

# Amid the fallout shelters, Cold War tourism hot in Berlin

The German capital marks the 20th anniversary of the wall's fall

By **SCOTT VOGEL**

LA TIMES-WASHINGTON POST

"All right, who is interested in touring the nuclear fallout shelter?" asked the young, bespectacled museum guide. It was 4:30 p.m., the last tour of the day, and she had been on her feet for hours. With a little luck, no hands would go up.

Every hand went up. The woman uttered a deep, vaguely melodramatic sigh.

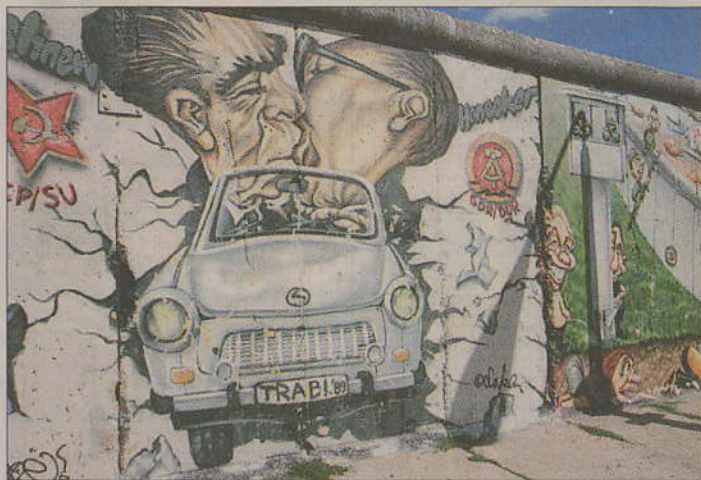
"All right. Follow me. Please."

We tiptoed behind her, all 25 of us, out the doors of The Story of Berlin — the museum with the on-the-nose title — and onto the Kurfurstendamm, once a bastion of louche bars and Sally Bowles-ready night life, later a bastion of Berlin capitalism when its first name was West, now a bastion of Japanese tour groups and general ho-hum-ness. (At least by comparison with a real fallout shelter, that is.)

Undaunted by our leader's ennu, the group crowded into a stairwell off the adjacent parking garage and descended several flights, our skin growing clammy with every step. At last we were herded into a small, dimly lit room. "Please undress completely and then shower," read a large sign on the wall, in English. We appealed to our guide.

## 3,600 people for 14 days

"The German sign fell down," she said languidly, returning to



HANS-PETER MERTEN

A section of the Berlin Wall is now an outdoor gallery whose artists do not treat former Communist leaders lightly.

her spiel. "The car park above your heads was built in 1974. As part of the deal, the owner was given financial incentives to build this shelter. It was designed to hold an absolute maximum of 3,600 people for a maximum amount of time of 14 days."

"This would be used if there was a nuclear war?" asked an Italian man in heavily accented English.

"Uh-huh," said the guide.

"But what if you came in when the attack had already started? Would they let you in?" he continued.

The group did a collective pan left to the guide, who uttered another deep sigh. She seemed to be struggling to stifle a sarcastic response. Then, quietly:

"Yes, but you would need to shower first."

Someday, soon perhaps, Berliners will tire of the whole Cold War tourism thing. But don't worry, we haven't gotten there yet. For now, the residents of the

German capital are content to be patient with us, aware that the excitement and energy of their city — and it truly is the most exciting city in Europe at present — are due in no small part to its unabashed, dedicated absorption in past insanities.

At least 25 shelters like this one were built in West Berlin, according to our guide, and to say there's an impossible-to-describe horror to them is to risk gross understatement. But they also have a kind of, well, ingenuity to them, just as the Berlin Wall had an ingenuity, albeit of a crueler sort.

