

Episode 79: Alternative Berlin

Summary

On a short trip to Berlin, Nick and Wendy take an 'alternative' walking tour to discover some of the lesser known sites and areas of the city.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you from Berlin. We're just here for a few days, just for a short trip as part of a mini family reunion. And we've already talked about Berlin on the podcast before. We talked about how we've been here and it snowed, uhh, a couple of times. Uhh, we didn't get any snow this time, even though it was winter, so your streak¹, Wendy, has come to an end.

Wendy: Yeah, and I'm sad about that, I have to say. I was hoping for snow, and we had been watching the forecast² in the days leading up to our departure for Berlin and it had been snowing, previously, before we arrived. So I was hopeful that it was going to snow, but it didn't, and it hasn't actually been all that cold. It's been, like, nine or ten degrees Celsius, so really not anywhere close to being cold enough for it to snow. But, still colder than Lisbon, where we were ... where we normally live. And so it's nice because it's Christmas, it's the holiday season, and so it's nice to be in cold weather and, you know, to see all the Christmas decorations and Christmas markets and things like that.

Nick: And we've been to Berlin a couple of times before, and so we've done a lot of the major tourist things that are on offer here in Berlin. And so this time we decided to do something a little bit different. We took a walking tour a couple of days ago and it's called Alternative Berlin. So this doesn't take you to the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag and all of these popular tourist spots, it's a completely different kind of tour. And really, we didn't have any idea what it was going to be like. We just saw, 'OK, Alternative Berlin.' We said, 'Alright, let's sign up and let's do it and see what it's all about.'

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: So it takes you into part of the old East Berlin and part of the old West Berlin. One of the big focuses of it is graffiti, and this doesn't sound like something that's really that interesting, I mean I don't like graffiti, really. Umm, but it was quite

¹ streak: uninterrupted series or run (in this case, of it always snowing when Wendy goes to Berlin)

² forecast: weather prediction (it's noun in this case but it's also the verb)

fascinating to see that there is a kind of culture behind it here, and perhaps everywhere else as well, but especially here I think. So we learned a lot about graffiti and that was actually quite interesting.

Wendy: Yeah, and about graffiti and also street art. And we talked a lot, or the guide talked a lot on the tour, about the difference between graffiti and street art, which is not always clear cut³. It's not always obvious if something is art or if it's an eyesore⁴, you know, something that is just vandalism and needs to be gotten rid of.

Nick: Right, and there was even one point where he was giving the point of view of some of the graffiti artists responding to that idea that what they are doing is an eyesore. And part of their answer to that was that certain things that aren't usually considered eyesores are for them, that are in the city. For example, McDonald's signs, or BMW signs, or different corporate logos that are all over the city as they are in other cities. And they were saying, 'Well, for us, that's an eyesore and our graffiti is not.'

Wendy: Yeah, and it's a good point that, you know, we are constantly surrounded by this advertising, more and more so all the time. And we never asked for that, you know. No one ever asked for our permission, if that was OK to put that in our face all the time. Uhh, so, you know, they're saying, 'It's the same thing, us putting our tag on the side of the building is no different than BMW putting its advertisement on the side of the building.'

Nick: And so, if you haven't been to Berlin, you might think that because Germany is the powerhouse, uhh, economy of the European Union, and because Berlin is the capital of Germany, therefore it would be a very affluent city, a very wealthy city, and it would perhaps look quite nice and pretty everywhere. And it's not really like that at all. And the graffiti is a great example of that because the graffiti is everywhere. Umm, and so you do see it in both parts of the city and, like I said, there really is a culture behind it. And I thought it was interesting that our guide Jason mentioned some of the things about the code of graffiti. For example, the first person to put graffiti on a particular wall will choose a spot, and this is called the 'Heaven Spot', I think the kind of best place to put your graffiti. And then there's a kind of respect given to that person for that. So the people who come and put graffiti on the same wall later, they're ... they won't cover over that original piece. It's kind of an unwritten law of graffiti. But then if they put something on the very bottom of the wall, then someone else can just come and paint over that and there's no problem with that. But the first person to do it, their graffiti gets to stand the test of time⁵ and gets to stay up for years and in some cases decades. And nobody will touch it as a sign of respect, so just things like that, I thought were quite interesting.

³ clear cut: obvious, well defined

⁴ eyesore: something ugly, painful for the eye to see

⁵ stand the test of time: to last for a long time

Wendy: Yeah, it was something that I didn't know anything about and, you know, to be honest didn't have that much respect for. I'd never really looked at graffiti in a way that, you know, as something that deserved respect. So, yeah, it was interesting to hear about it from that point of view.

Nick: And because you do see a lot of graffiti in Berlin especially, yeah, it just gives a different perspective for us now. When we walk past and see it, we recognise now some of the different signs or some of the individual artists who have done it and things like that. So that was definitely one of the, umm, focuses of the tour early on. One of the things that was interesting as well was that you have this impression, perhaps, that the old East Berlin would be the least affluent, least wealthy part and then West Berlin would be the opposite. And I think obviously now the lines have blurred⁶ a bit, umm, being that now the city has been reunified for the last, uhh, well, since 1990 now, since 1989-1990, so for nearly 30 years. Umm, and that was interesting as well, that he mentioned that when the city was united, what happened was that all of these people in West Berlin who had a bit more money, realised that there were some really nice suburbs in East Berlin. And they started moving to those areas, and those places were quite cheap. But then that eventually put the price up, and there was a kind of exodus from West Berlin and then people then started to move back to West Berlin and then the prices had gone down there, then they went back up and so there's this constant shifting between the two parts of the city.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: But then eventually we did go back into West Berlin and then I thought that was, umm, perhaps the most interesting part of the tour. That we saw some very poor areas in West Berlin as well.

