

So, I've had about a month here in Berlin, and I think all is going well.

It is time for me to write the first of three reports, which I think should offer something of use to those potential Berlin visitors as opposed to a summation of how things are going for me on the [Artquest/Acava](#) residency.

Thus far Berlin seems surprisingly mellow. I am consistently amazed by how few people there are on the streets, Saturday afternoon in the centre of town feels something like Clerkenwell on a Sunday. I'm told this is because, though it is designed to house up to seven million people, only three and a half million actually live here<sup>1</sup>. The feeling that there are relatively few people in the streets is heightened by the often huge scale of unicoloured roadside apartment blocks and quadruple wide pavements. I have never failed to get a seat on any form of public transport, no matter when or where I've been travelling and you barely have to queue in the supermarket, even if you go at seven in the evening when people have finished work.

A note on supermarkets; supermarkets in Germany are, in my experience, not really like they are in the UK. If you see something in the street and you think it is a supermarket it is probably a huge chemists; [Schlecker](#) and [Rossmann](#) are almost Tesco Metro like in their frequency, as are the various apotheke. For regular food shopping Lidl, Aldi and Netto are like smaller versions of the ones in England, there is also [Rewe](#) which is slightly more up market and by far the most seen is [Kaisers](#), which is a bit like a Sainsbury's local. They don't really stock international food so much (you'll have to go to a Turkish store to buy hummus or harissa paste for instance or a Chinese supermarket to buy English tea) they do though all have that strange section as seen in English Lidl's where near the check out there will be a opportunity to buy a range of specialist products changing on a bi-weekly basis and advertised in a very slim A3 colour catalogue; one time it might be a car maintenance section, a fortnight later it is more focused on equestrian pursuits. Surprises for me -

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<sup>1</sup> Looking at the Wikipedia statistics it is still the second or third most populated city in Europe, depending on how you count it, it does though a low population density 3,857.6/km<sup>2</sup> compared to London's 4,807/km<sup>2</sup> or Paris' crazy 20,807/km<sup>2</sup>.

very few places will take either Visa or a credit card, even the huge four floor electronic stores like [Saturn](#) and [Media Markt](#) only take Maestro (which is currently being phased out in the UK), everything is shut on Sunday so plan ahead on Saturday night and finally they don't pre-slice bacon, but they do pre-sliced cheese. Away from supermarket chains the organic or 'Bio' thing seems huge here with, at least in my gentrified area, independent Fresh and Wild equivalents being as common as regular supermarkets.

Berlin has a fairly large foot print so you will need to use Public transport to get about, even with a bike some things are just easier to get to on a train, unless a 45 minute ride on a barely functioning flea market bike is something you find peculiarly enticing<sup>2</sup>. One benefit of the U-Bahn (underground) or S-Bahn (overground) not being enormously oversubscribed is that you can take your bike on board, though you have to buy a ticket for it or risk a fine.

The transport ticket system here operates on a more or less honour system. You have to buy a ticket at the machine (which has an English language option) and then validate your ticket at the start of your journey by getting it stamped in one of the little machines on the platforms or on board the tram or bus; although all the different modes of public transport are operated by different companies one ticket works for them all. There are no barriers or ticket checkers as you get on or off the train or tram (and on a bus you just show your ticket to the driver as you get on), there are however conductors who occasionally get on and there are also undercover officers both of whom check tickets. I have yet to encounter either of these but I am assured they do exist; if you are caught the fines are quite hefty and there is apparently a 'no excuses' policy.

