

# 'I still have a suitcase in Berlin'

Marlene Dietrich and Chris Viney share a view on Germany's dynamic capital city





I'm standing on the top step of a wooden observation ladder, looking from West Berlin into the Communist-controlled Eastern Zone of the city. On the other side of the Berlin Wall, the raked sand of the Death Strip is lit up in glaring brightness by the sweep of powerful searchlights. I can see the East German border guards, binoculars to their eyes, scanning the approaches to the Wall. I can even spot the meandering tracks of the wild rabbits that live in this wasteland, among the trenches, trip-wires and razor wire. The rabbits are unconcerned, but this is a place that few men or women dare to cross – some who do, die.

Beyond the lights there's a shadowy steel footbridge, where workers with the right papers can cross from East Berlin to the free Western Zone. A lone figure in a black coat takes a few tentative steps onto the bridge. He pauses and snaps a lighter. I catch the red spark of his cigarette and hear a click of heels on cold metal gratings. Searchlight beams swing towards him.

But hang on a minute – it's not the late 1970s and I'm not in a scene from a John le Carré novel. It's December 2012 and I'm inside a cylindrical steel structure like a mini-gasometer, close to Checkpoint Charlie (above right). Berlin has been one undivided city since 1990 and The Wall is no more, apart from a few sections left standing to remind the world what happened here.

The image that recalls the dark days of the Cold War is an astonishing panorama painted on the curved inside of the cylinder (above left). The work of Berlin-based illusionist, artist and designer Yadegar Asisi, it portrays everyday life on both sides of The Wall.

The scenes are so realistically painted and the perspectives so cleverly rendered that I have to keep reminding myself I'm not observing a view of life. They're just pigments applied by an artist's brush to the inside of a cylindrical canvas but they're real enough to take me back in memory to my early teenage years, when The Wall was big news around the world.

Dear reader, if you are also old enough to remember seeing President Kennedy's inspiring 'Let them come to Berlin' speech on black & white TV, you may also recall the words of the pop song that topped the charts in 1962, the year before JFK told people on both sides of the Wall '*Ich bin ein Berliner*.'\*



I had to Google the name of the singer – it was Toni Fisher – but I knew most of the lyrics:

*West of the Wall, where hearts are free*

*West of the Wall, your heart can come to me*

*Though we're apart a little while*

*My heart will wait until we both can smile*

*That Wall built of our sorrow / We know must have an end*

*Till then, dream of tomorrow / When we meet again*

*West of the Wall / That soon will fall*

*And you'll come home / Oh, west of the Wall*

It was another 28 years before the predictions in the song came true. Today in Berlin, the amazing story of The Wall is just one of the highlights of a visit to a city with a unique place in the hearts of most German people – like the two Frankfurt doctors I meet in a restaurant near Friedrichstrasse, enjoying a night off from a medical conference.

"We Germans feel a special kind of affection for this city," Matthias tells me. "Cut in two by The Wall, West Berlin was an isolated outpost of freedom in a Communist country – and with its rich history, Berlin has always been the heart of German culture."

"As well as all that," his friend Helmut adds, "many of our taxes have been spent to reconstruct Berlin after the years of Communist rule, and the rebuilding goes on, so we feel we have a stake in the city.

Many Germans express that feeling when they say 'I keep a suitcase in Berlin.'

I Googled that saying too and up it came as a Marlene Dietrich song, '*Ich hab' noch einen Koffer in Berlin*' – 'I still have a suitcase in Berlin.'

Well, I'm with her. Turn the page for a few more reasons to spend time in this complex, fascinating and exciting city.

*\*If you've never heard the Toni Fisher song or the JFK speech – or if you'd like to reminisce – you'll find them here:*

JFK – [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hH6nQhss4Yc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hH6nQhss4Yc)

*West of the Wall* – [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVeG-MllgXI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVeG-MllgXI)

# Set your suitcase down

**G**ermany's capital city is a hub of art, culture, fashion, music and entertainment. Berlin's must-see sights reflect the many layers of the city's heritage, from its origins in the 11th century all the way through to the vibrant, sophisticated and beautiful city that is Berlin today.

This multi-layered history, especially through the dramas and changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can make Berlin a confusing place to understand in a brief visit.

As an example, take a morning stroll along Niederkirchnerstrasse, where a lengthy preserved section of the Berlin Wall (1961 to 1989) runs next to the complex of buildings that was the Gestapo's headquarters (1933 to 1945). The adjacent Topography of Terror exhibition is a confronting record of Nazi atrocities.

From there it's not a long walk to Checkpoint Charlie from the Cold War era; or in the other direction, to the haunting Holocaust Memorial close to the Brandenburg Gate (late 1700s), then down the wide boulevard of Unter den Linden (mid 1600s) to spend a few hours on Museum Island, a World Heritage-listed suite of five museums and galleries displaying remarkable collections of internationally-significant antiquities and art.

At the end of that day's exploration you'll be glad to put your feet up – and you'll have an idea of the richness and

complexity of Berlin's history and culture.

What's on the list for the next day, and the day after that? Here are a few ridiculously brief and superficial suggestions to tempt you, until you can be there and experience Berlin for yourself.

## Take a tour

On a short visit to any big city, a guided tour is a good way to get a handle on the place. Whether it's a walking tour of Mitte, the central part of Berlin; or a coach tour with commentary, you'll come away knowing some of the sights and experiences that need a longer visit.

## Go shopping

When East Germans were at last able to go through The Wall into West Berlin in 1990, many of them went directly to the famous shopping avenue, Kurfürstendamm.

Lined with plane trees, Ku'damm's boutiques, department stores and design houses are a magnet for anyone needing some serious retail therapy.

## Eat out

An unforgettable way to find a few of the secret flavours and hidden corners of Berlin is to join a guided gourmet adventure with the personalised guiding group BerlinAgenten. Their foodie tour takes you to places you'd never find without local knowledge, with a focus on the cool and funky NoTo area (North of Torstrasse) around Rosenthalerplatz. More: [www.gastro-rallye.com/](http://www.gastro-rallye.com/)

## Explore

We've mentioned the Topography of Terror, Museum Island, Asisi's panorama at Die Mauer, the Holocaust Memorial and the Brandenburg Gate (near the Gate is the Adlon Hotel and the balcony from which Michael Jackson famously dangled his infant son). Other essential must-sees are places like the East Side Gallery, where another remaining section of The Wall is ablaze with artistic graffiti; Berlin Television Tower, a landmark from almost anywhere in the city and the site of the Sphere revolving restaurant with sweeping 360° views; Alexanderplatz, for shopping,



bratwurst eating and people watching; and the Reichstag, burned just before World War II and bombed during it, then rebuilt with a modern and dramatic glass dome.

### Getting around

You'll probably arrive in the heart of Berlin on one of Europe's wonderful high-speed trains – in any European city, it's a better option than having to take long cab rides from the airport. Berlin Central Station is a destination in itself – a light-filled, six-storey cathedral of transport in glass and steel.

The city's U-Bahn underground railway is a fast, safe and efficient way to travel. A Berlin Welcome Card is an essential item – it gives you access to public transport as well as reduced prices for hundreds of tours, attractions, shops and restaurants.

Get a good map and wear comfortable shoes – some of the most interesting parts of Berlin are best explored on foot.

There's more of course, much more. To make the most of your Berlin experience, check [www.visitberlin.de](http://www.visitberlin.de)



Opposite: Brandenburg Gate  
This page, clockwise from top left: Reichstag dome; Berlin Television Tower; Holocaust Memorial; Ku'damm lights; Berlin Central Station

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