

# How To Move To Berlin



**The practical guide for everyone  
who wants to live, work, or study  
in Europe's coolest capital  
by Kevin Wells**

*"Crammed full with  
insider know-how"*



**BreakingOut Guides**

# **Welcome to**

## **“How To Move To Berlin”**

If you're interested in moving to Berlin to live, work, or study, then this is the guide for you.

When I moved to Berlin, like for many expats, there were a whole heap of things I didn't know about. It cost me a lot of time, overhead, frustration – and money – to find these things out for myself.

What I really needed was someone with the inside knowledge to show me the way as I went through the process of getting myself set up and established in the city.

So I've put together this handbook.

It's not a guide book for tourists – there are already plenty of those. This is a hands-on, how-to, practical handbook based on my own experience and my years of living in Berlin about the practicalities of moving to Berlin.

My aim is to help you avoid the mistakes too many people make and help your move to Berlin go as smoothly as possible. It's the handbook I wish I'd had to guide me when I moved to Berlin.

Knowledge is power – and practical know-how is the key to successfully moving to Berlin.

The guide contains over 400 pages covering all the essential things you need to know about if you're planning to move to Berlin to live, work, or study.

Such as getting a visa, arriving in the city, finding your way around, where to live, finding an apartment, registering with the authorities, and finding a job. As well as information about studying or starting a business in Berlin.

This must surely be the most comprehensive handbook available for expats moving to Berlin today.

If you want to move to Berlin, then you've made the right choice in purchasing How To Move To Berlin.

I'm interested to receive your feedback on what you think

of this guide. As well as anything important I've missed out - and also any new tips you come across.



You can contact me at

[kevinwells@breakingoutbusiness.com](mailto:kevinwells@breakingoutbusiness.com)

or via the contact page on my website

at [www.BreakingOutBusiness.com](http://www.BreakingOutBusiness.com)

Here's wishing you good luck with your move to Berlin.

All the best and Viel Spass in Berlin!

Kevin

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[breakingoutbusiness.com](http://breakingoutbusiness.com)

email: [kevinwells@breakingoutbusiness.com](mailto:kevinwells@breakingoutbusiness.com)

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# **Chapter 1 Why Move To Berlin?**



**Interested in moving to Berlin?**

**You're not the only one.**

**Many thousands of people every year are now making the move to Berlin, from other regions of Germany - as well as from all parts of the world.**

**It's not hard to see why.**

**Berlin is quite simply Germany's most energetic,**

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## **lively - and most happening city.**

Berlin, as its former mayor Klaus Wowereit once said, is “poor but sexy”.

No matter that Berlin is one of the poorer cities in Germany and is located in one of the weakest regions in terms of economic performance.

Berlin has something other cities in Germany just don't have. An image. A buzz. An energy and a lifestyle that attracts people. Not only from all over Germany, but from all over the world.

It's always been this way with Berlin. Back in the days just after the reunification of Germany. Back in the days of the Wall in the 60s, 70s, and 80s.

And for that matter, back in the 1920s and 1930s. Berlin has always attracted migrants from all over. So it is today. And so it will also be in the future.

As plenty of long-established and native Berliners will tell you, things have changed in Berlin compared to what they were 10, 20 or 30 years ago. And they will continue

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to change. For Berlin that's nothing new.

Berlin, as someone once said, is a city always in a state of becoming, but never arriving, never finished. Berlin is a constant work-in-progress.

Berlin isn't even as poor or as cheap as it used to be. Living expenses in Berlin today are higher than they were in the Berlin of 10 or 20 years ago. But compared to London, Paris or New York the city is still a bargain.

There aren't many capital cities of developed countries for whom you can say that.

There's a lot going on in Berlin, especially in the Web and IT start-up sectors. In fact, you could almost say the whole city is a start-up in itself.

So how do you go about moving to Berlin and getting established in the city?

There are a load of questions and problems you will have to tackle. Visas, work and residence permits. Finding a place to live. Finding a job. Learning the language. Learning and understanding the culture.

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Then there are the questions about taxation, health insurance and all the issues of practical every day life in a new city.

Berlin is a city I know well. I've lived in Berlin for many years. All of that time in the ex-Communist eastern part of Berlin.

## **Why Do So Many People Want to Move to Berlin?**

So what's the deal with Berlin and why are so many people keen to move here?

It's not just people from outside Germany who are flocking to Berlin. Berlin is popular with many Germans too.

Berlin is not only Germany's biggest city, but it's also the largest city between London and Moscow.

Berlin has seen plenty of history in the 20th century. Hitler, World War Two, the Berlin Airlift, division into

### **Why Move To Berlin?**



capitalist and Communist halves by the Berlin Wall, the Cold War era.

And then the fall of the Wall and the reunification of East and West Germany.

Even now there's a lot going on as Berlin catches up with the rest of Western Europe in terms of renovation, reconstruction and finding its way in united Europe. Berlin is very much a city of change and renewal.

Berlin is especially popular with self-styled hipsters, digital nomads, artists, students, and web entrepreneurs. As well as people who just want to take a break or sabbatical or just want to go and hang out in one of Europe's biggest and most lively happening cities.

Berlin is famous for its "Berliner Luft" - which refers to the liberal cosmopolitan air of the place where anything goes (or so legend has it). Berlin certainly has a reputation for being more liberal, less uptight and more easy-going than the rest of Germany.

