

In the wake of record year-end bonuses in 2006, countries on the further end of the world map are becoming increasingly popular. One such destination is the capital of Germany, a place that has quaint cobblestone walkways, alfresco bistro dining, avant-garde lifestyles, psychedelic boogie places and of course, uniquely German location names which 9 out of 10 Singaporeans cannot pronounce (yours truly included).

Did someone say na, na, Nazi?

Despite its glamorous and bustling cosmopolitan front, Berlin definitely had a darker history when it housed one of the world's most (in)famous dictators. That's right – Adolf Hitler, remember the really nasty guy with the weird little moustache?

During 1933 to 1945, this period (which was known as the National Socialist era), Hitler ruled with an iron fist. When the war ended on 8 May 1945, not much of Berlin was left. More than 600,000 apartments had been destroyed, and only 2.8 million of the city's original population of 4.3 million was left in the city.

Since then, Berlin has definitely made a grand comeback. It isn't just the geographical capital of Germany; it's a film city, a center of teaching and research, and a historical congregation with a diverse cultural landscape. A place that "gives birth" to more than 300 films a year, Berlin is also home to the Berlin International Film Festival, which was founded in post-war Berlin in 1951.

"The Great Wall of Berlin"?

There's no haze around the Great Wall of China as everyone knows what it represents. Let's talk about the wall in Berlin. No, it isn't called the Great Wall of Berlin – it's the Berlin Wall.

How did it come about? On August 13, 1961, West-Berlin saw an overnight action resulting in a cordon around West-Berlin to stop the never-ending refugee stream from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) – East Germany. There were barricades, barbed wire fences and roadblocks made of tanks put up. In the following days, construction workers began building a concrete to reinforce the barrier.

Initially, the wall only consisted of 12 km of slabs and 137 km of barbed wire fences. There were also 116 observation towers. The wall parted a total of 192 streets (97 within Berlin and 95 between the GDR and West-Berlin), 32 railroads, 8 suburban and 4 underground trains. Even lakes and rivers were not spared and were blocked and closely observed for any movement. If you're used to the easy travel between Singapore and Malaysia, you wouldn't have survived back then – travellers between East and West Germany had to pass through the frontier and tough controls.

That bloody wall

At least 239 recorded lives were claimed by the wall, with some

being shot on their escape attempts by frontier guards, whilst others drowned in the river or lakes. Rudolf Urban was the first victim of the wall when he jumped out of a window in Bernauer Straße. Another victim Peter Fechter bled to death at the wall amidst terrified gazes of bystanders.

In the evening of November 9 in 1989, freedom of traveling between the East and the West was finally proclaimed. One of the most beautiful scenes in history was created when thousands of people thronged the frontiers and dashed into each other's arms.

Since then, a memorial has been dedicated to the victims of the wall and the German separation in Bernauer Straße, which consists of the Berlin Wall memorial, a chapel of reconciliation and a documentary centre. The former "strip of death" is still visible and is the only place in Berlin where you can see a complete border area with "Vorderlandmauer", "Kiesstreifen", "Kolonnenweg", "Lichtstraße" and "Hinterlandmauer". Throughout the city, there are double rows of cobblestones marked to signify the length of the wall.

On the ground and up in the air

In 1990, the largest open-air gallery in the world was born. The 1.3 km long section of the wall between Oberbaumbrücke and Ostbahnhof Artists transformed by artists, with the most popular ones being "Bruderkuss" by Dimitri Vrubel, "Vaterland" by Gunther Schaefer and "Berlin-New York" by Gerhard Lahr.

The Berlin Wall remembrance has also been taken to new heights, with the BallonGarten at the corner Zimmerstraße / Wilhelmstraße being of the official concept. Take a better view of the country in the Hi-Flyer which is also located here. The balloon ride will give you a breathtaking panoramic view of the beautiful city.

Show me the money ... to shop!

Now we all know Singaporeans love to shop, so here's some fodder for shopaholics. Berlin is the first federal state of Germany, where shops can decide for themselves their opening and closing hours. On weekdays, they can operate around the clock, Sundays in Advent from 1 till 8 pm and on six further Sundays during the year.

One of the more popular shopping areas for young adults is the upper part of Kurfürstendamm and the following Tauentzienstraße. You can find famous international labels such as H&M, Benetton, Zara whilst bigger names such as Jil Sander and Yves Saint Laurent have boutiques in the nearby area.

After spending all that money, you'll be glad to know that you can actually recoup some of it back, since you are a visitor to Germany from outside of the European Union. After deduction of the handling expense, you will receive a refund up to 14.5 % of the purchase price. However, do make sure that the goods you've purchased are brought out of the country within three months.