



I ♥ Berlin

Our travel writer **Aoibheann Mac Namara** makes another visit to an old favourite

I have been in a long and fairly committed relationship with Berlin since setting up a gallery and artist residency there in 2008. Berlin is an instantly engaging place that has a generation of creatives hooked. It moves at such a relaxed pace that when you come back you almost feel as if you have been a month on a desert island, an odd feeling from a trip to a European city. You also come back totally inspired and enriched. In order to achieve all this I encourage you to follow the below plan. If you do, you too will get the Berlin bug and may never want to leave.

It is essential to stay east, there is no reason to go west; west is all that we have already. In the east of Berlin, having been removed from it all for so many years they have a heightened aesthetic and human curiosity, rendering so much creative thought and truly engaged connections, coupled with a healthy distance. The areas of Prenzlauer Berg, Friedrichshain, Mitte and Kreuzberg are the key areas to East Berlin magic. Mitte being the centre, Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg being the gritty, most interesting middle eastern emerging areas and my favourite, Prenzlauer Berg for a lesson in perfect living, a baby boom bliss enclave of uber-cool boho.

Walking or cycling throughout all areas is a must and with the tree lined almost de-trafficked streets there is an amazing calm

and peace to your exploration of this constantly evolving and intriguing city. If you take public transport you can't fully watch the film that is Berlin as it unfolds in front of you. Walking everywhere will allow you the chance to stop for that late Macchiato and a roll up 'organic' cigarette and a sit in the sun and a real chance to stop and not think.

Staying at Hotel Michelburger is a sure-fire way to plug straight into the main artery of this city. There is simply no hotel like it. In the vein of Kex in Reykjavik, it is at the centre of everything. Michelburger, an old converted factory houses bar, restaurant and endless rooms of the most perfect design without being design driven. The whole crazy tableau is unified by the film *The Big Lebowski* being shown on a loop on every turn of the darkened corridors leading to the bedrooms. And yes - you might have guessed it - when you turn on the TV in your room there is only one thing on, so your whole trip is set to a crazy circular watching of this film and it feels hilariously like *Ground Hog Day* and typifies the quirk of this addictive hotel. The hotel puts on, amongst other things, easy trips to see young designers and alternative tours to Berlin - this doesn't include the long tedious trip to Checkpoint Charlie, it does include the underbelly of the edgy areas and art collectives in disused spaces.

The restaurant is like a 1950s canteen with delicate hand



picked flowers on each Formica table, lending a softness to the space. Breakfast is endless in the buffet style of Berlin bounty. Cocktails at the bar are the thing of legend and they have their own liqueur, created and mixed up to exceptional tunes and plugged in barmen.

If I am able to get myself out of the hotel, I usually head to Mitte to the shopping area and to my buddies at Star Styling clothes shop www.starstyling.net on Mulackstr. I get kitted out in foil transfer padded bomber jackets and am fully ready to hit the streets then and pop around the corner to my all time favourite restaurant, Madchenitaliener on Alte Schonhauser, the all time best shopping street. This small Italian restaurant serves all things perfect in the world of food - meat and cheese plates, simple pasta plates, wobbly panacottas and choc mousses with fruity Prosecco and perfect coffees - I go back over and over again on trips to Berlin. Hugely busy; get there early or pre-book or it could all end in tears.

I like to take a walk down Auguststrasse for the ease of it. Long since off the boil for art as it is too commercial, it is a lovely walk none the less and I usually have a coffee or some bircher muesli in Milch and watch the children play in the playground and enjoy the afternoon sun before heading up to my favourite street for all things, Kastanille, and to my favourite shop Kwik and then on for falafel at Babel and for a truly middle-eastern time. Walk the full length of this great street and head to Plaurberg and any of the streets will bring you joy. Most especially Dunckerstrasse and the food shop and cookbook mecca, Goldhahn and Sampson where the genial hosts will serve you great coffee while you flick through some of the best collection of cookbooks from around the world after stocking up on their deli delights. Right next door is one of those classic Berlin bars, Liebling for more outside sitting and people-watching and time for drinks as the sun goes down on another perfect Berlin day.

Sunday morning in Berlin means only one thing for me. That



is getting to Bar Gargarin or its neighbour Gorki Park for the classic buffet brunch, outside rain or shine (blankets at the ready), popping Prosecco and looking out on the water-tower, one of my favourite architectures in Berlin. Pickled fish and vegetables, boiled eggs and cold meats - that typical merging of a lost generation of food and the melting pot of its post-war eastern European identity which renders the food oddly unsophisticated and yet endearing. You can nearly right off the rest of the day and tumble back into bed to wear off the club from the nights before. But yet the draw to Badeschiff is too great. This is a wonderful collection of pools, saunas and bars - add the fact that you are actually swimming in the Spree river and you have a truly mind blowing spot to recoup on a Sunday afternoon. Don't miss the Vodka saunas on the hour, where Vodka is poured on the coals as the heat intensifies. Cool tunes, fresh juices and intermittent drops into the chilling river eradicates the excess of the night or days before and you are ready

to face the plane home with the perfect memories of the days in this endlessly captivating very un-European city.

There is so much to do in Berlin that this is just a small drop in the ocean. There is so much fantastic art to see and people to meet. If you have not gone then go, you will be captivated at any time of the year. Whatever you want to do, you will be rewarded there and at every turn your heart will be warmed by beauty and by encounters. From the moment you arrive at the airport and pop in a taxi and the taxi driver plays classic 1980's tunes as he speeds past the great monuments of Berlin, of tumultuous and triumphant pasts, you are already in the film and excited by what the next few jam packed days will bring you. Savour every moment because moments really do exist there.

Aoibheann Mac Namara, Owner of Ard Bia and Nimmos Restaurant, Galway

