

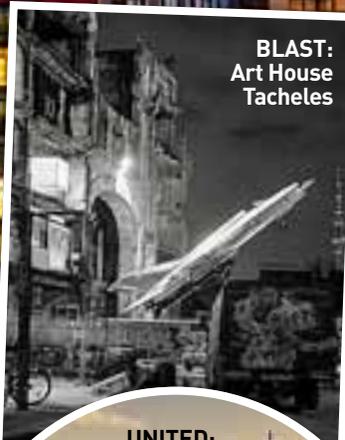
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EASTERN promise



A better Berlin since fall of the Wall

by **Chris Granet**

IT was a wild summer night in a derelict building filled with cool young artists.

There was a Russian MiG fighter jet out front. A pink Second world War Panzer tank out back. And lots of beer and schnapps in my belly.

That's all I really remember of my brief visit to East Berlin in 1994.

Back then I stayed in the relatively genteel West Berlin. The East in comparison seemed wilder, sparsely populated and still battle scarred almost 40 years after the war.

This time, 30 years after the fall of the Wall, I stayed out east in uber-cool Friedrichshain, an area similar to London's Shoreditch or Manchester's Northern Quarter.

The former industrial zone was laid to waste in the war and rebuilt Soviet style when it became part of communist East Berlin – complete with giant statue of Lenin.

But after German reunification, Lenin lost his head and Friedrichshain became populated by alternative arty types.

It's now in the inevitable grip of gentrification yet still retains an industrial, Soviet era feel.

Think well-worn brick and concrete alongside modern apartments. Scruffy students and slick media types. Hipster bars and warehouse clubs. That sort of thing.

It's also home to the East Side Gallery, the longest remaining

stretch of the Berlin Wall. Daubed in 105 murals of peace and hope from 1990, it's a poignant monument not only to the Wall's fall, but also to post-Soviet joy and optimism.

It's outdoors and free so be prepared to queue for a selfie.

Next to the Wall is the turreted Oberbaum Bridge with sprawling views over the River Spree. It used to link East and West, so is now a symbol of Berlin's unity.

It's covered in street art of a more contemporary kind, just like a lot of East Berlin. The best examples are up the road at RAW Berlin, an artistic collective in old train yards.

The abandoned warehouses were taken over in the 1990s and are now home to clusters of colourful clubs, bars, art studios, a skate park, and even a Second World War bunker transformed into a climbing wall.

It's heaving at weekends and

reminded me of the place where I partied back in 1994.

I asked people if they knew of it but they had no idea what I was on about. I had my doubts too.

The neighbourhood next to RAW is full of bustling bars, cafes, and restaurants. My fave was Timber Doodle, a cosy and eccentric cocktail lounge with an unfeasibly large drinks menu and toilets confusingly accessed through a bookcase.

Flashbacks

Nearby is Boxhagener Platz, a small yet famous park that on Saturdays is home to a century-old farmers' market and on Sundays to a bohemian flea market.

A more famous Sunday flea market is in Mauer Park, a stretch of the former no-man's-land between East and West known as the Death Strip. It's now a pleasant place to peruse antiques, crafts and souvenirs.

A great way to see what life was like in East Germany is to visit its

former governmental district and the great DDR Museum.

It has fun interactive displays of all aspects of life, like driving an old Trabant car, trying on 80s clothes in a tower block flat, as well as a not-so-fun Stasi interrogation room.

The museum is also behind the cool Nineties Berlin exhibition a few blocks south. It takes you back to the decade after the wall's fall via an array of multimedia displays, including a techno club that gave me all kinds of flashbacks.

And in its gift shop I saw a photo of that MiG jet. Despite probably not being alive in 1994, the girl working there informed me it was taken at Art House Tacheles, a semi-demolished department store taken over by artists in 1990.

Sadly, it no longer exists. But she was impressed I'd been there back then and asked what it was like.

And that's a question I still struggle to answer.

FACTFILE: Flights to Berlin from £14.99 one way. See easyjet.com. Nightly rates at nhow-berlin.com from £100. See nhow-hotels.com. For more information on Berlin see visitberlin.de/en.

TRAVEL TIPS

- **WANDER** the vast Soviet Memorial in Treptower Park honouring the 80,000 Red Army soldiers who died in the Battle of Berlin to get a reminder of the city's brutal past.
- **GO** native and sip beer with locals outside a spati – 24/7 corner shops that take advantage of Germany's very lax public drinking laws.
- **SEE** an arthouse movie in the cool Kino Intimes, a graffiti-covered cinema in Friedrichshain that dates back to the early 20th century.



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My PERFECT day

By **HARVEY DOWNARD**, cycling expert at Cycling for Softies. See cycling-for-softies.co.uk.

MORNING

After waking up alarm-free I would make my way down to breakfast at the Hotel Diderot in Chinon. I'd fill up on an unhealthy amount of fresh bread slathered in homemade jam then I'd hop on board my Trek e-bike and head westward along the Vienne river.

NOON

After stopping off at the excellent Ecomusee du Veron I would roll into the ancient river port of Montsoreau for a spot of lunch. I would then ride up to Fontevraud to pay a visit to the spectacular abbey.

NIGHT

I'd cruise downhill on the bike for an overnight stay at boutique hotel, La Marine de Loire.



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