

Crossing Kreuzberg

PHOTOGRAPHY: GÜNTER STEFEN



Mehringdamm, the heart of Kreuzberg

John Malathronas finds the spirit of defiance lives on in Berlin's hippest suburb



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Every sizeable wall is covered with graffiti

I still remember the jolt I felt when first stepping out of Mehringdamm U-Bahn in the middle of the down-and-out district of Kreuzberg, back in August 1989. Here was the end of the world as we knew it. To the east and south the Berlin Wall was delimiting the western sector; behind it stretched a no-man's land of foxholes, with soldiers permanently pointing rifles at those who peeked from the top.

Where there was no Wall, there was the River Spree with windowless, doorless, top-to-bottom cemented houses facing us behind barbed wire. To the north, Checkpoint Charlie beckoned and the Kochstrasse was the last underground station before, well, the realm of the Warsaw Pact.

But that was not the reason for my shock. A naked American Indian, clad only in a loincloth and a feather headdress, was getting out of a parked car, looking left and right as he crossed the street before disappearing into the backyard of a block of flats opposite. I followed him, young and curious, and ended up at a free squat party.

I should have known better. Set in this unfashionable corner of West Berlin, Kreuzberg had long been marginalised by middle-class Germans. Its empty factory buildings and flats, turned into squats by youngsters who fled to Berlin to avoid German military service, or by immigrant *Gastarbeiters* who couldn't afford to live elsewhere. The punks and the pierced, the gays and the lesbians, the Turks and the Greeks, the anarchists and the dropouts; all rubbed shoulders here.

And when they grew up, they built businesses. Today Germany's capital has 3.4 million inhabitants, including 460,000 residents with foreign passports from 180 different nations. They all seem to be represented in Kreuzberg. I spot a headscarved Muslim woman tending Christian graves, while outside an American busker entertains the crowd by playing in front of ubiquitous graffiti-sprayed walls.

In the side streets, kebab shops mingle with stylish Italian espresso lounges, and Japanese sushi bars jostle for space with Vietnamese restaurants. Over the street, wall-to-wall hostels try to price each other out by offering the cheapest beds in town. Further on, a bar creates a captive audience outside by transmitting a Bundesliga game live on TV. The football fans fight the cold with beer and occasional hugs.

Last year marked 25 years since the opening of the first Gay Museum in the world; it's in Kreuzberg, of course. "In the beginning, it was private, self-financing and manned by volunteers," explains the manager Karl-Heinz Steinle. "It is only since January 2010 that an annual budget of €250,000 was granted to us by the city of Berlin."

The numbers are indeed impressive. 124 special exhibitions in 25 years, 28 publications, a public reading library of 15,000 books, 2,000 magazine titles and 50,000 leaflets from 1896 onwards. The Gay Museum has loaned exhibits to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, and to London's Imperial War Museum.

"Back in the 1980s exhibition space here was cheap," says Karl-Heinz. "Kreuzberg was the centre of the alternative and immigrant culture in Berlin. As such, it was more accepting of gays and lesbians – it still feels that way."

Last year also marked 50 years since the big Turkish emigration. In 1961, Bonn and Ankara signed an agreement to facilitate guest workers (*Gastarbeiters*) in a move that would benefit both countries. The Turks would fuel the economic miracle in Germany, while their wages, wired home, would help their relatives. Attracted by low rents, they settled in the borders of Berlin: in Kreuzberg, Neukölln and Wedding.

Originally their tenure was for two years only, but once they learned the language and the skills, it was German employers in 1964 who asked for that fixed term to be abandoned. By 1973, when the flow stopped, the Turkish presence had transformed both Germany, Berlin and Kreuzberg itself, which was renamed 'Little Istanbul'.

How were these anniversaries marked in Kreuzberg, a district where even today more than 30% of inhabitants don't have German citizenship? With a demonstration, protesting against officialdom paying lip service to multiculturalism, but still discriminating against immigrants.

But while the spirit of Kreuzberg's defiance seems to still be alive, the last decade has seen gentrification creep in the wide avenues emanating from Mehringdamm, Victoria Park and Oranienstrasse. Chic boutiques, graphic design bureaux and cool restaurants are springing up next to the old organic vegetarian takeaways and second-hand bookshops.

“Everyone who doesn't want to see the area turn into Berlin's Soho must help.”

This is not an old Cold War enclave any more; it has become prime central property in Germany's thriving capital. So much so that locals such as the German actor Clemens Schick (of *Casino Royale* fame) have started a residents' initiative against the cheapening of the area.

"The old mixture that was Kreuzberg must be maintained," he has said publicly. "Everyone who doesn't want to see the area turn into Berlin's Soho must help."



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Turkish attendant in the Christian cemetery of Kreuzberg



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Admiralsbrück

THE DETAILS

ARRIVING

Many airlines fly direct to Berlin, the cheapest being **Easyjet** from Luton and Gatwick to Schönefeld (from £57 return when booked far in advance). **Lufthansa** flies from Heathrow to Tegel from £79 return.

STAYING

Hotel Riehmers Hofgarten, Yorkstrasse 83 (riehmers-hofgarten.de; +49 30 7809 8800), built in a *fin-de-siecle* eclectic style, is a four-star oasis in the centre of Kreuzberg (doubles from €126; check for weekend special). A more modern all-mod-cons choice is **Hotel Johann**, Johanniterstrasse 8 (hotel-johann-berlin.de; +49 30 22 50 740) tucked away in a quiet side street, with doubles from €95.

EATING

The queues outside the **Curry 36** takeaway on Mehringdamm 36 are not for a chicken tikka masala, but for Berlin's principal contribution to fast food: the unmissable *Currywurst*. The side streets off Mehringdamm are where you can find many international eateries, from the cheap-and-cheerful Tex-Mex **Lone Star Taqueria** (Bergmannstraße 11) to the exquisite **Mount Everest** (Zossenerstraße 25; +49 30 691 9434) and its mouthwatering Tibetan and Nepalese specialities.

NIGHTLIFE

Kreuzberg has some of the best nightlife in Berlin. **Ritter Butzke** (Ritterstrasse 24; ritterbutzke.de; weekends) is a trendy club housed in a former factory, with local DJs and group sets (opens midnight). Opening around 8pm at weekends is the **Lido**, in an old cinema, whose main highlight is the large outdoor chill-out area, as big as its main dance-floor (Cuvyrstrasse 7; lido-berlin.de). Not far from the Lido is the über-cool **Watergate Club** (Falckensteinstraße 49; water-gate.de; Wed-Sat) with a wonderful panoramic bar facing the river Spree, which gets going after 2am. Mehringdamm itself is dominated by the gay/mixed superdisco **Schwuz** (Mehringdamm 61; schwuz.de; Wed and weekends) with a variety of party nights.