

STREET ART NAMED DESIRE: A mural on a building in Friedrichstrasse, in Berlin's Kreuzberg. The district is at the heart of the city's revival, with hidden art spaces, great food and a former airfield that's now a park



REBORN TO BE WILD

Imaginative, artistic reuse of old buildings means Berlin is constantly being reinvented. **Victoria Stewart** revisits the German capital to experience the shock of the new



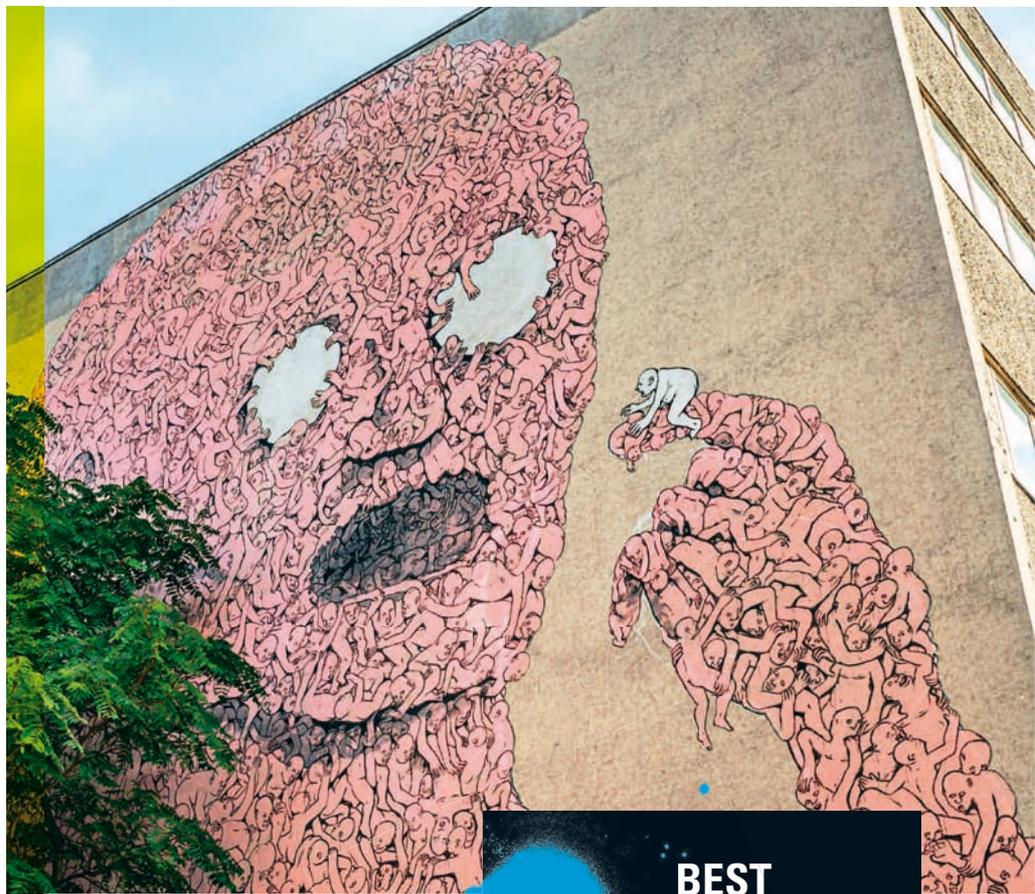


PERCHED on a brick wall, crumpled maps in hands and in need of refreshment, two of us are sitting among a sea of identical-looking tourists. The past few days have been fun, frenzied and an important part of any Berlin initiation weekend – but having strolled down the Linden Boulevard, taken pictures of the Reichstag and visited Potsdamer Platz, the Berlin Wall Memorial and the Brandenburg Gate, we’ve never once left the sightseeing trail. We haven’t yet worked out what it is that makes this city tick.

In the afternoon, we get lost down an alleyway that leads to a secret cinema and are handed leaflets to an all-night party in an old warehouse. We fall into a cafe, once used as something else, where people lounge on ramshackle furniture and chat with their neighbours. This feels like a more real Berlin than the one we’ve been trailing and, as we hop on the plane home, we promise to return for a proper explore.

And so in May, during the 25th anniversary year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, a friend and I find ourselves in Kreuzberg, in the south of the city, hungry for adventure. But we don’t want to get too stuck in our guidebooks – this time we want to learn about one of Europe’s coolest capitals through its street art, which is prevalent and often highly political, and by walking through its once-forgotten spaces to find out how the various changes that are going on are transforming the cityscape.

Our adventure begins near Warschauer Strasse U-bahn station, where we meet our guide, Andrea Peevers from Berlinagenten tours, and walk to Urban Spree. During the 1840s, this gigantic maze-like space was a train repair depot, but it has since



A HEADLESS MONSTER LOOMS OVER A DOORWAY

been transformed into a home for artistic projects. On the walls, a headless, ten-handed monster looms over a doorway, a brilliant blue lizard sniffs the roof, a cowboy sprawls backwards as though hit by a bullet and a spotted white baby’s head is silhouetted against a black background. These days, anyone can weave through this labyrinth, discovering beer gardens, an art gallery, a Sunday flea market, street food vans and clubs that host all-night raves.