Wendy: Yeah, uhh, we saw areas ... well, we went to the area known as Kreuzberg, in particular. And it's a place where lots of immigrants have ended up, particularly immigrants of Turkish origin, who have been in Berlin and in Germany for many decades now. And then more recently you have refugees from Syria and from other conflicts in the Middle East. So it's a very cosmopolitan area of Berlin and also was kind of the heart of the counter culture, the, you know, hippy and punk cultures in the seventies and eighties. And now it's become a bit gentrified⁷ but you do still see a lot of that there. And Berlin is really a place where you have lots of different cultures and, umm, different people following different walks of life who are all living here in the city together.

Nick: And we saw one building in particular which is a very large building and Jason had told us that there were people squatting⁸ in the building. Umm, and he

⁶ the lines have blurred: the difference between two things is no longer obvious

⁷ gentrified: changed or cleaned up, often losing some of its old character. See also: Episode 32.

⁸ squatting: living on land without owning it or paying rent

said ... I think he said that it was maybe semi-officialised now, that they might be paying some kind of rent of some sort. It's almost like, umm, what we saw in Johannesburg with the hijacked buildings, perhaps something along those lines⁹. Umm, but they're very poor, there are some very poor living conditions for some people. And there are other people who are living in vehicles I guess, in a kind of, uhh, trailer park.

Wendy: Yeah, like living in caravans and other, you know, small, kind of dilapidated¹⁰ mobile homes and things like that, types of vehicles that you can move and, you know, park it on this piece of land. And so a bunch of people have parked their caravans and mobile homes all on this same patch of land. And they've been living there, squatting on this land, essentially, for a long time now.

Nick: Yeah, and so I just thought that was one of the most fascinating things, was that the dividing line of the Wall, which you can still see, because in a lot of places they've marked where the Wall was, umm, and so I think it's important for the people to know where it was, umm, but, yeah, those lines have blurred and now the city is still trying to put itself back together, coming from two cities and merging itself into one city. Umm, but you have these different changes happening in these different neighbourhoods, and, yeah, it's no longer, uhh, clear cut: what is East, or what does that mean? And what is West, and what does that mean?

Wendy: Yeah, that's very true. And for some reason I thought that the East would be the uglier part of the city, but I found that that's not true at all. I imagined that it would be, you know, Soviet style, umm, ugly concrete blocks of high rises and ugly apartment buildings. But actually, because West Berlin was bombed so heavily, you have not that much old architecture left on the west side, whereas you do have some on the east side. Uhh, for example, in the neighbourhood where we've been staying, which is called Prenzlauer Berg, you have quite a few old buildings that have survived here. And I find it to be the more attractive side because I prefer old architecture as opposed to modern architecture.

Nick: Yep, so do I. And so, yeah, it was just an interesting walk throughout various districts of Berlin that we might not have been to otherwise. And, uhh, we learned a lot and found it quite interesting.

Wendy: Definitely.

⁹ something along those lines: something similar, comparable

¹⁰ dilapidated: run-down and in a state of ruin

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Nick and Wendy choose to do the alternative tour?
2. What is the 'heaven spot' in graffiti culture in Berlin?
3. Why did Wendy think East Berlin would be uglier than West Berlin?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. The new skyscraper that's just been finished downtown is awful. It's a real _____.
2. It would be nice to go to the beach this weekend if it's sunny. What's the _____ like?
3. The old Mouraria neighbourhood of Lisbon is becoming _____ for tourists and some of the residents are protesting against the changes.
4. There used to be a _____ difference between the two regions, but now they're very similar.
5. If you look at some of the fashion trends of the 1980s, it's pretty clear that they didn't _____. They're so untrendy now.
6. They just bought a _____ old farmhouse for a really cheap price. Now they have to completely renovate it because it's uninhabitable at the moment.
7. The building was abandoned years ago and people had been _____ in it for almost as long. It was finally demolished last week.
8. He has a six-year _____ of attending the Super Bowl every year, but he might not be able to go next year because his best friend is getting married on the same weekend.
9. The President said that he didn't think the government would invest in renewable energy until it became as cheap as fossil fuels, or _____. I don't remember exactly the words he used.
10. The two neighbourhoods used to be quite racially divided, with blacks in one area and whites in another. But now _____ and there's more mixing between the two groups.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Do you like graffiti? Why or why not? Did this conversation change your views of graffiti at all?
2. Are there any eyesores in your town or city? What are they?
3. Do you think characterful but run-down areas of cities should be gentrified or left the way they are? Why?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Because they had been to Berlin several times before and seen the major sites, so this time they wanted to do something different.
2. It's the prime position on a wall that contains the first bit of graffiti on that wall, and it can't be painted over out of respect for the original artist.
3. Because she thought East Berlin would be full of Soviet architecture, but actually it contains some of the oldest, pre-WWII architecture in Berlin.

Exercises

1. eyesore
2. forecast
3. gentrified
4. clear cut
5. stand the test of time
6. dilapidated
7. squatting
8. streak
9. something along those lines
10. the lines have blurred