The most useful ticket I have found is the standard Einzelfahrausweise AB ticket. This costs €2.10 and allows you to travel (within zones A and B) on any

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<sup>2</sup> The police here are pretty keen on checking peoples bikes are in good working order. For the German police good working order means two working brakes (a fixed wheel does not count as a brake), wheel reflectors or reflective walled tyres, pedal reflectors, a bell and fixed dynamo lights. If you haven't got all of these things you'll receive a slip that means you have to fix the problems and present the newly compliant bike at the Police station by some specified date or get a fine. 'Sport bikes' are exempt from the necessity for reflectors and dynamos but you must have working clip on lights with you, even in the middle of the day. For your bike to classify as a sport bike it must weigh less than 11kg.

mode of transport away from the station of validation for up to two hours – this means that, so long as you are going away from where you started your journey, you can get on and off and change between the train, tram and bus as often as you wish within those two hours. If you do want to make a number of stops this makes planning routes quite interesting. There is also one day travel card, zone AB is €6.10 and a 7 day AB ticket is €26.20. The other type of ticket is called a Kurzstrecken and this only allows you to travel three stops on the train or six stops by bus or tram so more or less walking distance. Berlin is, it seems, very well set up for going out eating, drinking etc. as such the train runs until about 1AM in the week and 24 hours at the weekend and, in an effort to encourage visitors to the city, if you have a monthly ticket at the weekend you can take two guests with you for free.

I'll try and do something of a gallery summation in my next report, at the moment though I'll say that to get into museums you have to pay; €8 will buy you a day ticket to see the state collection. This means that you can see the collection in as many of the museums as you can make it to in one day. My record is a measly two. You can though, if you are feeling particularly hungry for museum based culture in a short space of time, get a three day ticket for €15. Based on what I've seen the museums are pretty good and there are a lot in Berlin<sup>3</sup>, there are also an enormous number of commercial galleries and [KW](#), (which is similar to the ICA). As I say though more on this when I know more.

Since I've been here I've mostly been trying to find their equivalent of charity shops and jumble sales. For one reason and another Berlin has become famous for its 'thrift store style' and from my point of view this has been to the huge detriment to those who might be interested in the joys of second hand shopping. Basically anywhere that large numbers of young people live/hang out, everything that may be listed as a second hand shop has become

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<sup>3</sup> The state collection is spread over the [Altes Museum](#), the [Alte Nationalgalerie](#), the [Bode Museum](#), the [Pergamon Museum](#), the [Schinkel Museum](#), [Hamburger Bahnhof](#) (a bit like Tate Modern), the [Musical Instrument Museum](#), [Gemäldegalerie](#) (Painting Gallery), [Kunstabibliothek](#) (the Art Library), [Kupferstichkabinett](#) (the Museum of Prints and Drawings), the [Kunstgewerbemuseum](#) (Museum of Arts and Crafts) and the [Neue Nationalgalerie](#), the [Egyptian Museum](#), the [Berggruen Collection](#), [Galerie der Romantik](#) (the Romantic Gallery), the [Museum für Vor und Frühgeschichte](#) (Primeval and Early History Museum), the [Museum of European Cultures](#) and the [Ethnologisches Museum](#) (Ethnological Museum).

basically Rokit or some similar retro store, in essence everything in there has already been found and selected by someone else, thus everything is 'on trend' and priced for profit<sup>4</sup>. The main charity shop chain [Humana](#) seems to specialise in reselling H&M clothing for quite a lot more than it cost new. The flea markets<sup>5</sup> are basically like Brick Lane or perhaps more so Camden Market i.e. hoards of early 20's fashion tourists buying ironic clothing and apparel. This also isn't my idea of a good thrift based experience. Properly arranged stands that display vintage sunglasses on purpose designed racks or people with clothes rails selling colour and brand selected 70's and 80's tracksuit tops are basically a sure-fire sign that there will be nothing to find there. The other thing that is an absolutely huge staple of the second hand market here is 60's and 70's design objects, all of which have been researched on eBay and priced accordingly. Thus far the only market that I have found that seemed interesting was [Trödelmarkt am Rathaus Schöneberg](#) which seemed to be mostly Turkish immigrants selling junk, way rougher than the other ones but of course with this comes the potential to turn up a gem. On nearby Martin-Luther Straße are a couple of junk shops that are pretty good, (though the market is on Sunday so those shops are closed) and there are a few around in Neukölln, which incidentally is apparently the new place that young people are starting to move to.

