



visit to berlin

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I'd wanted to visit Berlin for some time. Friends had long enthused about the city, and filmic images of it always summoned romantic thoughts and a sense of deep history—albeit one encrusted with periods dark and horrific. Recently, I was presented with the chance to travel, by van, with a few French friends and musicians, to do some concerts in Berlin, see it for myself. We drove through the night to the German capital, over a thousand kilometers from Paris, and arrived bleary-eyed in the early morning.

It took time to find the area known as 'Wedding', an extremely poor Turkish district that's also a popular spot for artists, who take advantage of large lofts, perfect for producing and exhibiting their work. Upon arrival, we carried our bags into a dirty-looking block with ornate doors painted orange. The walls were daubed with graffiti and some black and white photos of hippie types. We had no success rousing our host, but his flat mate, an illegal immigrant from Romania, finally awoke and managed to stir the man—a native of France called 'Le Pape' (The Pope), although with tufts of thick hair and one of his ears lined by metal rings, he's far from papal in appearance. He wore not one pair of glasses, but two—thick, dark goggles masking his eyewear reserved for indoor vision. His clothes, as he later told me, have all been "found", just like the assortment of bizarre art in the spacious but sparsely decorated apartment we were to occupy. This acquired garb included a pair of jeans with a broken zipper which rendered his fly open at all times. Papal though he may not be, Le Pape does possess the face of a philosopher, and that's only appropriate: He's a deep thinker blessed with an enthusiastic personality. We exchanged anecdotes with him, and then fell asleep on an assortment of mattresses.

Once awake, it was time to discover Berlin. First, after much indecision, we were taken to a photography show, black and whites depicting undoubtedly local subjects.

The people running the project were most convivial and an array of foods was generously on offer. A great deal of English was spoken, as it was throughout our trip. Young Germans have a natural flair for English. Communication was, therefore, not a problem for me or my co-travelers—German only being required when we shopped at an extremely inexpensive Turkish take-away (at which point, a certain amount of confusion reigned).

After yet more deliberation, the group divided—some off to prepare for the evening's proceedings, some to take in more central parts of Berlin. I was itching to move about and opted for the latter option. Our guide was the mild-natured, heavy-accented Romanian, who was informative about the city and seemingly well-immersed in its hedonistic culture. We got on the

U-Bahn, and also took in the overground S-Bahn. (Yellow seems a dominant color in Berlin, the subway trains and trams awash in it.) I simply followed the others' leads. Even in the early evening, Berlin seemed to be priming itself for an enormous shindig. I spotted people carrying in party material, music equipment, and the like.

One structure that caught my eye was the The Fernsehturm (German for "television tower"), which is 365 meters high. We were told that one can travel, at speed, up to a restaurant, there, and be privy to a fantastic view of the sprawling city below.

As night was closing in, we walked around the city, saw the canal and much evidence of reconstruction work. Berlin is in a constant state of flux. It doesn't have the uniformity of so many other urban areas its size, having been fused together from two parts. A movement is afoot to tear down symbols of the past and buildings that have had associations with Communism, some believing that they are symbols of a repressive regime and unworthy of the esteem they currently enjoy in central Berlin. Debate ensues about how to upgrade the city so that it might compete with the likes of Paris and London without losing complete sight of its bygone days.

We performed a concert at a place called Café Shmidt. It's décor proved to be most interesting; I ventured downstairs, where there I came upon a tall, suitably decadent mannequin on a staircase and, below that, an area for a Dj, followed by a quite long skittles alley. There were people scattered about upstairs, either drinking beers or finishing their evening meals. We were minus our Vj (video Dj), who was forced to stay in Paris and would have had a great screen on which to project images—a real loss. Once our sound was established, I began my set. I was playing Dub but was unsure of how it fit into the scheme of things in Berlin, even though the audience represented a broad range of international countries. Admittedly, it might have presented a bit of incongruity, but a Dj/musician has to persist—whatever the makeup of the crowd.

I was preceded by a couple of collaborators combining guitar/bass/electronic music with didgeridoo. Some applause rang out, but it seemed we were at that early evening point of death when people leave for unknown destinations. We left, as well, to play our next gig, back at Le Pape's.

A makeshift sound system was quickly put in place, and I began to play some of my tunes. Earlier, the apartment had been furnished with some crates of cheap beer and a lethal punch. People drifted in and out as the music thundered. Some shuffled about while others brought in their own instruments for the purpose of a free jam. I quickly got into the spirit of things and, despite a rather threadbare group, it was a pleasant experience. Both projects played and the party eventually petered out in that way that parties do.

The next day, we discovered we'd been locked in by our host. We tried everything imaginable to release ourselves (including the obvious recourse of calling The Pope on the phone), but he remained downstairs, oblivious to the world. We tried to attract the attention of passersby who might help remove us from our predicament. We took a vote on whether we should force open the

door. For three hours, we were locked in a German squat.

At long last, Le Pape stirred and we were freed—but having missed out on some potential tourist action. I was determined to get to the Reichstag. It can be hard, with a group of travelers, to get to do what you want; however, my companions were amenable and cheery. We arrived in the center of the city only to find that there was a semi-marathon in progress. Muscular types wearing tight lycra sauntered about to the sound of pounding rhythms and strange clacking sounding instruments held by spectators. We'd arrived at the tail end of things and some of the runners already had beers in their hands.

The marathon meant that taking a bus was impossible because roads had been cut off; so, a long walk was necessary. We neared the Brandenburger Tor (Gate), where, the week before, there had been celebrations for the anniversary of the European Union; the festivities were still in evidence. Built in 1791, that famous German monument, scale-wise, isn't as big as some might imagine.

