

# lingua weekly

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## Berlin! Berlin! Wir fahren nach Berlin!

By Wesley Trobaugh



Berlin is huge. It is an island in Germany; it is different from the rest. That's not good or bad; it's just how I see it. If you're going there for a weekend, it won't be enough. I was there for four and a half days. It was good for a brief introduction but there was a lot I didn't get to see and do. The streets are long and wide and distances are amazingly far. That said, you don't get lost. It's an easy city to get around in; it's just not entirely walkable. Mitte (the center) is mostly walkable, though I get a sense that it is more touristy than "authentic."

What is authentic? That I probably can't answer but I will try. One of the more central areas I liked, for instance, was Hackescher Markt and Oranienburger Straße, with its inner terraces and patios. It was the most *gemütlich* area I came across, despite its popularity among Spanish tourists. In Berlin I discovered how much I value *gemütlichkeit*. As I get older, I am less awed by the big city and more awed by smaller communities, or not small, but what I like is compact. Madrid is a lot more compact than Berlin, especially from a tourist's point of view.

We stayed in Schöneberg. It is nice and quiet, a decent place to live, but not a lot of action. For action (interpret that as you will), I liked Kreuzberg and Prenzlauer Berg quite a bit. I found Kreuzberg

very liveable (is that a word?), with its shops and markets. There is a large Turkish population there, which adds to the diversity, but they've been there so long that the all-night Turkish bakery was probably just as "authentic" as *wurst* and beer.

I interpret action as activity by day and activity by night. While I am not exactly a night owl, I appreciate a place where there is something going on 24 hours a day. The action by night that we found in Berlin was entertaining, but not quite what we had expected. On Friday night, we ended up in Kreuzberg, on Mehringdamm. Well, the place we happened upon was having a varied evening, what with a Schlager party at the entrance, a Disco party in the middle, and a strange English-speaking (-singing) 60s remix (think the Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel) in the smokers' lounge. It was both perplexing and amusing. I only wish I had brushed up on my Schlager before I went because, my, were they having a good time!

Another interesting encounter with "action" was on Sunday evening, on Oranienstraße. Apparently at seven there had been a dance class. Apparently they had taught them to dance salsa. Apparently they told them that any song that could possibly be played could be danced to with salsa moves. Salsa? Salsa. Madonna? Salsa. Abba? Salsa. Katy Perry? Salsa. To me, it demonstrated the oh-so-German need for a system. Dancing by moving and swaying and shaking just won't work. You need a system. You need someone to teach you exactly HOW to dance. And they took it seriously. Very seriously. Those of us who just wanted to bob a little were so intimidated by the salsa moves that we just stood aside and observed. I ended up speaking Basque with a Berliner who recognized the logo on my Loreak Mendian t-shirt. A bit surreal. But all in all, it was a fun evening.

Along with the action, Berlin has a very creepy past. Creepy is the best word I can use. So many things have happened in that city, so many of them not good in even the slightest way.

For me the creepiest thing in Berlin is what is now the German Finance Ministry (creepy in its own right). It was the Nazi Reich Air Ministry building and is basically the only Nazi construction standing. There is something about it that gives you the shivers. Maybe it's because they just left it there and took a utilitarian approach to its destiny, rather than making it of tourist appeal. It's probably because it is really the only physical remnant of the Nazi regime, something I had only seen in films. Berlin brings lots of films to life and brings you closer to history.

Creepy, yes, but it makes you think and reflect. It makes you afraid, afraid to see just how easily people are convinced and how quickly the wrong people can take a country down. I think about my own country...

Berlin is a lot. I don't know if it's as sexy as Klaus Wowereit says, but it is definitely a place to see, a place to be.

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