From here we cross **Oberbaum Bridge**, overlooking a riverside area known as Media Spree, controversial due to the

The double-decked Oberbaum Bridge, which spans the River Spree, links Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg, once divided by the Berlin Wall. It is seen as a symbol of unity.

building of HQs for media outlets such as MTV (in a former warehouse) and the O2 World in an empty shipping warehouse by the station, both of which are

3 BEST STREET FOOD SPOTS

BITE CLUB

Itinerant street feast, currently on Saturdays outside a shipping container building. Try Heisser Hobel’s spätzle (floury noodles tossed in Bavarian cheese, chives and fried onions) and wash all that down with an elderflower, mint and Prosecco cooler.

Platoon Kunsthalle, Schönhauser Allee 9, Prenzlauer Berg

BURGERMEISTER

Favourite with hipsters and normal punters alike, this converted toilet is home to some first-rate burgers, so expect to queue. Order a Meisterburger (seeded bun, medium rare beef patty, caramelised onions, lettuce, tomatoes) and chase with beer or homemade applesaftscharte.

Oberbaumstrasse 8, 10997 Berlin

MARKTHALLE NEUN

Huge hall that houses a Thursday street food night and a Saturday fine food/fresh produce market. Top picks include Bonvodou chocolate stall (go early), smoked fish from Glut + Späne and microbrewery HeidenPeters.

Eisenbahnstrasse 42, 10997 Berlin



3 NEW SPACES**URBAN SPREE**

A former train repair depot, now home to an array of events and projects from expansive street art to vintage sales, a flea market, clubs and a gallery.

Revaler Strasse 99, 10245 Berlin

TEMPELHOFFER FREIHEIT

Sprawling former Nazi airport boasting plenty of grass to run around on, fly kites, eat ice creams or sunbathe, and tarmac ex-airstrips for cycling and rollerblading. Gigs and exhibitions are laid on inside the old airport. Admission free.

Open daily until sunset, entrances at Tempelhofer Damm, Columbiadamm and Oderstrasse

MAUERPARK

Formerly part of Berlin Wall and death strip, now a public park with a Sunday flea market and live karaoke sessions in an amphitheatre. *Gleimstrasse 55, 10437 Berlin*

German version of mac'n'cheese) and tacos.

On Sunday, we meet Walid from Fat Tire, who leads us on a Berlin bike tour. Pedalling along the River Spree, we learn that the home of the Tresor techno superclub was once an abandoned power station and pass a garden-cum-gallery filled with parts of the wall. We stop to look at **TommyHaus**, a squat since the 1970s, which now hosts youth organisations and gigs.

Finally, we race each other up the former runways of Tempelhofer Freiheit, an airport built by the Nazis, watching children flying kites and trying to imagine what it was like before its transformation.

That afternoon, we join thousands of sweaty Berliners in Mauerpark, Prenzlauer, now home to the city's largest flea market but in earlier times part of the wall's 'death strip'. Here, it isn't stalls that catch our attention but BearPit Karaoke, an X-Factor-style singing contest with a huge crowd.

As we walk away, we realise we have still only scratched the surface of what modern Berlin can offer. Needless to say, a third trip has been planned – and next time we might ditch the tours and guidebooks altogether. **e**

Photograph by (main) Alamy and (inset) Manuel Reinartz

ABOVE: The eye has it in this street mural in Kreuzberg, while (BELOW) it's contained enthusiasm at Kunsthalle in Prenzlauer Berg.



a pink human made up of and eating hundreds of tiny terrified pink humans, suggestive of the power of Nazi rule.

We move on – this time to satisfy hunger pangs – to Burgermeister, where delicious, heaving bacon and cheese-topped beefburgers are served from a converted toilet under a flyover in the middle of a busy junction. Close by is Markthalle Neun, which was blacked out during World War Two, survived air raids and stood empty for many years. Three years ago, when it was purchased from the council by a supermarket chain, locals collaborated to revive the market instead following a mass sit-in. Today, it hosts a Thursday street food night and a regular weekend market.

Our final stop with Andrea is in Prenzlauer Berg, further north, where we find an epic structure made out of 34 shipping containers in what was previously empty space. Platoon Kunsthalle describes itself as a “living social sculpture – not an office, not a gallery... a playground for the city”. Depending on the day, you'll find exhibitions, artist residencies, workshops or club nights. Today, there is a bar and outside it Bite Club, a street feast that plants itself in different parts of Berlin and features around ten stalls and vans that sell Venezuelan arepas, pizza, spätzle (like a

TommyHaus is named after Tommy Weisbecker, a 23-year-old anarchist killed by West German police on 2 March 1972. Weisbecker was part of a leftwing group.

situated near the wall. Gentrification is evident elsewhere; a one-time marmalade factory is now a residential building, while the future of the impressive, brown-bricked Army Bakery, built in 1805 to store coal and salt, is under negotiation.

On the west side of the bridge is Pink Mural, by the artist Blu, which depicts

GETTING AND STAYING THERE

British Airways flies from Heathrow to Berlin Tegel International from £63 (one way). ba.com/berlin

The Michelberger hotel in Friedrichshain is relaxed, informal and arty. Rooms from £50 per night. michelbergerhotel.com