

# Berlin, Germany: Making the Most of My Free Time

by Bernie Edwards, PassPorter Guest Contributor

I was recently sent on a business trip to Berlin, Germany, and, in between meetings, I had some free time to enjoy the city.

□ Besides being the capital city of Germany, Berlin is also the home of renowned orchestras, museums, film studios, universities, and research institutes. Of course, it is also a city rich in controversial history, especially relative to World War II and the Cold War. In this article, I'm going to discuss some of the things I had the opportunity to do that I consider "must dos" on any trip to Berlin.

With a population of about 3.5 million, Berlin is Germany's largest city, and the second most populous in Europe. Due to the large area of land officially making up the city, however, it doesn't feel that crowded and it is relatively easy to get around. The easiest way to get around is by walking or using public transportation. Public transportation in Germany is world famous; buses, trains, boats, etc., all run on a schedule, and they stick to it! I bought a week-long pass letting me ride throughout the city on buses, the underground metro (U-Bahn), and on the commuter rail system (S-Bahn). You can also purchase single-day passes and a 72-hour "WelcomeCard" pass, giving you unlimited public transit rides and significant discounts at museums, theaters, and other attractions.

□ I landed in Berlin on an early Sunday morning, and while everybody else went to the hotel to get some sleep, I decided to just stay awake and tour the city. One of the first things I did was to spend two hours on an open-top double-decker sightseeing bus. There are a lot of tour bus companies operating in the city, and all of them that I saw let guests hop on and off. On my bus, excellent commentary was provided by digital recording in a dozen different languages; guests wore a headset and could select any of the available languages.

□ I graduated from high school in Stuttgart, Germany and hadn't been to Berlin since I was a student. The last time I was there, the city was still divided by the infamous Berlin Wall. The wall came down when I was in college and I was anxious to see how Berlin had changed. The thought in my mind all week long was, "Wow, things sure have changed," like when I saw the U.S. Embassy in a prominent position in what was then East Berlin, or when I walked back to my hotel at night, which was only a few blocks from historic Checkpoint Charlie, but on the eastern side!

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□ To say there's a lot of history in Berlin is an understatement. Not only is there the usual several hundreds of years of history as a result of it being a major European city, but there's a lot of relatively recent history related to World War II and the Cold War. As a matter of fact, what struck me were how many reminders there were throughout the city of the horrors of World War II, the atrocities committed, and the war's impact on Germany, including the impact of the Cold War that followed.

□ A "must do" is a visit to the Topography of Terror. This is an outdoor museum on the site of buildings used by the Gestapo (the official secret police of Nazi Germany), and the SS (an elite corps of the Nazi Party) for their headquarters. These organizations were the two principal instruments of repression during the Nazi regime from 1933 to 1945. The headquarters were destroyed by Allied bombing in early 1945 and the ruins were demolished after the war. The cellar of Gestapo headquarters, where many political prisoners were executed, was turned into a memorial and a museum in the 1980s. The latest exhibition building was opened to the public in 2010, making this whole complex a very new museum. The focus of the museum is on the rise of the Third Reich and on the crimes those two organizations committed throughout Europe.

□ At the end of World War II, Berlin was occupied and divided into four sections controlled by American, British, French, and Soviet forces. By 1961, approximately 3.5 million East Germans had gone to the West, representing about 20% of the population of the country. To stop emigration, the Soviet Union to construct the Berlin Wall in 1961. In addition to the large concrete wall, the barrier also included guard towers, anti-vehicle trenches, automatic guns, and other defenses. Checkpoint Charlie was the name given by the Western Allies of World War II to the best-known Berlin Wall crossing; it was designated as the single crossing point for foreigners and members of the Allied forces. Today, Checkpoint Charlie, like what remains of the wall in various parts of the city, is a tourist attraction. Nearby is the Haus am Checkpoint Charlie, a famous private museum about the Berlin Wall, the many daring escapes across it and the inner German border, and the wall's impact on the city. The wall fell in 1989, paving the way for German reunification, which formally occurred on October 3, 1990. There is very little of the wall left today, but the course of the former wall is now marked in the streets with a line of cobblestones or some other marker.

□ Another "must do" is visiting the Reichstag, the meeting place of the modern German parliament, the Bundestag. One of its most interesting features is a large glass dome open to the public. The dome has a 360-degree view and the main hall of the parliament can be seen from

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the cupola; a large sun shield tracks the movement of the sun and blocks excessive direct light from reaching the parliament floor. Members of parliament debating on the floor can look up and be reminded that they, "Work for the people." Another interesting tidbit is there's still Soviet graffiti on some of the walls from the end of World War II, as a reminder to the members working.

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□For more cultural enlightenment, head to what is known as Museum Island, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The island houses the Altes Museum (Old Museum), the Neues Museum (New Museum), Alte Nationalgalerie (Old National Gallery), Pergamon Museum, and Bode Museum. The Altes Museum is famous for a 3,300 year old bust of Queen Nefertiti, the Great Royal Wife of the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten. However, if you only have time for one museum, then make it the Pergamon! The Pergamon houses original-sized, reconstructed monumental buildings from Greece and the Middle East, such as the Pergamon Altar, the Market Gate of Miletus, and the incredible reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate. The gate stands 47 feet high and 100 feet wide, and the original was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World until another wonder, the Lighthouse of Alexandria, replaced it on the list in the 6th century AD. Another museum that I really enjoyed was the German Historical Museum on Unter den Linden, a famous boulevard at the heart of the historic section of the city. The museum is just a short walk from Museum Island, and has a great exhibit on the Protestant Reformation and the rise and impact of Nazism on Germany.

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□Berlin is a city full of history with a lot of things to see and do for tourists. I enjoyed my time in the city, and I didn't even get to mention the great food and beer! It's definitely worth a visit if the opportunity arises!

*About The Author: Bernie Edwards lives in Maryland with his wife and two children. He is an engineer for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and a member of the Walt Disney World Moms Panel. He enjoys visiting both Walt Disney World and Disneyland, and sailing on the Disney Cruise Line.*

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