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Destination Berlin

The destination of Berlin can look back on its best year to date for tourism: around 15.7 million overnight guests in the hotel sector in 2006 will have further enhanced the reputation of this pulsating metropolis on the Spree River as Germany's favorite destination. In addition to these figures that were recorded in hotels and guesthouses with at least nine beds, 126 million day-trippers visit year after year, and 28.5 million nights are spent with friends and relatives. All in all, the German capital can be proud of nearly 140 million visitors a year – placing it in the top three European city destinations after London and Paris.

Berlin covers an area of some 890 square kilometers, making it is nine times larger than Paris. The municipal boundary extends for 234 kilometers. Only by traveling the entire length of the motorway encircling the city is it possible to appreciate the sheer dimensions involved. Nearly 3.4 million people inhabit this urban area.

Today, the German capital consists of twelve independently administered municipal districts (the number used to be twenty-three), each the size of a city. They vary in dimensions and each have their own distinct character, but have three things in common – each has its own town hall, its own market place, and its own municipal services organization. The reason for this phenomenon lies in the capital's historical development. In 1920, eight cities, fifty-nine rural communities, and twenty-seven manorial properties were joined together to form Greater Berlin. Berlin's first mention in historical documents dates back to 1237 after the two merchant colonies Cölln and Berlin joined together.

The fall of the Wall on November 9, 1989 marked the dawn of a new era for Berlin – an era whose most significant elements have been the reunification of Germany in 1990, the decision in 1991 to change capital cities, and the relocation of government and parliament to the former historical center of the city in 1999.

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Since time immemorial, Berlin, at the very heart of Europe, has always been a focal point for travelers from all over the world. In the 1930s, the Potsdamer Platz had the most traffic of any square in Europe. It was here that the first traffic lights were installed, a replica of which can be admired at the same spot. After nearly three decades of desolation caused by the Wall, new visions for traffic control and urban planning were implemented at the Potsdamer Platz for the Berlin of the third millennium. This area reflects the reemergence of and sweeping changes to the entire city. After reunification, Berlin now lies at the geographical crossroads between East and West in Europe.

The Berlin Wall earned the city a sorrowful reputation around the world for nearly thirty years. A few remains of the Wall can still be seen today at the East Side Gallery, on Bernauer Straße, next to the Preußischer Landtag, and in Prenzlauer Berg. But for a long time now, Berlin is no longer the “city of the Wall”. It has redefined its image as a metropolis in the heart of Europe. It is now associated with top-class architecture, modernity, and a fast pace of life. The German capital, whose profile will continue to change, is more attractive than ever for tourists.

During the approach to the city, Berlin already offers visitors a fascinating landscape with its expansive lakes, parks, and woods. More than a third of the city’s area is taken up by parks, woods, and water. The largest lake is the Müggelsee with an area of 750 hectares. A chain of lakes like the Tegelersee and the Wannsee is interspersed across the city, connected by a system of rivers (the Havel and the Spree) and canals. It is a well-known fact that the Athens on the Spree has more bridges than Venice. Berliners can reach the North Sea and the Baltic Sea from their city directly by boat.

Berlin is Germany’s greenest big city – there are more woods, parks, and cultivated areas within this city than any other. The proverbial “Berlin air“ owes its clarity in part to the many parks within the city such as the Tiergarten, the Botanical Gardens, and the Zoological Gardens, the largest zoo in Europe both in terms of size and variety of species.

It was no accident that in 1988, Berlin was officially designated Europe's "City of Culture". It still holds this title unofficially. Cultural events of international standing are a permanent feature of everyday life in Berlin: the international film festivals that have achieved worldwide acclaim, 150 theatres and stages, three opera houses, and a host of variety theaters and music halls. Berlin's cultural ambassador to the world – the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra – has a true global player at its head with Sir Simon Rattle as principal conductor and artistic director.

The range of musical entertainment includes cabaret performances in various folklore pubs and a notable rock and jazz scene with many clubs and venues for major events. Berlin's "Waldbühne" is the finest open-air theatre in Europe. During the summer months, it attracts audiences of up to 22,000 each evening to various events ranging from classical and rock music to film presentations.

