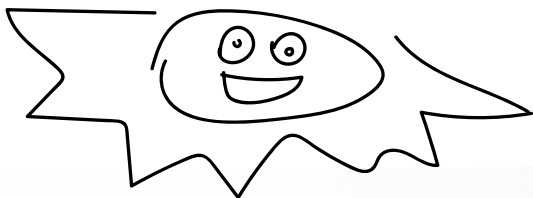


Zine Verschenken

#19 | february 2024 | the berlin fantasy



Editorial

In the words of David Bowie, 'Berlin is the greatest cultural extravaganza that one could imagine.'

Vibrant, crazy, artistic, smart, Berlin is the capital of 'cool', a powerful magnet that attracts people from all over the world. It's a paradise for techies, media gurus, creatives and non-conformists, and a relatively low cost of living means many are able to come here to pursue their dreams.

So what's the 'fantasy'? Well, it's the compromise. Just how liberal are you? How experimental? How 'out there'? Let's face it, the worst thing you can be here in Berlin is normal! What people say about the city are often well-worn stereotypes and cliches. Yet, isn't it these that make Berlin Berlin - as opposed to just another German metropolis? Politically, it may drag its feet, economically it may be poor - but creatively it is definitely sexy. True, many are lost in the fantasy, but that's half the fun.

The Berliner's enduring fantasy: escape from the Berlin winter

Winter is Berlin's natural season, climatically and politically. No city is more redolent of the Cold War, what with all those spies 'coming in from the cold'. Anyone like me, who's grown up with the likes of spymaster John le Carré, and Philip Kerr, author of the Berlin noir, would not want to miss Tempelhof Airfield in the snow, never mind the Wall Memorial at Bernauerstrasse, Lichtenberg's Hohenschönhausen Stasi prison, Checkpoint Charlie (albeit a casualty to crass tourism) the industrial Spree-side, the nuclear bunkers and Flaktower of Gesundbrunnen, and the "Alex", former Police HQ, now the Alexa shopping mall with its neighbouring Fernsehturm sticking up like a giant icicle from this, the most soulless square in Europe. (Granted, the Bourne Trilogy cast it in a slightly better light, but that's more to do with the Moby's soundtrack than anything else).

Fact is, history buffs and spy thriller addicts apart, most Berliners fall prey to quite a different kind of fantasy: how to escape the rigours of the Berlin winter. Everyone knows that once it begins, there's going to be no let up until late March at the earliest. Bleak, stone cold and unrelentingly grey - next stop Vladivostok! Surreptitiously it seeps into your bones, howls around your ears, bites your skin and crawls under the collar of your overcoat to grasp your neck in its vice-like grip! If you don't find something to keep yourself busy over winter, you could go stir crazy, succumb to a virulent bout of SAD or be clinically depressed by spring. Not for nothing is the city's mascot a bear, embodying much-needed strength, resilience and an unyielding spirit.

There's no point in sugar coating it: Berlin winters are dull and dreary: 17 hours of darkness, followed by 6 hours of daylight - if you're lucky. The socialist architecture only adds to the drabness of this 'twilight zone'. As soon as the mercury drops, everyone battens down the hatches, goes into enforced hibernation, huddling in their winter coats behind the frostflowered windows of the local Späti, glugging antifreeze until their hearts slow to a sustainable polar beat: 'Ich möchte ein Eisbär sein im kalten Polar/ Dann müsste ich nicht mehr schrei'n/Alles wär' so klar', as Grauzone's chilly ode to escapism goes...