## Wall was 96 miles long

"The wall had a German perfection," concedes a man in the film shown at the entrance to the House at Checkpoint Charlie, an unfancy and enthralling museum in another part of town on the Friedrichstrasse. The perfection in question was a 96-mile-long, 12-foot-high structure that

## Berlin museums

**Events:** The biggest events will be in November, when the city will mark the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, but celebrations and commemorations throughout Germany are ongoing: [cometogermany.com](http://cometogermany.com)

**Museums:** Berlin's city museum, **The Story of Berlin**, is a good place to start (Kurfurstendamm 207-208, [www.story-of-berlin.de](http://www.story-of-berlin.de)). Admission, which includes a guided tour in English of the adjacent nuclear fallout shelter, is about \$13; open daily 10 a.m.-8 p.m. **The House at Checkpoint Charlie** (Friedrichstrasse 43-45, [www.mauermuseum.de](http://www.mauermuseum.de)) has a marvelous collection of artifacts. Admission about \$16.50; open daily 9 a.m.-10 p.m. Expect crowds at the small **DDR Museum** (Karl-Liebknecht-Strasse 1, [ddr-museum.de](http://ddr-museum.de)). Admission about \$7.25; open daily 10 a.m.-8 p.m. (Saturdays until 10 p.m.).

was erected seemingly overnight in 1961, sealing off East from West in an instant.

Later this year Germany will commemorate the 20th anniversary of the wall's sudden, gleeful demise in 1989 — indeed, the country's celebrating already — but the Checkpoint Charlie house has been having a celebration of sorts for years. A celebration of the ingenious lengths people will go to to escape oppression, that is.

"Why is she in those suitcases?" asked a young girl with a laugh, if I understood the German right, pointing to an exhibit with a female mannequin whose top half was in one suitcase and the lower

in an adjacent one. Her mother explained that with the suitcases placed close together, their common sides could be removed, making it easier for a refugee to hide in the trunk of a car.

Not far away from the pair was a deflated hot-air balloon, the one that eight East Germans employed to float over the wall in 1979.

In another corner was the pair of hollowed-out surfboards that a Stuttgart mechanic fastened to the roof of his car in 1987, creating a compartment large enough to smuggle his girlfriend to freedom; in still another, the welding machine that meant freedom for 29 people who hid inside it during border crossings in the early '70s.

Nearby, too, is a mini-submarine, the first sub ever with a gasoline-powered internal combustion engine, according to the museum. The contraption went just 3 mph in rough waters, but somehow its inventor managed to cross the Baltic Sea in it, escaping the old German Democratic Republic, or DDR, via Denmark.

## Cold War as cottage industry

Maybe it's nostalgia for a crisis that we know ended happily, but tourists from around the world are flocking to Berlin these days, clamoring to hear its story told over and over again. Inevitably, then, Cold War commemoration has become something of a cottage industry, which means you get everything from Christmas ornaments with pieces of the wall inside to such elaborate efforts as the DDR Museum.

The latter, just across the Spree River from the Berlin Cathedral, likes to refer to itself as a

"hands-on experience of the everyday life of a state long gone," even if the state in question is East Germany, which isn't quite 20 years gone. Point well-taken, though. For all its proximity in time and space, Communist Germany remains a mystery to most of us; and the museum somehow manages to be both critical and respectful of the place, even in the face of its almost epic drabness.

Black-and-white news footage from the early days of the wall plays in an endless loop, capturing the initial confusion felt by Germans of all stripes. "We've moved out of a beautiful region only to find ourselves in a world of concrete," says one bewildered woman who has relocated to East Berlin from the provinces.

Then there's the museum's detailed examination of the group potty bench that was standard equipment in East German pre-schools, a long trough with several holes in it meant to teach toddlers both communal toilet training and, apparently, submission to the will of the masses.

Which brings us back to the fallout shelter.

"Is this the only men's bathroom?" asked a woman in our group, referring to a sad series of stalls lost in a purple haze.

"Yes," the guide answered. "As you see, you would not be allowed to wash yourself, and there are no showers. And it would be smelly and hot in here, 32 degrees (Celsius) and high humidity."

With that, the guide broke into a smile no one knew she had.

"OK, that concludes the tour."