

SHADOWS & LIGHT

Sharon Feinstein uncovers Berlin, a place with a special but often haunting history

Berlin plays havoc with your emotions. The brutalities of recent history are evident everywhere. Holocaust reminders and memorials, and the subsequent terrors of Communism and the Stasi, are spread among the stones of this intelligent, thinking city.

There's nothing dumbed-down about Berlin. There is a strange mix of creative vitality and the resounding spectre of death; I found myself flipping from fascination to tears and despair.

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

At the hotel, everything works seamlessly and, with its special place in Berlin's history, it is a privilege to stay there. It has greeted luminaries including Marlene Dietrich, Michael Jackson and, a few weeks before me, the Rolling Stones. During the Berlin film festival, Brad and Angelina jostled for breakfast tables on the terrace with Steven Spielberg and Matt Damon.

In fine weather, Berlin has bikes for hire on

every corner and it's a pleasure to ride along by the River Spree through the sprawling Tiergarten to take in the city – Mitte, with its cool, cultural buzz, shows the hedonistic *carpe diem* atmosphere of the 1920s portrayed vividly by Isherwood has returned to Berlin's bars, cafés, music halls and cutting-edge fashion.

There is a renewed taste for pleasure and excess and, as one Berliner told me: "We love to dress up, dance, drink and express ourselves; we work to live, not the other way around". Bombed-out dance halls with bullet holes in the plaster have been left standing, their fading grandeur now thought of as 'Berlin chic' by new designers who flock here from other capitals to copy it.

Restaurants such as Borchardt, Grosz and the Paris Bar draw an exotic crowd. The food at all three is among the best in the city, especially Paris Bar, one of David Bowie's favourite hangouts. Cordobar is a dimly lit, atmospheric wine bar owned by sommeliers who pair delicate dishes with exceptional wines. Or try a hidden gem in the splendid Gendarmenmarkt, flanked by two cathedrals – Chippis, an unpretentious antidote to Michelin-starred or glitzy restaurants elsewhere.



From top: The view from the Adlon Kempinski Hotel and the River Spree. Inset: the Holocaust Memorial

For me, Berlin shopping is the best in Europe. Buy a soft, lush Gretchen handbag in the lively Hackescher Markt, handmade shoes at Premiata, and clothes from cool young designers at LNFA in the hip new Bikini House overlooking the zoo.

On Sunday there's only one place to go – Café am Neuen See, in the thick of the Tiergarten, where people sit beside the lake and eat well among the bright hubbub of relaxed families.

But Berlin also casts the long shadow of past desperate days and, to their credit, the people have marked it with ubiquitous evidence of the Reich's terrible crimes, revealed to me by my knowledgeable tour guide, Heidi Leyton, who revealed sides and depths to the city I would never have discovered. The Holocaust is remembered everywhere, from the 5,000 *Stolpersteines*, brass memorial stones among the cobbles with the names of Jews taken to the camps, to Daniel

Libeskind's extraordinary Jewish Museum, hauntingly evoking the void of exile and extinction.

There are the thick deathly-grey pillars of the Holocaust Memorial down the road from the Topography of Terror, which charts the Nazis' march of destruction, and the painful Room of Names, dimly lit and charting the horror of the Shoah for named individuals and families. And, fittingly, visitors are met by Primo Levi's famous quote: "It happened, therefore it can happen again."

Sharon's contacts...

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