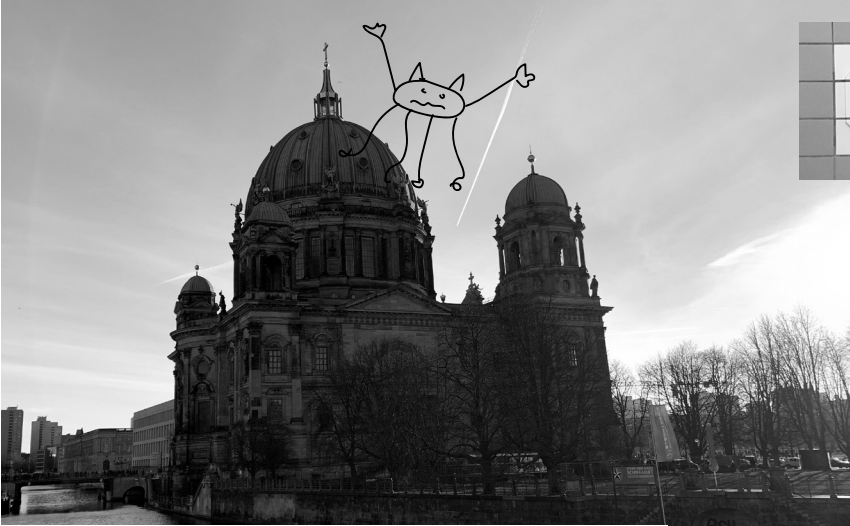
We're not talking about the odd gust of cold wind coming off the North Sea. This is downtown Stalingrad! No feel good vibes, Scandi Hygge or cosy whatnot, just faint glimmers of arctic light seeping from the gimlet-eyed windows of gridlocked council flats, blinkered against the iron grey sky, row upon row of frost-bitten balconies and desolate squares, abandoned street corners and vacant lots - urban wastelands bristling like overgrown winter gardens. Venturing out, the city's boulevards look like sludgy impressionistic snowscapes where black clad figures lurch about, blinded by flurries of sleet and snow, leaning into the prevailing Siberian winds. Like urban sherpas, hardy Berliners battle against the raw elements with characteristic tenacity. Used to harsh conditions, they seem singularly unimpressed by low temperatures. To them, a cold spell

is just that - a blood chilling, bone snapping, teeth chattering blast from the past.

The deepest snowfall in living memory was in 1969: 119 days of total whiteout. Berlin's concrete jungle momentarily transformed into a gigantic pile of sugar cubes. Charlottenburg an ice queen's palace, its frosted turrets resembling the ornamental spires of a Russian dacha. The glacial Spree choked with shifting sheet ice. The twin towers of Frankfurter Tor sparkling like Soviet Christmas cakes. Tiergarten wreathed in freezing fog - a boreal forest - the Brandenburg Gate its icy portal.

These days, winters have been a tad milder, but climate change could put paid to that.

So what to do and where to go in the Berlin winter? Well, there are the ice-skating stadiums, the frozen lakes of the hinterland, the Cold War trail, the Christmas markets, snowbound Tempelhof, the Winterwelt toboggan run at Potsdamer Platz, the illuminations at the Botanical Gardens, or arctic cocktails at the Eisbar in Mitte... need I go on?



Hermannplatz



Unter den Linden



Schönhauser Allee



STADTMITTE

Boddinstraße



Potsdamer Platz



Unter den Linden - a fantasy that lives on...

Few street names are as evocative as Unter den Linden, the

Champs-Élysées of Berlin. The sound of 'Linden', with its softly spoken second syllable, rolls lightly off the tongue, like a falling leaf, a dusting of pollen off the shoulder, a shower of gold on the ground.

The tree-lined avenue leading from the Spree River to the Brandenburg Gate, cameoed by its vivid heart-shaped leaves, once stood for the prestige of Prussia, a sacred grove of limes embodying the grandeur and elegance that characterised the glory days of the 18th century capital. Gilded paintings picture scenes of Teutonic splendour: sleek and shining horse-drawn carriages spinning along a flower-studded carpet of green, ladies in fancy crinolines promenading in the dappled shade, their layered petticoats sartorial copies of the delicate lime blossoms dangling above their heads like fuzzy golden chandeliers on a May day. Long before, in the 1500s, it was but a leafy bridle path that paved the way from John George of Brandenburg's castle by the Lustgarten to his royal hunting grounds of Tiergarten. His successor Frederick William gave the order to adorn it with four rows of linden trees and his wife, Sophia Dorothea, duly planted the very first sapling back in 1680. Eventually there grew to be a thousand...

In German culture, the linden is the most hallowed of trees. Homesick immigrants planted lindens in American soil so they could cultivate a little piece of Germany in their backyards. On his 'Winterreise', sentimental Schubert composed a nostalgic dream-song about one, Strauss serenaded its loveliness in a waltz, Hesse wrote an arboreal fairytale in its honour. Linden leaves and flowers have been distilled in many a natural remedy and its sought-after perfume is as exotic as it is elusive. The symmetry of its boughs is a wonder of botanical architecture, which is why it's a favourite for street planting throughout Europe. In literature, the linden is a symbol of joy as well as the tree of justice: its buttery blooms exude a honeyed fragrance that invites clemency and conciliation - one would be ashamed to tell a lie in its shade. Marlene Dietrich sang somewhat prophetically that for as long as the lindens bloomed her beloved Berlin would be kept safe and sound. She was right, but not for long. Inevitably, during the war years, Unter den Linden became a military parade ground. But once it had ceased to be useful, Hitler gave the order to cull them in a characteristically philistine gesture, and their timber fuelled the factories and furnaces of war; what little was left was gathered as firewood by impoverished local Berliners. The maiming and ultimate decimation of these iconic limes was a poignant reminder that neither joy nor justice could have hoped to flourish there, at least for the time being. The bombardment of Berlin to rack and ruin ensured that not so much as a stray seedling survived, and when the bleak wind of Communism blew across the divided city, the area lay abandoned for years in a stark no man's land: forgotten, bare, dormant; a street of two dead ends on either side of the wall, with nowhere to go.