Berlin is noted for its unique variety of museums, including many collections relating to archaeology and the history of art. They document 6,000 years of cultural and historical development from Europe to the Far East. On the Spree, there are more museums than rainy days – around 175 in all. Many important additions are institutions that were added in recent years. They include the Jewish Museum in the impressive new building designed by Daniel Libeskind, the Old National Gallery with nineteenth century art as well as the Bode Museum with the Sculpture Collection and the Museum of Byzantine Art on the world-renowned Museum Island, and the bold new building of the German Historical Museum at Zeughaus bearing the signature of the famous American architect, I. M. Pei. On top of that, the museum landscape of the city has been enhanced since 2004 by the Helmut Newton Foundation / Museum for Photography, the Flick Collection – one of the most important collections of contemporary art in the world – and the Berlinische Galerie in the former glass warehouse on Alte Jakobstraße. The numerous museums and collections in Berlin also include curiosities such as a hemp museum, the sugar museum, and the erotic museum.

Back in the Roaring Twenties Berlin was already the stage for world literature. The Romanisches Cafe at the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church was the main meeting place for literary figures and poets. Today, Berlin is once again considered to be a center of German language literature. It is not just a forum for international literary encounters through the work of the Literary Colloquium of Berlin, the German Academic Exchange Service, and the Academy of the Arts, but also a forum for publishing houses, the press, and the media. The international architecture exhibitions of the 1950s and 1980s met with worldwide interest beyond expert circles and served as inspiration for other cities thanks to the extraordinary achievements in architecture and urban development.

The construction work on the German capital has further raised the standing of the city on the international stage and attracted investors from all over the world (see, for example, the Potsdamer Platz or Friedrichstadt arcades). When it comes to fashion design, Berlin has developed into a center in particular for young and avant-garde fashion. The city is once again on the way to justifying its reputation as a city of fashion. This is documented by the numerous tradeshows. The spectrum of collections ranges from haute couture to streetwear and is presented to tens of thousands of visitors at tradeshows such as "Bread & Butter", "Milk & Honey", and "Premium". On account of the creative potential in the city on the Spree, UNESCO has honored Berlin as a "City of Design".

With its International Congress Centre (ICC), Berlin as a conference and tradeshow city has had a unique conference building for twenty-seven years. Berlin ranks among the best in the world as a venue for these international meetings, as the numbers of participants and visitors clearly confirm. Current surveys have shown that in the first term of 2006, around 46,700 events were held on the Spree with about 3.6 million participants.

But Berlin is also a rapidly developing city when it comes to shopping. With the Kurfürstendamm, Friedrichstraße, and Potsdamer Platz, it boasts three different shopping centers. The Kurfürstendamm, a magnificent boulevard which extends for a

length of 3.5 km from the Memorial Church to the Halensee, has something for everyone: from the famous department store Kaufhaus des Westens (KaDeWe) through the Europa Center to the many international fashion boutiques, restaurants, and cafés. During the mild summer nights, this part of Berlin (like so many others) stays open round the clock. Closing times are practically unknown and visitors can savor the delights of this cosmopolitan mixture to the fullest. And to lend them a helping hand, there are approximately six thousand restaurants to suit all possible tastes. In addition to Ku'damm, Friedrichstraße in the former East Berlin is an inviting place for a stroll, too. On the Potsdamer Platz, there are now around 130 shops just on the DaimlerChrysler site alone, which opened on October 2, 1998. All three shopping centers are directly connected with each other by the U2 subway line.

The elegant boulevard Unter den Linden celebrated its 350th birthday in 1997. Strolling along it, visitors can once again enjoy the charm of the great city of Berlin, surrounded by historic buildings such as the Humboldt University, the State Opera House, the New Guard House, the Arsenal, the Old Museum at the Lustgarten, the Cathedral, and the Nicolai District with the Ephraim Palace.

Behind "Museum Island" at the Hackescher Markt in the former Scheunenviertel (barn district), a subculture scene has established itself. By virtue of the creative diversity of its many galleries, performance spaces, variety theaters, dance halls and cafés, it exerts international powers of attraction on artists and visitors alike. A second center of the new scene has also developed in the eastern part of the city in the district of Prenzlauer Berg.

We can, of course, provide only a rough outline here of this multifaceted city. We would like to warmly invite you to discover Berlin, to understand it, and come to appreciate it. We wish you a very pleasant stay.

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