Since the fall of The Wall (and indeed sometime before) Berlin has attracted large numbers of a young and artistically minded type of visitor. This along with many other political factors has encouraged a certain socio-economic climate to evolve. Large numbers of effectively unskilled and often non-German speaking people come and live for a short time, even if this short time is a couple of years, and this does appear to actually have a tangible effect and as such a slightly unusual society has developed. The housing is relatively cheap to rent and there are huge numbers of coffee shops and bars

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<sup>4</sup> Old Adidas trainers are about €45, re-tailored now skinny Levis are €30, typical retro band/brand/slogan t-shirts €10, tons of those 70's fake leather holdalls that always crack.

<sup>5</sup> Mauerpark the most like Camden stables, Arkonaplatz, mostly researched retro furniture, Boxhagener Platz a bit rougher but still everyone there is young white and middle class and at least a third of the people are tourists, Treptower Undercover market looks rough but also super eBay researched with stuff like 60's/70's/80's film magazines stored all crumpled up in cardboard boxes but priced at €10 and if you ask how much anything is you get a bit of a schpiel about 'this is a really collectable rare...' despite the fact that you just pulled it out of a bucket that was half full of old spanners.

and clothes stores in which one can work and survive, but it seems that every young person you meet has a three or four day a week job in one of these shops which allows to spend their other three or four days a week frequenting them. Because Berlin was in the German Democratic Republic, with just west Berlin being a kind of capitalist west German island, financially it is still has a lot of catching up to do with the other big cities in Germany. The big businesses (read big employers) have already by and large set up home elsewhere and the reunification hasn't been cheap so there are relatively few jobs here and unemployment is high at 14.2% (German average: 7.9%). In order to get one of the relatively few interesting and well-paid full-time jobs one must be able to speak perfect German, which as a foreigner is fairly uncommon as it is actually quite a difficult second language to really master. This means that (from my experience of having met a few people working in what is I suppose called the creative sector) in places like architects' offices and graphic design studios, which in London are often extremely ethnically diverse, in Berlin they are very German. I'm not saying that this is a good or a bad thing, it just seems to be the case and to me it seemed rather strange. The lack of people being able to get a half decent gainful employment (let alone kind of falling into it) means that relatively few young Germans actually decide to settle down and make their lives here and even fewer non-German nationals. This means that in fact despite feeling incredibly young and cool Berlin's population is getting older and birth rates are low, some say worryingly low. It is hard to imagine why or how this might change because as a result of the transience of the young population, here with a kind of have fun and just make ends meet attitude, the society has become tailored to serve those needs, rather than the needs of those who want to settle down get a decent job, have a couple of kids and invest back into the city and its infrastructure.

Its political and historical uniqueness is though, of course, the thing that makes Berlin what it is. A city that until 20 years ago was half communist and half capitalist will not be like any other you have been to. Basically, from my short time here it would seem that Berlin has not quite reached the late stage capitalism of London or most other major western European cities (at least the ones I've been to). The simple fact that shops aren't all open seemingly as

much as is humanly possible or the fact that a normal bar, (and I don't mean some kind of eco-hipster café), will say in the menu, 'we don't take cards because we would rather your money went to the staff than to the banks'. The fact that people rent and work three days a week rather than buy and work seven. The fact that the consumer might have some notion that their rights are often a negotiation with the rights of workers. This is, to me, an ultimately refreshing environment. That said inevitably if you are staying here for more than a few days it does require some readjustment. Someone gave me the advice that things are much easier if you just don't compare it [Berlin], too often it will feel like it's coming up short. You are way better off to just enjoy it for its own merits, then before you know it you'll see that the things you were missing were often not that important. I agree with that and whilst some comparing is inevitable if you try to err on the side consideration rather than demand, the result is a feeling that Berlin provides an interesting and healthy lens through which to consider society.