Now the trees have been replanted, five species of linden, 252 in all; hardly the forest of yesteryear, although a lot of water will flow under the Spree bridge before they'll be at their best and most beautiful. In many ways Berlin is a memorial ground and city of remembrance and, given its number and distribution perhaps the linden should have its day...

In the mild to moderate climate of disagreement that still surrounds how best to refurbish Old Berlin and bring it into the 'new', maybe Unter den Linden as the sunniest aspect of the city's formerly golden face, will be fully and faithfully restored. Time will tell.

In as much as any tree has a soul, the linden deserves saving, if for no other reason than as a gentler reminder of the past, to sow seeds for peace, to celebrate the blossoming of a vibrant culture and free-spirited lifestyle, and last but not least, to conserve Berlin's place among the greenest of German cities.

In Berlin, You Never Have to Stop

In 2012, the New York Times published an article titled, ‘In Berlin, you never have to stop’. The article follows an unnamed Australian band who moved to Berlin, lured by the so-called ‘Berlin Fantasy’.

With David Bowie and Nick Cave-shaped stars in their eyes, the band moved to Neukölln, found a cheap apartment, rented a rehearsal space and began to ‘explore the very fringes of the arts’ within Berlin. To four young Australians this meant going to bars and clubs and talking to the endlessly churning cycle of English-speaking people finding their feet in Berlin.

In summary, the writer tells the story of a band who initially found Berlin as an inspiring artist’s Mecca but soon found it to be an “artist’s paradox”. They say that although there are plenty of people talking about art, no-one is successfully creating any. The band themselves were among this alleged majority and did not succeed in either producing music or internationally touring as they had hoped upon arriving in Berlin. After three months, they realised that they could not live up to their goals and returned to Australia. The band never returned to playing music and most of them turned to corporate jobs and a more traditional lifestyle. The writer of this article was one of the band members and after completing 3 months in Berlin, began to write a book on his experiences and the disappointment he felt with Berlin’s creative industry.

Along with the unknown name of the band, there are details missing from the story. Was the band performing and recording in a regular routine before moving to Berlin? And weren’t David Bowie and Nick Cave already successful artists prior to living in Berlin? Their successes were not a product of the city, rather it helped them push their creative boundaries.

The Berlin Fantasy does exist for many people, you can be whoever you want to be in this city without judgement. The expectation that you will excel creatively just by proximity, however, is not a realistic approach. Berlin can look like it has a lack of boundaries to someone who has come from a different country or city, but sooner or later it will test human self-expectations and limitations. What the author explained is a fairly common entrance into Berlin. The cycle of being swept up into the seemingly limitless playground may last up to six months before the reality sets in that as an artist, you need to set your expectations.

In this article, the writer tells of his experience in meeting many artists who dreamt of creating something but not actually doing it. To say that artists are not working on their art in this city is not accurate. Berlin is full of art. Apartment windows light up all through the night with artists creating their work. Designs are drawn on tablets during the early mornings and late afternoons in the park. Digital print shops are full of artists printing their projects. All throughout the city, a quiet observer won’t need to

look far to find someone creating art. The Berlin Fantasy does exist for those who are prepared to work at it.

This may be a story published over ten years ago, but it’s one that is told by many. In this city, where most see is as temporary, there are few that are turning their Berlin Fantasy into a reality.

Talking about creative dreams in bars and cafes is a known pastime among Berlin Expats and a part of the city’s culture. As new tribe members find their feet and see the many possibilities within their community, listen and tell your own dreams right back. But allow yourself to work on one making one of them a reality.

Zine Verschenken

#19 | february 2024 | the berlin fantasy

Artists Bianca Cheung
Erin Johnson
Karen Foster

Do you want to contribute to the zine?
Have any questions?
Send us an email:
zine.verschenken@gmail.com or
scan the QR code to access our website:



zineverschenken.de

