

Could Berlin live up to its hype — quickly? Yes

By Niece Regis

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BERLIN — I had read the buzz about Berlin: young and dynamic, art lovers' heaven, awesome new architecture, cutting-edge trendy. On a recent trip in Germany, I altered my itinerary to see the capital for myself.

With only a day and a half to visit, I hoped to squeeze in as much as possible. But where to start? I'm generally tour-bus-averse, a.k.a. a travel snob, but that seemed the best way to get an overview of a city of 3.5 million people.

I arrived in the morning, too early to check into my room at Swissotel Berlin, though they agreed to hold my bags. The concierge recommended City Circle Sightseeing, a hop-on, hop-off bus that visits 20 city landmarks and provides ear-phone translations. I bought a ticket at the hotel, walked around the corner, and easily found the bright yellow double-decker bus.

My plan was to disembark at a few stops on the 2½-hour route for a quick look-see, and return later — on my own — to ones that sparked my interest.

After 40 minutes of sightseeing, passing KaDeWe (said to be Europe's largest department store), the Berliner Philharmonie (concert hall), the Neue Nationalgalerie (modern art), the glass and steel towers of Potsdamer Platz and the Jewish Museum, I alighted at Checkpoint Charlie.

This famed Cold War crossing point between East and West Berlin is highly touristic, with a museum that chronicles the history of the wall. On the street, vendors hawked souvenirs.

Waiting for the next bus, I perused nearby food trucks and couldn't resist Check Point Curry, partly for its name, and partly for its currywurst — grilled pork sausage slathered with stewed tomatoes and curry — a specialty of the city.

Alongside the Spree River, the Berlin Wall East Side Gallery is a 4,200-foot-long section of wall that is covered with murals. I hopped off the bus and walked past image after image while reflecting on the celebra-



Art galleries and restaurants in the Hackesche Höfe area, and inside the Protestant Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church.

tory mood in 1989, after the wall was breached, when hundreds of artists created this sometimes highly political graffiti art. As I reached the end, what affected me as much as the paintings was that the wall, when viewed from the side, is so slim — no more than a hand's width wide.

The tour crossed from West to East and back again. (A subtle red brick line crisscrosses the city, marking where the wall stood.) We passed the reconstructed Reichstag, sporting a glass dome designed by British architect Sir Norman Foster, and though I could see people walking interior ramps I was more intrigued by the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, also known as the Holocaust Memorial, designed by the architect Peter Eisenman.

The memorial consists of more than 2,700 gray concrete slabs arranged in a grid. The height of each is different, and set on the undulating ground, the slabs create narrow passageways where one loses sight

of the city. I couldn't help but link their shapes to those in the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, a somber thought.

Later I hustled to find the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, an octagonal concrete and glass brick structure and tower built in 1961, adjacent to the remains of the original neo-Romanesque church destroyed by Allied bombing. Stepping inside the worship room was like entering another temperate zone, not only because of the cool air but also because of the ethereal light coming through more than 22,000 panes of thick blue glass produced in Chartres, France.

Farther down the street, mannequins of Andy Warhol stared from the windows of KaDeWe. I wasn't shopping for fashion in this elegant, more than hundred-year-old department store. I headed straight to the sixth floor, a vast food emporium. Imagine marble floors and gleaming display cases, but instead of jewelry and hand-



PHOTOS BY NEECE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

bags there are rows of fresh and prepared foods, with entire sections dedicated to meat, seafood, fresh baked bread, pastries, caviar, wine and champagne, and even areas representing entire countries such as American food (Pop Tarts and Quaker Oats) and Thailand. You can dine in or take out. One could easily spend an hour there, as I did, lost while ogling the Veuve Clicquot Bar and the Chocolate Bar.

In the evening, I checked into my hotel and dined in-house at Restaurant 44. My guidebook described the menu as "French creative" but I'd say its culinary arc is wider with international influences and flavors.

Morning rain dampened my plans to bike through the nearby Tiergarten, an enormous urban park reminiscent of Central Park. Instead, I used the rail line to travel across town.

Hackesche Höfe, a series of restored Art Nouveau buildings with eight interconnecting courtyards, is a lively area of street-level bars, restaurants,

art galleries, and boutiques. It was a perfect way to spend half a day perusing work by local designers. I found softer-than-soft leather shoes (Trippen), handmade Jugendstil tiles (Golem Kollektion), women's fashions (Simon Seidel), a design and art store and gallery (Gestalten Space), leather bags (Jost), and fanciful hats (Coy).

