

My Berlin



PENNY CROUCHER
[AUTHOR]
 It's safe to say that few – if any – travel writers have been writing about Berlin in English for as long as Penny Croucher. It was 30 years ago that her first Berlin guidebook was published, and though she now spends much of her time back in London, she continues to write regularly about her second home on her blog, Berlin Unwrapped.
www.berlinunwrapped.com

What brought you to Berlin in the 1980s?

I studied German at university and had always wanted to live in Berlin. In 1984, when my husband was posted there with the British Army, my dream came true. I worked for the *Berlin Bulletin*, the newspaper for British Forces' families, and was given a special pass to go over into East Berlin. In 1987, my articles were published as a book, *Berlin – An English Guide to Known and Unknown Treasures*. After returning to London, I became Head of Languages at a secondary school and accompanied school trips to Berlin. In 2012 I published my second book, *Berlin Unwrapped*. Like Marlene Dietrich, I have always kept a suitcase in Berlin.

What are your thoughts on the ways the city has changed over the past decades?

When the Wall fell in 1989, it was wonderful to see Berlin reunited, so I certainly don't miss the Wall itself nor the political tension. Berlin is now a very different city, vibrant and stimulating. It is a hub of creativity, but is still feeling its way towards world status. The regeneration of disused spaces has been exciting.

What is the focus of your most recent guidebook, and of your blog?

In my book *Berlin Unwrapped*, I tried to include every place that I thought visitors would find interesting. One chapter describes the special character of each district and another has details of Berlin's amazing lakes and forests. The last chapters are grouped under the headings

"Jewish Berlin," "Hitler's Berlin," "Divided Berlin," and "The Berlin Wall." The object of my blog is to keep unwrapping Berlin, so I write about recent additions to the cultural scene or elaborate on places I could only describe briefly in the book.

You have described Berlin as "more than a place, it is a state of mind."

Over the past century, Berlin has come through the most terrible times imaginable. It has always attracted outsiders who want to escape a restricted, provincial existence. Berliners have a straight-talking attitude and there is a collective feeling of wanting to escape any kind of dogma. Berlin isn't just a place, but also a determined, free spirit.

Where would you take a first-time visitor to show them the essence of Berlin?

The essence of Berlin is its ability to balance its dark past with edgy, modern culture. I always take first-time visitors to Clärchens Ballhaus, an old dance hall which combines nostalgia with fun, or to Crackers, a top restaurant in a former industrial-style nightclub. On a summer evening, there's nothing to beat sitting by the river, perhaps at Strandbar Mitte opposite Museum Island. In winter, I take visitors to a traditional pub like Metzger Eck in Prenzlauer Berg or something

more avant-garde, such as Kirk Bar.

Favorite recent discoveries?

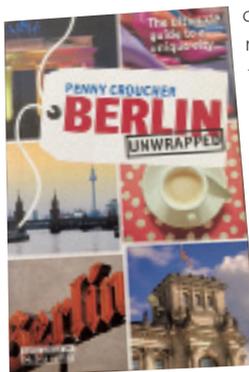
The fabulous Pierre Boulez Saal is the brainchild of Daniel Barenboim, linked to an academy for musicians from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim backgrounds. The Feuerle Collection is a stunning private art museum housed in a former bunker. And Park am Gleisdreieck is a community-led public park on an old railway site with rose gardens and trails.

Imagine you had an entire day to spend however you choose.

What would your perfect Berlin day look like?

I like to escape the crowds and take the S-Bahn to one of Berlin's lakes and forests. At Wannsee, I get the bus to the idyllic Liebermann Villa and lunch by the lake at Bootshaus Bolle or walk through

the forest and take the ferry across to Pfaueninsel (Peacock Island). Or I head east to Köpenick, stroll around the palace grounds, then take a boat across the Müggelsee. But best of all, I like to cycle to Grunewald, swim in a lake, and visit friends who have a wooden house in a garden colony there. **W**



Clockwise from top left: Clärchens Ballhaus; Penny Croucher; the Pierre Boulez Saal; Penny Croucher's book, *Berlin Unwrapped*; Crackers Bar & Restaurant.