

Then and Now

Berlin was besieged during the war and strained by the fall of the Wall. It never really recovered.

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Twenty years after the fall of the Wall in 1989, Berlin is still in transition. Arriving by train at the futuristic Hauptbahnhof station—a gleaming glass cathedral opened in 2006—you're smack in the heart of the new government quarters of Europe's most powerful economy. Before you rises the massive Chancellor's Office (into whose lobby a good part of the White House would fit) and the remodeled Reichstag, Germany's parliament. Yet all around there still lie vast tracts of empty, undeveloped real estate, a few old building foundations barely visible between the weeds. Sixty years ago, this was among Europe's most pulverized and blood-soaked ground, scene of the final battle that brought World War II to a close. Later divided by the Iron Curtain, it is still waiting to be built up. *(Article continued below...)*

It is Berlin's contrasts and clashes—its rough and unfinished edges—that continue to make it magnetic. Unlike more established, richer cities, it has space to grow, a physical and cultural openness that lets newcomers make their mark. And it has past and present, new and old—where east and west meet in an experimental, eclectic melange.

Scarred like no other city by the upheavals of Europe's war-torn 20th century, Berlin doesn't even try to hide its history. On the contrary, today's younger generation of Germans takes pride in the way their country has faced up to its terrible past. In Berlin, that past shows up in the countless bullet holes in the old monuments, in the Nazi-built Olympic Stadium with its statues of **brawny Aryans**, in the granite blocks that **memorialize the Holocaust**, in the small brass cobblestones set into Berlin's residential streets engraved with the names of former residents and the **date of their extermination in the camps**.

Cold-War history is a little harder to find—after 1989, Berliners were eager to erase the city's division—but includes **remains of the death strip that divided the city** and a stunning **museum** that documents the creative ways desperate East Germans tried to make a run for freedom. Today, retro commie chic is all the rage. Visitors can sleep at the **Ostel**, done up with communist-era decor, or **rent a Trabant**, the putt-putting plastic microcar that was the standard-issue vehicle for East Germans.

When Berlin reunified, many thought that this bohemian Cold War outpost, home to 1980s counterculture and the scene of John Le Carre spy novels, would turn into just another sprawling Euro-metropolis. And yes, Berlin has undergone (and is still undergoing) a massive and impressive facelift. But the expected economic revival never came; instead, the east's highly inefficient, communist-era industry almost completely collapsed and few new businesses found their way to Berlin. Today, though its not always easy

to see (because of Germany's high level of social services), Berlin is one of Western Europe's poorest capitals.

But Berliners love it. In fact, they were tickled pink when their popular mayor, the openly gay Klaus Wowereit, called the city poor but sexy. Paradoxically, it's Berlin's relative poverty (and low prices) that make it Germany's—if not Europe's—lifestyle capital, and such a magnet for visitors. Living space is cheap and plentiful thanks to a 1990s building frenzy fed by subsidized mortgages and false promises of growth. Students on a budget often find that they can choose not only the neighborhood where they want to live, but sometimes even the street—and still have money left over for weekend clubbing (at the legendary **Berghain**, for example). For visitors, Berlin is a bargain too. A double at a four-star hotel goes for an average \$123 versus \$266 in Paris and \$315 in New York, according to **data** compiled by hotels.com.

For the past decade, Berlin has been Europe's fastest-growing hub for the arts—not because there are all that many buyers here, but because creative, non-commercial types have mostly been priced out of cities like London and New York. Within a block of my apartment in central Mitte district, at least half a dozen storefronts lacking proper tenants have been turned into artists' studios, galleries, and impromptu guerrilla fashion boutiques. The city is luxuriously green, ringed by endless lakes and forests because Cold-War division and exodus prevented suburban sprawl. (Take a boat cruise from downtown Berlin to Potsdam, the nearby Prussian Versailles, and you'll see.) Berliners seem oddly indifferent to the question of whether their city will ever truly revive. Maybe it's because they've been disappointed so many times before. Or maybe it's because they're living so well along the way.

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