

The Feeling of Berlin

By Tyler Steele

Sitting in Kane lounge, its walls covered in old-world silk and wallpaper, situated on the ground floor of a 300 year-old building, deep in East Berlin, a native East Berliner explains the city to me. "Berlin is a feeling; when you come here it is like coming out, because you are suddenly free...it also has its hazards because no one here will tell you you're acting too crazy or going out too much or having too much fun..."

Though the shadow of the past is still found in some corners, the famed wall that split this city in two is now almost completely gone, save for a small stretch at the Eastside Gallery (eastsidegallery.com). Today, Berlin is one of the most exciting and beautiful cities in the world; parks and rivers crisscross the city like veins that feed it life, and there are museums and architectural amazelements everywhere. After sunset, the city transforms itself with nightlife that is unparalleled to anything happening in America. (And yes, this definitely includes New York.) Nightlife begins late, with people mingling for drinks at neighborhood lounges and Absinthe bars between 9-11pm before heading off to the city's numerous, and often hard to find clubs, where the party only gets going well after midnight and can continue on as long as 10 am.

There is no gay ghetto in Berlin, and in fact the city itself doesn't have a true downtown, per se, but rather each district (there are over a dozen) has its own unique vibe and attitude, with several having gay pockets, including Kreuzberg, Schöneberg, Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte.

Getting around is aided by an amazingly efficient transit system that runs exactly on schedule, is clean and has stops located all over the city. Buses are similarly predictable and enjoyable. When you do opt for a taxi, it is a stylish ride, as most of the fleet are Mercedes sedans. Physically, Berlin is massive—15 times the land size of London or Paris. Be sure to stay in two different parts of the city to truly soak up and experience that Berg's particular vibe.

Begin in Mitte, German for center. Destroyed

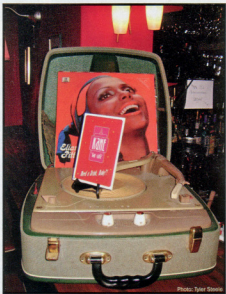


Photo: Tyler Steele

in the war, this area became a desolate demilitarized zone. Now it is home to the ultra-sleek Sony Center (sonycenter.de). With free WiFi throughout the open-air center, it is constantly crowded with tourists, students and hotties getting their PDA on. Universal and MTV have their European offices nearby to cultural landmark the Brandenburg Gate, which remained caught in the middle of the demilitarized zone between East and West Berlin for 30 years. Between daytime sights, you can relax on the grass in the city's gorgeous Tiergarten (Berlin's Central Park) or at any of the Beach Bars that spring up in nice weather along the River Spree.

Maritim ProArte (maritim.de) is an impeccable, full-service hotel with a boutique feel; designed by a team that including Philippe Starck, each of its 11 floors features original artwork by city artists. The hotel's front door exits onto the famed Friedrichstrasse, home to elite shops as well as Checkpoint Charlie.

From the hotel, gay nightlife in Schöneberg or Kreuzberg is, at most, 10 minutes away by

cab or U-Bahn. Schöneberg is the city's oldest and most established gay area with legendary—and infamous—bars like S036 and Eldorado. If you need pointers on which scene is for you, visit the concierge boys at Mann-O-Meter in Bülowstraße (mann-o-meter.de) or check out club details at out-in-berlin.com.

To experience East Berlin properly, book an apartment at Ackselhaus (ackselhaus.de) in the city's new "it" area, Prenzlauer Berg. Surprisingly affordable, these gorgeous old world hotel units have modern conveniences, and each unit is uniquely decorated, with private balconies that overlook a koi-filled reflection pond. Wander around the neighborhood and enjoy the unique, homegrown shops and cafes and soak up the amazing architecture.

Nearby, some of the city's best nightlife runs the scene from ultra-trendy to simply unbelievable. Let's leave it at most clubs here don't allow cameras for a reason. Club Weekend (week-end-berlin.de) is one of the city's best parties, but looks can be deceiving: from the outside it looks like an office building. Be prepared in Berlin to have to search a little harder for the hippest clubs—they are often hidden in plain sight.

Check out these links to find out more and plan your own Berlin experience.

1. Club nights can change quickly and the locations are strictly in the know. Keep up with the latest at berlin-tourist-information.de or out-in-berlin.com.
2. Skip big, impersonal tours and book a private tour built around your interests (day or night). Private concierge services are also available. berlingent.com
3. Discover your history at the world's only gay museum in the hip Friedrichshagen-Kreuzberg area. schwulesmuseum.de
4. The city hosts an impressive array of cultural events, including the famous Love Parade, a giant street party where anything and everything goes. Loveparade.net
5. LTU offers non-stop flights from NY, LA and Las Vegas, with special business class rates. ltu.com.