Not far from the gate, stood the Reichstag, with its inner glass dome construction. It was situated by the wall before the unification and badly damaged in a fire in 1933, Communists accused of being responsible. The building was further damaged when the Russians entered Berlin. The Reichstag's latest reconstruction, which lasted from 1995 to 1999, was designed by Sir Norman Foster; it adds a glass dome over the plenary hall, and—like much Berlin reconstruction—has been the subject of immense controversy.

We sat down, on the expanse of grass near the structure's entrance, to take in the surrounding city, that includes some extraordinary modern architecture.

The next place of interest for us was the Holocaust Memorial—another controversial monument, and unsurprisingly so, since it's a reminder of Germany's most nightmarish hour. The Monument takes the form of a sprawling field of 2700 stone slabs near the Brandenburg Gate. Oddly, it seemed, to me, like an austere playground, an adventure maze of some sort.

The Holocaust Memorial was designed by U.S. architect Peter Eisenman, whose construct divided opinion and was finally approved only in 1999. He said, then, that he "hoped that Berliners and visitors to the city will navigate the pathways as part of their daily lives". He added, "I like to think that people will use it for shortcuts, as an everyday experience, not as a holy place," And, in truth, during our visit, there were people lain out, looking up at the clear sky...children playing....all in nonchalance.

Eisenman dismissed claims that 60 years on was too late to erect a memorial.

"One hundred years from now, people will not say 'this came too late'. For me, it is still early."

Some critics said the design was too abstract, while others pointed out that many thousands of non-Jews perished in the Holocaust but are excluded from mention in the memorial. I had difficulty forming a correlation between what I saw, there, and the Jewish extermination, and had to ask one of my more enlightened fellow travelers what the huge blocks of concrete signified. Whatever had been constructed could never represent the enormity of the horrors of Hitler's Germany, a terrible affront to a race of people and other victims of the Nazis.

We headed back, having satisfied our touristy needs, and our minds turned to doing another concert, back at the squat. That evening proved quite challenging; due to the excesses of alcohol and other indulgences, our meager audience was more like a group of wayward children. One member was a painter from England, who, when sober, seemed pleasant enough but, in a drunken state, became most obnoxious and willing to embroil in any kind of provocation and psychological point scoring...the type of inebriate who lingers, who persists, and to whom you must say, *ad infinitum*, "You're a nice guy, but you're drunk and should just go home, now." Such prompts proved fruitless.

Problem Drinker wasn't the only Brit in attendance; there was another—a 'Geordie' (indeed, a *proud* Geordie, despite having lived in England's Tyneside region a mere seven years). A perennial traveler now doing a stint in Berlin, he was accompanied by a petite, Mexican girlfriend with large brown eyes, a prodigious collection of facial expressions, and the impish look of Björk; she would be the ideal model for an adorable cartoon character. The girlfriend would float in and out of the room, perform a sort of raver's jig, then disappear.

The Geordie and his significant other came as part of a package also comprised of a German producer named Boris and a dog. Boris didn't feature much in the evening, as he was slumped in a chair, possibly from various over-excesses or sheer exhaustion; music producers don't tend to sleep much. The dog, which cruised freely about the apartment, would occasionally steal everyone's attention.

Another Berliner, very drunk, swayed about, lurching and laughing—usually at his own witty observations. Le Pape held court in the kitchen, no doubt guarding the alcohol. Things started to get out of hand in the main living room. Some of the party guests, like petulant children, took it upon themselves to twiddle knobs on the music equipment, creating full-on bass and mass distortion. There were aspiring musicians, singers, and sound people, there, who seemed to delight in making our crew suffer, by changing our equipment's settings. Normally, hard core roadies would have dealt with these unwanted intrusions, but reasoning in English and Spanish had to suffice.

It was Seb, the didgeridoo player, who finally cracked, as Mexican Björk, in tartan trousers, tampered one time too many. He began packing up, bringing the music to a definitive end and causing the Geordie's pocket-sized girlfriend to lose her puppy dog smiles; she adopted, instead, the pathos-riddled face of a child who'd just had her favorite toy snatched away.

The squat, as a whole, clearly isn't always a utopia; there were a number of wrangles and noticeable bitterness among its occupants. Apparently, they've received threats of being kicked out by the police, at any point. Some, it appeared, have paid a portion of the rent to the company that owns the large block; others have chosen not to. These are professional squatters. Le Pape had previously been part of a squat, plumb in the center of Paris—in a bank, no less. I'd actually visited there, a couple of times, before it was closed down. Given the chance, our host would squat the Vatican, itself; he's not one to ever lay roots. For him, the motto might be "Property is Theft", given his theory that if not for squatters, such buildings would simply fester and decay.

The next morning, we set off back to Paris. In some ways, I was sorry to leave the madness of Berlin; but, at the same time, I lean toward order and structure. We jostled our way home, through massive German juggernauts and experiencing a few near-misses. It was a surprise, when we joined the huge traffic congestion in Paris, that we'd made it back unscathed.

Germany's capital lived up to expectations and provided us with a memorable weekend. I would say that anyone who's an artist and thinking of relocating to a city in Europe, should consider Berlin. It's *incredibly* cheap, compared to London or Paris, and certainly lively. There are some fantastic buildings, although it falls way short of Paris, in terms of architecture. The people are relaxed, affable and cool—as long as they're not tempted to tinker with musical equipment, or become too drunk to be coherent. And I'm sure that friends can be made easily—especially if you like parties that straddle the brink of chaos.

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