

SOUNDING OUT...

BERLIN

Germany's capital city has undergone major changes since reunification and is now rivalling London, Paris and New York on the cosmopolitan stakes. Martin Gordon reports



It has been said that living in Berlin would be akin to living in Nirvana were it not for the Berliners. To quote a recent guide to the Germans – ‘they consider it more necessary to tell you that your life philosophy is hopelessly misguided than to pretend to like your ghastly shirt’. However, if you can ignore the Berliners’ directness, you will discover a city unique in Europe. Imagine a capital city surrounded by lakes and forests, with sandy beaches only ten minutes away from the Parliament buildings. Following German reunification in 1989, it seemed as if Berlin had turned into a building site. But things are less frenzied today, not least because as many people leave Berlin as arrive. Population levels (currently at three and a quarter million) grew by only 0.5% last year, despite it now being the German capital once more.

Getting around Berlin is no problem given the efficient under- and over-ground train system, the night buses and the proliferation of bike hire shops. Seeing Berlin by bike is an experience not to be missed – red-painted cycle paths are everywhere.

To find out what’s on offer, check out the bi-monthly *Tip* (www.tip-berlin.de) and *Zitty* (www.zitty.de) listings magazines. They appear on alternate weeks and are an ideal way to digest the enormous array of culture. There are also web magazines *Flyer*

(www.flyer.de/berlin) and *O30* (www.berlin030.de).

There is a thriving music scene that encompasses world music as well as jazz, rock and pop. Live music venues range from the officially sanctioned Haus der Kulturen der Welt, a rather cold analogue to London’s South Bank Centre, to dodgy dive bars in the former Communist East. World music, although well represented by visiting artists, doesn’t have a regular home, sharing the stages with whoever else happens to be passing through at the time.

Besides Europe’s biggest free dance event, the Love Parade (above) which happens in July, Berlin is also home to a number of regular music and culture festivals. The Karneval der Kulturen is every June, and attracts half a million people, during which it traditionally rains buckets. The Fête de la Musique, also in June, has 40 stages dotted around the city, and the All Nations festival in July sees the embassies throwing open their doors and inviting all lovers of culture (and food) to investigate the land of their choice.

So where can the world music lover slake his thirst? As far as radio is concerned, the only choice is the world’s first world-music-only round-the-clock station radio MultiKulti (www.multikulti.de), to be found at 106.8 FM. They also organise the monthly World Music Charts Europe

(www.wmce.de), where you can find a taste of what might be passing through Berlin in the coming months.

As for music venues, the below are worth investigating. Travel info is noted, but you can also look at a very handy online travel site with maps, www.stadtplandienst.de.

MUSIC VENUES

Quasimodo

Great basement club, well-appointed and probably the oldest and best jazz/world music venue in Berlin. Dark and intimate and, if you don’t mind cigarette smoke permeating your every orifice (two out of three Berliners smoke, and it seems that they all hang out here), this is the place for you. Musically it will be worth it – recently Joe Zawinul, Tania Maria, Georgie Fame & Ben Sidran and Al di Meola have all performed here. (Kantstraße 12a, 10623, +49 (0)30 312 80806, www.quasimodo.de, U-Bahn U2, Zoologischer Garten)

Columbiahalle

With a capacity of over 3,000, the former USAF sports hall-turned Berlin’s second biggest venue plays host to the occasional world music act. Daniela Mercury and Angélique Kidjo are booked for later in

2003, so it's worth checking. The atmosphere is friendly, the beer requires a deposit for the (plastic) glass and it's right next door to the Tempelhof Airport, former Luftwaffe HQ and the centre of US activities until the end of the Cold War. Get there early and have a nose around the airfield before they replace it with hotels as it's due for redevelopment.

(Columbiadam 13-21, 10965, +49 (0)30 698 0980, www.columbiahalle.de, U-Bahn U6, Platz Der Luftbrücke)

Columbiafritz

Next to the Columbiahalle, but smaller and more intimate, this was a former USAF cinema. Candy Dulfer, Ismaël Lô and Billy Bragg do very well in these slightly reduced surroundings. Standing room only.

(Columbiadam 9-11, 10965, +49 (0)30 6981 2828, www.columbiafritz.de, U-Bahn U6, Platz der Luftbrücke)



Columbiafritz

Junction Bar

Another small basement bar with a funky atmosphere, run by an American ex-pat. There's also a café upstairs. Local bands and the more obscure passers-through appear here. (Gneisenastraße 18, 10961, +49 (0)30 698 17421, www.junction-bar.de, U-Bahn U6/U7, Gneisenastr.)

Arena

Rather cavernous former factory that needs a lot of noise to fill it, although sightlines are great: you can peer up Carlos Santana's nose as he grimaces at you. Björk will be more rewarding, no doubt. (Eichenstraße 4, 12435, Treptow, +49 (0)30 533 7333, www.arena-berlin.de, S-Bahn S6/8/9/10, Treptower Park)

Pfefferberg

Set in a former brewery in hip Prenzlauer Berg and with a big beer garden, Pfefferberg hosts a variety of discerningly chosen acts, from Afro-beat and Gypsy music to rock and hip-hop. (Schönhauserallee 176, 10435, Prenzlauer Berg, +49 (0)30 4438 3110, www.pfefferberg.de, U-Bahn U2, Senefelder Platz)



Tempodrom

Tränenpalast

In translation, the name means 'Palace of Tears', as this was the site of the main crossing point between east and west Berlin, and many a family waved their goodbyes within these rather grim concrete walls.

Today it's a rather sparkling affair, decorated by old TV monitors in memory of previous times. There's comfortable table seating to experience the variety of jazz, soul and world music (especially Latin and Cuban) acts that perform nightly. (Reichstagufer 17, 10117, Friedrichstraße, +49 (0)30 206 10011, www.tranenpalast.de, U-Bahn & S-Bahn Friedrichstraße)

Tempodrom am Anhalter Bahnhof

Built on the site of Europe's largest train station which was bombed by the Americans, and which lay in ruins until the late 80s. The remaining entrance archway gives an idea of how enormous it was. The venue is a kind of space-age solid tent, surrounded by white spires that point into the sky. The artists who appear are an eclectic lot ranging from the Kronos Quartet to Ibrahim Ferrer. (Möckernstraße

10, 10963, Kreuzberg, www.tempodrom.de, S-Bahn S1/S2, Anhalter Bahnhof, U-Bahn U1/U7/U15 Möckernbrücke)

Russendisko

For those intrigued by the latest Russian musical happenings, get to the historic arts club in Mitte, Kaffee Burger.

Russian DJ émigrés Wladimir Kaminer and Yuriy Gurzhy hold their twice-monthly club night here – Russendisko (www.russendisko.de). It's become a bit of a cult event; cheap, hot, and packed out with Russian immigrants, native Germans and tourists alike. Check out the DDR-chic decor. There's been a CD release *Russendisko-hits* (Trikont), which was a *Songlines* Recommends disc in #18, and they also have a show on MultiKulti radio every Saturday at 8.40am. (Torstraße 60, 10119, +49 (0)30 2804 6495, www.kaffeeburger.de, U-Bahn Rosa-Luxemburg Pl.)



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