In a city that offers a plethora of museums, including five world-class institutions on Museum Island, I had time to see one. After a quick lunch at a Turkish food truck, I headed to Hamburger Bahnhof, a contemporary art museum in a restored mid-19th-century train station. I power walked through two of the eight large exhibition spaces, and emerged blurry-eyed into sunshine and heat.

Before catching the bus to Dresden, I had one last destination. A friend who shares my passion for swimming had suggested a spa with steam, sauna, and a pool with city views. At Therman Am Europa Center, I

If you go . . .

Where to stay
Swissotel Berlin

Augsburger Strasse 44
800-637-9477
www.swissotel.com/hotels/berlin

Near the central shopping and business district, from \$155.

What to do

City Circle Tour Berlin

011-49-30-3519-5270
www.bbsberlin.de/citycircle
Daily 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Adults \$22.50, children ages 7-14 \$14.25, under 7 free.

Checkpoint Charlie Museum

Friedrichstrasse 43-45
011-49-30-253-7250
www.mauermuseum.de

\$16

Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

Georgenstrasse 23
011-49-030-263-9430
www.stiftung-denkmal.de
KaDeWe
Tauentzienstrasse 21-24
011-49-30-2121-0
www.kadewe.de

rode the lift four flights, paid for entry and a towel, and changed into my suit. Stairs led up to an indoor pool curving along a glass wall looking out on a terrace and, beyond that, office towers. I stepped outside where two men swam laps in a semi-circular channel. As I donned my cap and goggles, it dawned on me that every person — swimming in the pool, lounging on chaises, heading toward the steam room — was naked. I was the only person in a bathing suit.

Not one who enjoys standing out in a crowd, I removed my suit, casually tossed it on my towel, and slipped into the water. As I began the backstroke, the sun rounded the building, blasting me with warmth, and the six o'clock Angelus bells rang out across town. It was as close to perfect as travel gets. Oh, Berlin. I'd say the hype is right.

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All food is not Roman but Rome is all food

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they dish out.

On a recent trip I decided to visit (or revisit) the cream of the regional restaurants in town. Some are haunts from the decade I lived in Rome; others were recommended by Italian and expatriate friends who, along with the city's myriad enchantments, lure me back year after year.

Geography is destiny, they say, and none of Italy's regions better illustrates that adage than Sicily. A stepping stone at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, the island has been on the sharp end of countless foreign powers' imperial ambitions, from the Greeks, to the Spanish, to the Arabs. Those waves of invasion have made Sicily's cuisine as rich as the hyper-fertile volcanic soil that blankets its hilly terrain and yields some of the most flavorful produce on earth.

For a sampling of that lava-fed richness, I made my way to Capricci Siciliani. Housed in a 12th-century palazzo once owned by the influential Orsini family, the restaurant affords a chance to feast on classic Sicilian fare against a backdrop of Romanesque elegance. Warmly lighted groin vaults soar above walls festooned with Sicilian ceramics, armor-clad puppets, and rusted coats of arms. The effect is enchanting; the food superb.

True standouts are the insalata di polipo, a succulent, citrusy antipasto of sliced octopus and caponata, a relish of tomatoes, eggplants, olives, capers,



BETSY UPHAM FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Octopus salad at Capricci Siciliani. Over the decades, Italy's islands and inland regions have brought their particular cuisines to Rome, adding restaurants to a tourist's itinerary.

pine nuts, garlic, and raisins that has a distinctly Arab-tinted sweet-sour finish. Fusilli with almond pesto is also spectacular. Another favorite, grilled swordfish alla Ghiotta, topped with a complexly spiced sauce of cherry tomatoes, olives, capers, and raisins, is as moist a slice of swordfish as you'll ever not have to chew. Save enough room for dessert: the cassata, a ricotta-laced cake in a shell of marzipan, is a delightful mélange of spongy, creamy, and firm.

On the opposite end of the country, both geographically and temperamentally, lies Liguria, a thin boomerang-shaped strip of a region joining the slender trunk of Italy to the French Riviera. Luckily, Taverna Giulia, bulwark of Ligurian cuisine in Rome, is a mere stone's throw from Capricci Siciliani, saving you a 14-hour overland traverse.

Ligurians were accomplished seamen, operating a merchant fleet that rivaled the

Venetians'. Long months at sea nosing on bland provisions whetted Ligurians' appetites for flavors redolent of forest and field. Hence the special place occupied by aromatic herbs in Ligurian gastronomy.

"Basil," my genial waiter informs me, "was a sacred plant to ancient Ligurians."

