



Into the Light

Berlin doesn't shirk its dark past but combines a recollection of a painful history with a glorious new polish and great panache.

Words SHARON FEINSTEIN

History towers over Berlin with the Brandenburg Gate considered both a symbol of Germany's tumultuous past as well as of European unity and peace. (Opposite) Bronze statues on the banks of the River Spree quietly contemplate the magnificent Berlin Cathedral

BERLIN PLAYS HAVOC with your emotions. The brutalities in its recent history are glaring everywhere. Reminders, markers, memorials of the Holocaust and the subsequent terror of Communism and the Stasi, are spread among the stones of this intelligent, thinking city. There's nothing dumbed down about Berlin. I found myself flipping from fascination to tears and despair within Berlin's mix of creative vitality and the resounding spectre of death.

My suite in the legendary Adlon Kempinski faced the Brandenburg Gate with Norman Foster's distinctive dome of the Reichstag beyond. Images of blazing Nazi rallies in Pariser Platz below me just 70 years ago jostled with the wonder of the majestic Brandenburg Gate lighting up the night sky.

I relished every day at this grand hotel, which has hosted luminaries like Marlene Dietrich, Michael Jackson and, a few weeks before me, the Rolling Stones. Frau Merkel holds meetings here,

and world leaders choose it for its history, luxury and bulletproof windows. During the Berlin International Film Festival, Brad and Angelina jostle for breakfast tables on the terrace with Spielberg and Matt Damon. Everything works seamlessly and with polished style – and with its special place in Berlin’s history, it’s a privilege to stay there.

The hotel’s wood-panelled, Michelin-starred Lorenz Adlon is serious eating with informed service, softly lit with a library hush and a drift of romance in the air. Don’t ask me how many crunchy, flavoursome courses I ate – but I’m betting you will too.

Summer in Berlin has bikes for hire on every corner, so wind in my hair, handbag in the basket, I flew along the River Spree through the sprawling Tiergarten to take in the city. Those were the thrilling moments, racing around Mitte with its cool, cultural buzz of art galleries, innovative designers and inventive eateries. That hedonistic *carpe diem* atmosphere of the Golden ’20s, so vividly portrayed by Isherwood, has returned to Berlin’s bars, cafés, music halls and cutting-edge fashion. There is a renewed taste for pleasure and excess, which flourished amid the political turmoil of the Weimar Republic. As one Berliner told me, ‘We love to dress up, dance, drink and express ourselves – in Berlin we work to live, not the other way around.’ Bombed out dancehalls with bullet holes in the plaster have been left standing, their fading grandeur now considered ‘Berlin chic’ by new designers who flock here from other capitals to copy it.

Restaurants like Borchardt, Grosz, and the Paris Bar have that exotic chic and suave, carefree clientele echoing Berlin’s former *Cabaret* magic. The food at all three is among the best in the city, especially Paris Bar, one of Bowie’s favourite hangouts. Cordobar is a dimly lit, atmospheric wine bar owned by sommeliers who pair delicate dishes with exceptional wines. Riding through the splendid Gendarmenmarkt, flanked by two cathedrals, I came upon a hidden gem – the unpretentious antidote to Michelin-starred or glitzy restaurants, Chipps, where I returned three times for chef Igor’s delicious, blissful dishes and welcoming service.

On my birthday, the legendary Tim Raue treated us to lunch with his light, fragrant Asian-style delicacies, and dinner was on the terrace at the Adlon, which they made really special – table strewn with rose petals, kitchen staff coming out to sing, and the pleasure of the finest food. For me the shopping here is the best in Europe because of its originality and flair. I bought a soft, lush Gretchen handbag in the lively Hackescher Markt, exquisite

handmade shoes at Premiata, and clothes from cool young designers at LNFA in the hip new Bikini House, overlooking the zoo.

But the long shadow of darker days is cast across this city and to their credit, Berliners have marked it with ubiquitous evidence of the Reich’s terrible crimes. My deeply knowledgeable, vibrant tour guide, Heidi Leyton, and her dog, Daisy, revealed sides and depths to Berlin I would never have discovered. How do you remember the Holocaust in the city where it was conceived? It’s everywhere, from the 5 000 Stolpersteine (small brass memorial stones among the cobbles with names of Jews taken to the camps) to Libeskind’s extraordinary Jewish Museum, which swallows you up and hauntingly evokes the void of exile and extinction of so many millions. Or the thick, deathly grey pillars of the Holocaust Memorial down the road from the Topography of Terror, which charts the Nazis’ march of destruction. Most painful of all for me was the Room of Names below the Holocaust Memorial, dimly lit and charting the horror of the Holocaust for handpicked individuals and families.

But we are here and it is now, and on Sunday there’s only one place to go: Café am Neuen See in the thick of the Tiergarten, where you sit in the sunshine beside the lake, eat well among the bright hubbub of relaxed families, and then have a blissful, wine-softened slow time rowing out in one of the small boats for hire. These are the layers of Berlin, thrilling, excruciating and always expansive. I would return in a heartbeat. □

