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Traveling to Berlin 20 years after the wall came down



The Brandenburg Gate in the background the common sight of a construction worker walking through the area that was once "no man's land" in Berlin. Pictured here is a poster announcing a James Taylor concert. (Michael Goulding/Orange County Register/MCT)

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Twenty years ago, I was a bearded little Dorothy going through a "Wizard of Oz" moment, only in reverse.

In October 1989, I passed through Checkpoint Charlie and stepped from the Technicolor world of West **Berlin**, with all its blue neon theater signs, bright shop windows and teens with spiky blue hair, into East Berlin.

After running the gantlet in the East German border station where my copy of Newsweek was confiscated, I walked into a world that seemed to have suddenly gone black and white.

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Wide but nearly empty streets were hung with banners celebrating 40 years of the German Democratic Republic, which was neither democratic, republican nor — given the presence of tens of thousands of Soviet troops — arguably German. The few shops that weren't shuttered sold metallic-tasting beer or stale, soapy chocolate. Everyone I met was testy or glum. A post- **World War II**-era treaty required that Westerners be allowed to visit East Berlin, but the government didn't like it. And the citizens knew that with 91,000 agents and countless informers, the Stasi secret police were likely watching all interactions with outsiders. After five hours, I was glad to get back to the West.

I took the Cold War for granted. I was born in 1958, with the confrontation more than a decade old. Now here I was, 30 years later, a reporter on patrol with the Berlin Brigade, the **U.S. Army** unit that roared along the length of the Berlin Wall each day in full combat gear, M-60 machine guns mounted up top on their Humvees. We'd stop at aging wooden platforms to scamper up for a look across the Wall. Our guys with binoculars looking at their guys with binoculars. The Wall was slathered along its western side with brilliant swirls of abstract artwork amid the copious graffiti. From the platform, I could see the other side of the Wall.

It was gray white, followed by a strip of pointed rocks, then barbed wire, guard towers, floodlights and another wall. The Army guys on patrol called it the Death Strip.

The Iron Curtain that stretched across Europe had its thickest, tallest, razor-wire-strewn stretch cutting through the heart of Berlin.

Weeks later, it all crumbled.

Alexanderplatz filled with protesters. The Wall came down. East Berliners spilled into West Berlin. Demonstrators stormed the headquarters of the Stasi, the once-dreaded secret police. The empty husk of the communist government teetered, then signed on to a humiliating reunification plan. Soviet troops withdrew. A million Dr. Frankensteins -- architects, engineers and workers -- began sewing the dead parts of the ruptured city back together.

A dark, nasty but thankfully short period of Berlin's history was over.

Unfortunately, I was back in Southern California when the Wall was breached. I've returned many times in the past 20 years, watched as the bulldozers swept away nearly all traces of the Wall, cranes built mirror-clad skyscrapers around Potsdamer Platz, and **Starbucks** opened on the Unter den Linden, just up the street from the Russian embassy.

First there was exuberance, a desire to dump anything remotely connected with East Berlin. But as the promise of the early years gave way to cold realities, a backlash developed against the clean, corporate capital being thrown up by civic boosters.

The disappointment has taken the odd form of "Ostalgie," a nostalgia for the communist days of East Berlin (ost means east in German).

Not a longing for the Wall, the Soviet occupiers, the secret police, the shootings of demonstrators, the decades of lost promise. But a reaction to the unraveling of the world East Berliners had known. They painted in their minds a memory of a more stable and egalitarian past, where everyone had a job and everyone was poor (except for the party elite). Where families stayed close because travel wasn't an option. A time where clubs -- chess, sports, youth, even nudist — were the places to make friends. Where every smart kid who didn't mouth off against the government could go to college. Before the raw competition of capitalism swelled the unemployment rolls, split marriages, sent children to work in distant countries, and Western products pushed out familiar if inferior brands.

For Americans, the Ostalgia bent is hard to understand. It would be unthinkable -- actually against the law -- to have Nazi symbols and artifacts sold as sweatshirts and coffee mugs. Yet hats with red stars, T-shirts emblazoned with the hammer and compass of the old DDR, and furniture that echoed the kitschy-tacky early-1970s heyday of East Berlin are sold everywhere.

But the **Nazis** had been defeated, while East Germany simply faded away. East Berliners wanted the dictators and occupiers gone, but they didn't figure on the political, cultural and social submersion of the

East by the West. Many Germans are uncomfortable with it — Der Spiegel, a top magazine, tried to declare Ostalgie as "dead" in 2006, before the worldwide recession rekindled the old sore points.

Most of all, Ostalgie is a cult of symbols -- many of which have become heavily marketed kitsch for sale to tourists. Tops is the Ampelmannchen -- "little traffic light man" -- the jaunty green man with a hat that was the "walk" sign at East German intersections. Along with his red brother signifying "don't walk," they were among the first symbols of the regime learned by children. Early attempts to convert intersections to Western-style walk and don't walk symbols were met with stiff resistance. Ampelmann, a string of boutiques, shops and restaurants, has opened across Berlin, and the symbols are highly sought souvenirs now on T-shirts, refrigerator magnets and coasters.

