves of Brandenburg over an uppity population, Berlin's *Stadtschloss* (City Palace) served as winter residence to various Electors of Brandenburg, then Kings of Prussia (1701–1871) and finally Emperors of Germany (1871–1918).

The *Schloss* changed dramatically over the centuries, developing from a fortified castle into a vast Protestant Baroque palace in the 18th century (following plans drawn up by the German architect Andreas Schlüter) and serving as the backdrop to several key moments in Prussian and German history. During the Revolution of 1848, huge crowds gathered outside to demand liberal reform; 70 years later, the Spartacus League leader, Karl Liebknecht, declared his German Socialist Republic from one of the balconies (see p269).

However, once the new Reichstag opened down the road in 1894, the palace lost its unofficial position as the symbolic centre of the German Empire and was largely sidelined for most of the 20th century. Between the wars, parts of the building were used as a museum; the National Socialists largely ignored the place, and the Allies reduced it to a burned-out shell during World War II.

In 1950, what remained of the palace was destroyed on the orders of the GDR

government, who replaced it with the Palast der Republik (completed 1976). Of the original building, only the portal and balcony from which Karl Liebknecht had made his speech were preserved and later added to the façade of the new Council of State building. In 2003, the Palast der Republik was itself demolished, giving new impetus to already heated arguments over what should be done with the space. The final decision was to build a broadly faithful reconstruction of Schlüter's 18th-century palace to accommodate the newly formed Humboldt Forum. This cultural centre will rehouse the Ethnological and Asian Art museums from Dahlem (see p203) as well as a permanent exhibition on 'Berlin & the World' that includes an unflinching appraisal of German colonialism and modern-day issues around globalisation. The project has, of course, divided opinion. Cynics suggest that rebuilding the seat of Prussian Imperialism and then using it to house exhibitions on world cultures is a typical fudge, guaranteed to please no one, while idealists claim it will restore the unity and integrity of the historic centre of Berlin, at the same time as it continues the city's proud tradition of dealing courageously and openly with German history. The new/old City Palace is scheduled to open in late 2019; commentators and critics are already sharpening their pencils...



A Tale of Two Airports

Out with the old but ‘when?’ with the new

When the last commercial flight took off from Tempelhof Airport in 2008, the airfield quickly found a new lease of life as the world’s largest inner-city park (see p173). Unsurprisingly, it wasn’t long before the city government began to regret its generosity, attempting to sell large parts to developers in 2011. They would have gotten away with it, too, but for a petition organised by the 100% Tempelhofer Feld initiative, which gathered enough signatures to force the city into holding a referendum. When the votes were counted, over 64% had chosen to keep Tempelhof as it is, and this was a large enough majority to make the result legally binding. Politicians and investors threw up their hands in despair; Berliners threw up theirs in celebration.

But politicians, investors and residents are all joined in despair at the debacle that is Berlin Brandenburg Airport, a multi-billion-euro white elephant located 11 miles (18 kilometres) south of the city centre. Originally due to open in 2011 to replace both Berlin Tegel and Berlin Schönefeld airports, it is not now expected to start operation until 2020, or even 2021. A list of everything that has gone wrong – a faulty fire-safety system, a chief engineer who wasn’t an engineer, lighting that couldn’t be turned off, financial mismanagement, corruption, even controversy over the new airport’s name – would fill a book longer than this, but, still, there’s something oddly satisfying about the sheer scale of this balls-up: a characteristic Berlin subversion of the famously efficient German economic machine.



Now, with the fastest-rising property prices in the world (over 20% in 2017) and a population consistently growing by more than 50,000 people per year, Berlin has become a city of cranes, with every nook and cranny earmarked for development. The city’s famous murals are disappearing; by the time you read this article, the triptych of political caricatures near Savigny Platz station will have vanished behind a block of ‘micro-apartments’, and the ‘world tree’ at Tiergarten will be obscured by a property developer’s office. The pressure on space is starting to worry a city that prides itself on being different.

In its best image of itself, Berlin is a haven for people who feel excluded elsewhere. Since



2015, and Angela Merkel's short-lived 'open door' policy, this has included thousands of refugees from the world's poorest and most war-ravaged countries. By and large, Berliners have offered a wonderfully generous welcome, though the integration and long-term future of Germany's newest residents remains a heated topic, particularly given the resurgence of far-right nationalist political parties. More generally, Berlin acts as a refuge for people who don't fit in to more conservative environments, and when the city lives up to its best image of itself, 'more conservative environments' basically describes the rest of the world. But what happens when Berlin becomes just another big city, where people come to fit in, not to stand out, to make money, not to make a difference? A significant number of people in the city are not willing to

With the property boom, Berlin has become a city of cranes, with every nook and cranny earmarked for development.

Berlin acts as a refuge for people who don't fit in to more conservative environments

let this happen without a fight; Berliners have a long history of activism and, importantly, the means to make themselves heard, as proved by the Tempelhofer Feld referendum (see p34 A Tale of Two Airports).

Following local elections in 2016, which returned a left-wing coalition of SPD, Greens and the Left Party, the city government has become significantly more energetic in responding to concerns about the pace of change. It has actively tried to prevent the city from being hollowed out by Airbnb, first by introducing a blanket ban on short-term visitor lets in 2016, which turned out to be unenforceable, then by overturning this in favour of strict conditions and penalties; the new rules came into operation on 1 May 2018. The city government is also taking a proactive approach to Uber: the app is permitted in the city, but drivers are not allowed to undercut the fares charged by regular cabbies. But perhaps the area in which the city authorities are doing most to make their presence felt – under considerable pressure from grass-roots movements – is with a raft of measures designed to take the heat out of the property market, including rent caps, development-free zones and increased social housing subsidies. Most effective so far are the *Milieuschutz* (social environment protection) laws, intended to stop landlords undertaking expensive renovations designed to price out existing tenants.

Even so, since much of the property boom is fuelled by foreign investment capital, many Berliners worry that these efforts fall into the ‘too little, too late’ category. It’s not just residential property; commercial rents are also sky-rocketing as countless start-ups compete for space with older NGOs, artist collectives, small magazines and social projects – a reflection of the way people’s motives for coming to the city have changed in recent years.

The wave of immigration that began in the early 2000s led to some fairly crass



Since local elections in 2016, Berlin Mayor Michael Müller of the SPD has headed a firmly left-of-centre coalition with Die Linke (the Left Party) and the Greens.

examples of gentrification and high levels of resentment among born and bred Berliners, but, on the whole, incomers then were seeking to escape more rigid social and political mores elsewhere. They came with dreams of making the world a better place as writers, artists and campaigners. More recent arrivals tend to be avoiding high levels of unemployment and economic uncertainty elsewhere (particularly in southern Europe and South America), brought about in part by the financial crisis of 2008. Less utopian than their predecessors, they're often IT professionals or entrepreneurs attracted to Berlin's heavily promoted start-up scene. In Berlin, it's possible that these successive waves of immigration are simply indicators of an overall direction of travel towards conformity with neoliberal values. Or, perhaps, the shared love of an extraordinary city will forge unexpected alliances, leading to new solutions for old problems. One thing is certain: people here continue to feel a sense of agency; they certainly won't be sitting back and letting forces beyond their control spoil the place they love.

Berliners have a long history of activism and, importantly, the means to make themselves heard

By and large, Berliners have offered a wonderfully generous welcome to the waves of refugees that have arrived since 2015, but the resurgence of far-right nationalism makes their future far from secure.

