



Planes, Trains and Bikes to Berlin

by Lee Jackson – Bliss Travel

There can be no more appropriate a travel game for a visit to Berlin than eye-spy, especially for a visitor of my age with many memories of the Cold War. As we arrive in Hauptbahnhof station after a very comfortable rail journey from London we look for something beginning with “B” and the list is endless, Bear, Brecht, Brandenburg, Bauhaus, Bowie but top of our own list, and not an obvious choice, is the word “Bicycle”, more easily associated with Amsterdam but as we will find out a common feature of modern Berlin.

Following a superb journey through the German countryside, via Brussels and Cologne, and in the first class comfort of

Eurostar and then German Railways, we arrive both relaxed and excited about our break to Berlin. Our enthusiasm to visit Berlin by rail had been hugely rewarded with sumptuous comfort on the Eurostar train and an easy connection in Cologne. At the centre of our visit is a 5 hour guided bike tour where we will get an insider’s guide to the city under our own steam in the warm spring sunshine.

Berlin is easily and superbly covered through its rail and tram system. At the same time many of the popular visitor attractions, especially those of the former Eastern side of the wall are easily covered on foot. On arrival we make a quick stop at the Berlin Info Store in the station to obtain a group pass for the

transport system, which at 18 Euro for the three of us is fantastic value and includes our journey to Schönefeld airport for the flight home. After our rail journey we welcome the opportunity to walk and follow the river Spree by the Reichstag and the new German Parliament buildings and on to our hotel on Friedrichstrasse.

Almost immediately we spot groups of people making their way around the city on organised bike sightseeing tours and I feel more relaxed about my children's ability to negotiate the Berlin traffic! Our hotel base is very well located right by Friedrichstrasse station, conveniently close for the central sights and with immediate S-Bahn and U-bahn rail connections. The Eurostars hotel is modern, clean and comfortable with an indoor pool that may bring a welcome relief in the heat of summer but holds no such draw with so much in the city to discover this time around.

Having dumped our bags it is just a 10 minute walk down Friedrichstrasse to reach the former control point between East and West Berlin famously known as "Checkpoint Charlie". Little remains of the actual crossing point, only the wooden guard hut from the US Sector remains, and alongside it actors dressed in US military uniforms to make the most of the tourist desire for a photo opportunity.

However, alongside the former checkpoint is a museum that records the history of the divided city and includes amazing examples of escape attempts by those trapped in the East. The relics, including a specially made welding unit constructed to hold a person, an adapted VW petrol tank that carried many escapees to the west and a zip wire harness that was used successfully by a family in the dead of night. We spend almost two hours looking through the information and exhibits and could easily

spend more time there given the extent of the material.

Instead, with the evening approaching we decide to walk to Potsdamer Platz as a likely venue for dinner. The area had stood barren for many years before being developed under the umbrella of the unified city where German property developers and architects have turned the area into a futuristic entertainment hub. After a few photographs of the imposing architecture we notice a hive of activity in the Sony centre and walk in on the German premier of the new Spiderman movie but elect to stay clear of the crowds and exit in search of dinner.

At the outset of the day we had decided that we would seek out German fare for dinner and walk past some very tempting noodle bars and kebab restaurants. As we realised later Berlin's gastronomic offering is truly cosmopolitan. With thousands of Vietnamese refugees joining both sides of the community in the nineteen seventies, and with Berlin home to the largest Turkish community in Germany, the noodles and kebabs were probably every bit as much about Berlin's cuisine as the traditional beer hall. Still our choice is a good one with relaxed informal dining by the side of the Spree, good beer and very good food before an easy walk back to the hotel.

The planned early morning swim is skipped in favour of an early wander in the street and we head for Alexanderplatz to find the meeting point for the bike tour and a suitable location for breakfast. Along with 50 others of various nationalities we gather at the meeting point where we are joined with our appointed tour leader and introduce ourselves to the 15 people that will make up our group. Our French Canadian guide is knowledgeable and enthusiastic on the city and we head off on our Fat Tyre mountain bikes towards the first

stop beyond Alexander Platz. Due to my daughter enthusiastically sticking up her hand when a volunteer is called for I end up taking on the role of coming in behind the group at all points to make sure we stay together. Unfortunately this means that I am most often caught at red lights and craning my neck to ensure that my children are safely finding their way, largely unassisted by me, around the streets of Berlin!

The commentary from our guide is informal, informative and entertaining and we cover all of the central locations at an easy pace and with an hour set aside for lunch in the Tiergarten, a huge expanse of greenery where Berliners exercise, picnic and enjoy the natural habitat. Of stark contrast on the tour are the visit to the site of Hitler's demise, and the monument to the Jewish millions that suffered through his regime. The man who set about making Berlin the centre of a thousand year Reich, and sought to erase from the planet the entire Jewish community now remains unacknowledged where his bunkers sits in the swamp-ridden earth beneath an unassuming car park. In contrast the Jewish memorial is vast, thought provoking and testimony to the fact that their plight should never be forgotten.

As we near the end of our five hour journey including a stop on the green expanse in front of the Reichstag, and a journey down the renowned avenue of Unter Den Linden, I ask our guide for her recommendation as to the less well known areas of the city that may be worth visiting. Following her advice we make for Ostbahnhof station, pick up an ice cream and wander along the longest remaining section of the Berlin Wall. On one side each section is adorned with the work of an appointed artist and we take in what proves to be a moving open air art gallery. We follow the wall and the river until the red brick towers of the Operbaum Bridge and then

head west for dinner, followed by an evening stroll up the famous shopping street and a late evening dessert with coffee.

Our last day is taken up with the difficult decision of choosing our final locations and activities from too many choices. Berlin stands unique through its role in twentieth century history and its ability to achieve constant re-invention. Many more days would be needed to cover both the museums of its past and the exciting areas that are its future. We elect to take in the Topography of Terrors which stands on the site of the Gestapo HQ and combines an open air exhibition with an adjoining museum that tells the full story of the 12 year reign of Nazi terror. The exhibition has many schools attending and most gaze in horror as they try to understand the terrible actions of the time.

With just a few hours left and in a sombre mood we decide to go west again to finish the trip on the Kurfurstendamm where we have a recommendation for lunch from my son's German teacher. On the way to the u-bahn station we grab a few pictures of Trabi-land, another example of Berlin using its past and forging its future. Here the former East German car famous for its simple design and complete inferiority to the VW's, BMW's and Audis of the west have been collected, painted up and offered for hire as a way of seeing the city from the seat of the East German communist past. After a few minutes of consideration I decide that the opportunity to drive this basic vehicle is for another day and opt for a 6 Euro model of the car as a memento of our visit instead.

Back in the West on Kurfurstendamm we find the Schildkrote restaurant and have another helping of German cuisine, of which my beef with almonds and raisins with dumplings and red cabbage is excellent. We pass our appreciation and then after finally finding the

location of the "Story of Berlin" attraction decide that the 1.5 to 2 hours required to make the visit will not allow time to make the airport. Regrettably instead we take in Ka Da We, for want of a better description the German Harrods, and then make haste as it is increasingly clear that we have left minimal time to make our flight.

Following a direct express service from Alexanderplatz station to Schonefeld we sprint up the walkway to the small terminal building, clear a packed and slow customs hall and then sit with two hundred or so others in

the cramped and hot surroundings of the departure gate. It may only be a ninety minute flight, but when compared to our rail journey, an £80 fare to Germany by first class rail versus a £50 flight in cattle class is probably worth the extra hours of travel.

As we head on to the aircraft I look towards Berlin and look forward to returning and also to sampling again the relaxed surroundings of German Railways!