The smoke-belching Trabant sedan, with its noisy two-cylinder engine, has become a collector's item, spawning car clubs that gather with their Cold War clunkers by the scores, and used by the likes of rock band U2 as a symbol of cool.

Former East Berliners have battled to save communist statues and street names (Germans yes, Soviets no) that littered parks and neighborhoods throughout the city. One statue of Marx and Engels, briefly endangered with eviction from its spot near the Berliner Dom cathedral, is now a national heritage site.

These are all tiny victories against a tide of change that has swept away familiar neighborhoods. Downtrodden Mitte is once again the city's government center. The workers districts of Prenzlauer Berg and Wedding, which only a decade ago still had buildings marked by shell holes from World War II, have been steadily gentrified. A long battle over the future of the ugly, asbestos-laden Palace of the Republic, with its shimmering bronze glass front, went against modernist preservationists. The showplace of the communist regime was torn down to make way for a literal blast from the past -- a re-creation of the imperial palace of the Kaisers, dynamited by the Soviets in the early 1950s.

Berlin has always been a chameleon city, taking on whatever role history wanted of it. Prussian citadel, imperial seat, Weimar's sensual playground, Hitler's Germania, target for American bombers and Red Army troops, capital of the German Democratic Republic.

While holding tight to some of their symbols and ready to label anyone wessie or ossie (meaning originally from western or eastern Berlin), many former citizens of East Berlin say their looking backward has its limits.

Guido Weiss, 38, grew up in communist East Berlin. But he has lived more than half his life in the "new" Germany. For his parents' generation there is some regret, lingering Ostalgie, for the old days. They are the ones, as commentators have noted, who have replaced the Wall in the streets with one in their heads.

But for Weiss, it is different. A delivery driver, he's angry over 14 percent unemployment, Westerners buying up Eastern properties, and the failure of the post-unification boom to materialize. But he has no desire to turn the clock back.

"All in all, today is much better," he said. "Because now it can get better. Someday."

IF YOU GO:

HOTELS

—Westin Grand Berlin. Built in the late 1980s as the first Western-quality hotel in East Berlin. It has a great location for visiting nearby museums. Rates from about \$180 per night. Friedrichstrasse 158-164. www.westin.com.

—Circus Hotel. A favorite chic budget choice for those who want to stay in the eastern part of the city. The hotel is sponsoring events related to the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Wall. The same company operates a low-cost hostel. Rates from about \$120 per night. Rosenthalerstrasse 1. www.circus-berlin.de.

—Hotel Adlon Kempinski. Re-creation of the famous pre-World War II luxury hotel, its location on the Pariser Platz is perfect for seeing former East Berlin sites. It's also famous as the hotel where **Michael Jackson** once dangled his baby over the balcony while waiving to well-wishers. Rates from about \$425 (specials sometimes available). Unter den Linden 77. www.hotel-adlon.de

DINING

—Lutter & Wenger. Rebirth of legendary pre-World War II wine cellar with huge Weiner schnitzel and a

long list of European and other wines. Charlottenstrasse 56. Berlin-Mitte. www.lutter-wegner-gendarmenmarkt.de.

—Einstein Cafe. An East Berlin outpost of the best cafe in the city. Unter den Linden 42, www.einsteinudl.com.

—Hackescher Markt. Through fascist, communist and capitalist regimes, one constant has been the stands and cafes around this busy S-Bahn subway station.

— **Kadima** Restaurant. Russian-Jewish food in the heart of what was a pre-World War II Jewish community. Oranienburgerstrasse 28. www.kadimarestaurant.com.

—Cafe Orange. Relaxed cafe and restaurant next door to the restored facade of the Neu Synagogue. Oranienburgerstrasse 32.

—Fassbender & Rausch. Best known as one of the great chocolate shops of Europe, the shop also has a nice little dessert cafe. Charlottenstrasse 60.

SHOPPING

—Ampelmann shops. Locations around the city, including in the Potsdamer Platz Arkaden. www.ampelmann.de

BOOKS

—"Berlin 1945-1989," by Maik Kopleck (Past Finder, \$20). The best guidebook for communist-era sites. Kopleck also has a guidebook for Nazi-era sites. Make sure to get an **English** copy (look for British flag on the back), as many stores only sell the German version.

—"Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin," by Alexandra Richie (Carroll & Graff, \$48). Encyclopedic history of the city, with a very strong section on the Cold War. Richie ties together the draw of Berlin to a series of megalomaniacal regimes.

—"The Ghosts of History: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape," by Brian Ladd (**University of Chicago** Press, \$25). Challenging but intriguing look at how successive rulers have used Berlin architecture and urban planning to underscore the expansive (and often totalitarian) aims of their governments.

MOVIES

—"Wings of Desire," the original **Wim Wenders** version, has several views of East Berlin as it was during the Cold War. "The Spy Who Came in From the Cold," excellent espionage story featuring **Richard Burton** with early action centering around (a movie lot version of) Checkpoint Charlie. "Good Bye Lenin!," the best "Ostalgia" film, about a son who goes to great lengths to convince his Communist Party loyalist mother, recently awakened from a coma, that the Wall never came down. "The Lives of Others" depicts the suffocating presence of the Stasi in the lives of East German artists, with a twist ending.

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