

Berlin: A City Divided Now Reunited

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

There can't be many cities in the world that have the sort of history that Berlin does. Most cities' histories stretch back hundreds of years and usually the most dramatic changes took place well before living memory. That's not the case at all with Berlin, where its history has been very much shaped by the events of the last 60 years.

Now the capital of Germany, for many years, Berlin was still a capital city, but of East Germany, when the country was divided during the Cold War. Literally cut in half almost overnight, the Berlin Wall left families torn in two, with some living in West Berlin and others stuck on the East side with no way out.

It all started after the Second World War, when Berlin was divided up between the Allies; The United States, Britain, France, and Russia, with each getting roughly a quarter of the city. However, as the years went on and the Cold War took hold, Berlin took center stage in the battle against Communism. In a bid to stem the number of refugees heading to the western parts of the city, the Russians decided to build a wall in 1961 and that was the end of a unified city, until the wall fell in 1989.

Bearing in mind that the historic events of the fall of the wall only took place two decades ago, it's amazing that today the city shows very few signs of ever having been divided. Checkpoint Charlie, the most famous way to move between the two parts of the city, still remains, but today it's there mainly for the tourists to have their photo taken with it -- and people dressed as Russian and American soldiers - in the background.

The nearby Checkpoint Charlie Museum is a fascinating place to visit, although at first glance it looks tiny and when we visited, it was absolutely packed with people. However, head upstairs and suddenly you realize that the museum runs almost the length of the street and is a real hidden gem. It also brings home to you how people lived while the city was divided and, although there were some humorous stories to read in there, it did make you think about the desperate lengths people would go to so they could cross from the east of the city to the west.

Today where the wall once stood is marked out, wherever possible, with bricks on the roads and pavements and it doesn't take long before you realize that most of the major sights are in what used to be East Berlin. That includes the Brandenburg Gate, perhaps the city's most famous sight. The gate dates from 1795 and is a striking sight today, having recently undergone a major restoration program.

Move further east and you'll come to Museum Island -- an area of the city that's got a good reason for its name. Not only is it an island on the River Spree, which cuts through the city, but its home to a variety of museums. The Altes (old) Museum houses Greek and Roman antiquities, while the Neues (new) Museum was originally built to accommodate the overspill from the Altes Museum. Today it's the place to find Egyptian art. Add in the Old National Gallery and the Bodemuseum, which contains an impressive collections of coins, medals and notes, and you can see how the island got its name.

But perhaps the most stunning museum on the island is the Pergamonmuseum, which got its name from one of its most famous exhibits, the [Pergamon Altar](#), taken from a Greek temple that dates to around 170 BC, on display in the first hall you enter. The huge structure been recreated and you can sit on the steps of the altar and just take in everything you're seeing. The museum is dedicated to antiquities and other highlights include the Market Gate from Miletus, a Roman town in Asian Minor, dating from around 120 AD (and currently undergoing major restoration); and the [Ishtar Gate](#) from Babylon, dating from the 6th century BC. To us, this was the most stunning of the main displays, covered with glazed yellow and blue bricks to depict animals such as lions. Looking at it, you can't help but be amazed by the detail that went into it and wonder how on earth the people living all those thousands of years ago were able to create such a masterpiece.

Museum Island isn't the only place to find stunning museums in Berlin. One of the newest additions to the museum line-up is the Jewish Museum to the south of the city. It takes you through two thousand years of Jewish life and we certainly learned a great deal from our visit to it. It's a sobering place to visit, as you might expect, although the section on the Second World War is very sensitively handled and doesn't dwell overly on the terrible events that took place during those years.

So far, every attraction I've looked at was in former East Berlin, but there are some that were on the other side of the dividing line. One of those is the Reichstag, the German Parliament, just a few metres away from the Brandenburg Gate. Dating back to the late 19th century, this superb building recently underwent a major addition in the shape of a glass dome, complete with viewing gallery. It offers some superb views of the city and the Reichstag is also home to a wonderful restaurant, again offering great views over Berlin.

Somewhere else to head for to get a bird's eye view of the city is the TV Tower, affectionately called the "toothpick" by locals because that's effectively what it looks like. The viewing platform is more than 200 metres above ground and offers views in all directions. It's also home to

a very popular cafe, so there are plenty of restaurants with a view to be found in Berlin!

From here, you get clear views of Nikolaiviertel, the oldest part of Berlin, dating back to the 13th century. It's a maze of narrow alleyways, unique shops and old buildings and is exactly what you'd imagine traditional Germany to look like.

It's probably clear that Berlin not only has a lot to offer the visitor, but is also a city of contrasts, with history from recent years and dating back over many centuries, and even millennia to explore. The divides of the past have all but gone now and you can't help but think as you travel around the city that it's a great improvement without the wall, not just for local people, but for visitors, as the former East Berlin has a lot to offer and explore. It's wonderful to finally be able to step into this area and see some of the city's highlights now that Berlin is once again reunited.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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