By the looks of it, the cult of basil is alive and well at Taverna Giulia. From the dark green waiters' uniforms to the marble mortar-and-pestles in the window sills, the restaurant is a shrine to the herb that forms the basis of Ligurians' most celebrated edible invention: pesto.

It's no surprise, then, that the pesto sauce here is enough to make you fall to your knees in worship. Equally praiseworthy are the pansotti in sugo di noci. Plump, delicate ravioli stuffed with 12 minced herbs, they come slathered in a buttery walnut sauce. Finished off with a dash of Parmesan, they're, well, divine.

For my next stop, I pulled a

metaphysical U-turn back to the central Italian region of Tuscany for a visit to Tullio, a tony trattoria wedged between the snarling traffic of Piazza Barberini and the glitz of Via Veneto. Tuscany is said to be where the purest Italian is spoken, and, fittingly, the byword of its cuisine is simplicity: Just add a dash of olive oil and salt, and let the ingredients speak for themselves. Or, as they do at Tullio, sing.

Fortunately, the restaurant's upmarket tone doesn't carry over to the food, which is Tuscan fare as it should be, straightforward, unfussy, sparingly seasoned — and utterly delicious. The fagioli all'olio, cannellini beans, olive oil, garlic, tomatoes, and fresh sage, are a study in sophisticated simplicity, and the pappardelle alla lepre, long, flat, perfectly al dente noodles with hare ragù, pack a dark, musky punch.

But what secures Tullio's place in the pantheon of Roman gastronomy is its bistecca

If you go . . .

Capricci Siciliani

Via di Panico, 83
011-39-06-4543-38-23
Dinner for two, not including wine, around \$85. Open seven days a week.

Taverna Giulia

Vicolo dell'Oro, 23
011-39-06-686-97-68,
011-39-06-689-37-20
Dinner for two around \$100, without wine. Closed Sundays.

Tullio

Via San Nicola da Tolentino, 26
011-39-06-474-55-60,
011-39-06-481-85-64
Dinner for two, without wine, averages \$100. Closed Sundays.
Il Drappo
Vicolo del Malpasso, 9
011-39-06-687-73-65
Without wine, prices for two average \$90. Closed Sundays.

fiorentina, Tuscany's signature dish. A Spanish friend dining with me pronounced this char-grilled hunk of lean Chianina beef, served bloody rare and unadorned, better than anything he'd ever tasted in his native land. "Or even," he added after a thoughtful pause, "Argentina."

After this tasty stopover in Italy's heartland, it was out to sea again to the island of Sardinia. Forty years ago, restaurateur Valentina Tolu opened Il Drappo, a cozy and refined outpost of Sardinian cuisine a short walk from Campo de' Fiori, and she's run it with a steady hand ever since.

"We were the first Sardinian restaurant in Rome," she tells me a little wistfully. "There are many others now — Sardinian restaurants in name if not substance."

Tolu is at pains to preserve that substance — and authenticity — at all costs. To that end, every two weeks she takes delivery of a shipment of supplies from her native soil (everything from the characteristically-Sardinian malloreddus gnocchi to the island's famed sheep's milk cheese). Even the centerpiece of the decor, a silvery silk sheet draped in undulating folds from the ceiling, harks back to the traditions of the homeland, where natives celebrate the festival of Corpus Christi by unfurling bolts of fabric from their windows.

Curiously, fish is a fairly re-

cent arrival in the Sardinian diet. For centuries, seafaring raiders harried the indigenous Sardinians into the island's mountainous interior, resulting in a cuisine heavy on hoofed proteins. After a starter of carta da musica — a paper-thin, crispy flatbread once favored by shepherds and swineherds because it didn't spoil — topped with chopped tomatoes, celery, and olive oil, I paid homage to those agrarian roots by diving, fork-first, into the meltingly tender flesh of a roast suckling pig garnished with myrtle (su porceddu al mirto, in the Sardinian dialect).

But don't think that just because they were latecomers to seafood, Sardinians aren't experts at working wonders with it. For my money, the best at Il Drappo is linguine all'astice, or lobster linguine. It's sometimes not on the menu, but don't lose heart. Ask and you shall receive.

Indeed, what you see isn't always what you get in Rome — and what's true of menus goes double for the city's dining scene as a whole. Behind the veneer of predictability thrives an eclecticism every bit as varied as Italy itself. For a taste of that richness, all you need is a ticket to Rome, a good pair of walking shoes — and a hearty appetite for the unexpected.

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