For Germans wanting to escape mainstream conformist

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Germany, but still wanting to be able to speak German and without having to leave Germany, Berlin has always been an attraction.

It's debatable just how realistic this desire to escape is in practice and exactly how far Berlin manages to live up to its own legend. To some extent you might say some people are fleeing to a Berlin of their own imagination that doesn't really exist in the real world.

You can't deny though that Berlin certainly has a lot of creative energy. There's a big artistic community here. Both real artists, as well as would-be artists, hangers-on, and people who just like the idea of being an artist.

And Berlin is the city in Germany where foreigners tend to feel most at home. You find people living in Berlin who come from pretty well all corners of the world.

The one thing Berlin definitely isn't is boring.

## **Moving to Berlin is Easy**

It's surprising simple to move to Berlin. If you're a citizen

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from an EU country then you have the right to stay in Germany for at least 90 days.

To stay longer, you simply need to show "visible means of support" and proof of German health insurance. Visible means of support can mean bank account funds or a source of regular income from a job.

If you're from a non-EU country, in particular from North America, Australia or New Zealand, then you can stay 90 days out of 180.

Note that the 90 out of 180 days rule applies to the entire Schengen Area within the EU, and not just Germany.

For non-EU citizens, staying on longer is not so straightforward as for EU citizens, but it's still possible.

See the chapter on Planning Your Move for details about how to stay longer in Berlin.

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# Chapter 2 Advantages of Living in Berlin



First of all, let's take a look at the main pluses of living in Berlin.

## **Berlin is Cosmopolitan**

Berlin is Germany's biggest and most cosmopolitan city. There's loads going on in Berlin, with renovation and reconstruction still continuing as Berlin catches up with the rest of Western Europe since Germany was reunified way back in 1990.

### **Advantages of Living in Berlin**

Berlin also has a BIG expat population. Well over a third of the population of Berlin comes from outside Germany - and from all parts of the world. Berlin is the city in Germany where foreigners tend to feel most at home.

There are loads of young people here and a very large student population that comes to study in Berlin from all over Germany as well as from all parts of the world.

## **Berlin is Relaxed and Easy-Going**

Even though Berlin has a large population of around 3.5 million, it's very spread out. Berlin's geographical area is bigger than Paris or Greater London and the city is still a relatively easy-going place.

You don't find the big city stress in Berlin like you do in London, Paris, or New York. Things are much more laid back.

Berlin has plenty of green space, forests, lakes and there's a dense network of cycle paths and good public transport. Berlin even has sandy beaches which are very

### **Advantages of Living in Berlin**

popular in summer and the city is one of Germany's top yachting and sailing locations. Roughly half of all the yachts in Germany are said to be registered in Berlin.

Nor does Berlin have large volumes of commuters streaming into the city centre every morning from the suburbs and region around Berlin, unlike what is the norm in London or Paris.

This of course is a legacy of the Berlin Wall which surrounded West Berlin - it meant there wasn't anywhere to commute from!

In fact the largely rural and sparsely populated surrounding region of Brandenburg around Berlin could hardly be more starkly contrasting to the heavily populated expensive commuter belt of London's South East. The fringe areas of Berlin are more a case of the land where time stood still.

## **Berlin Has Great Nightlife**

Yes, all the stories you've heard about Berlin are true.

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Berlin does have a great nightlife - and pretty well anything goes. It's also fairly inexpensive and egalitarian.

There's lots of space for clubs and a constant coming and going of venues - although some of this has been coming under threat from residents, especially in Prenzlauer Berg. And rising rents are also a problem for venues across the city.

On the music front techno still tends to dominate and the bars and clubs in Berlin stay open as long as they want with no official closing times. In fact some don't even open until after midnight. There are even some, though I haven't come across them, that are said not to even open their doors until 5 or 6am in the morning.

And it's - almost - true that beer in Berlin is cheaper than water. At least in discount supermarkets where you can buy a can of beer for 30 cents or so, whilst a bottle of brand name mineral water can cost a Euro or more. Though prices in bars are rather higher, but still better value than London.

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Hangovers are a feature of life in Berlin that you'll have to get used to.

## **Berlin is Relatively Cheap**

The cost of living is also lower in Berlin than in other large cities in Germany and elsewhere in the world.

Berlin apartments especially are much more affordable - although rents in Berlin are steadily increasing.

Berlin's excellent public transport is also much cheaper than London's - and more reliable too.

Eating out in Berlin is also cheap, with plenty of choice on offer at affordable prices.

Plus there's loads of varied and mostly inexpensive night life to be found in the city as well.

## **Berlin is a Great Place to Study**

If you want to study, then Berlin is a great place to move to. Berlin has four main universities, plus loads of other

### **Advantages of Living in Berlin**

colleges.

Fees charged by colleges tend to be low, even for overseas students. Germany has a tradition of providing free university level education to anyone who has the entrance qualifications.

Bear in mind though whilst some of the classes may be held in English, you'll need to have an acceptable level of fluency in German as a condition of enrolment for most programs.

## **Berlin Has a Dynamic IT Start-up Scene**

Berlin has established itself as arguably the world's third biggest Web and e-commerce start-up location right now after California's Silicon Valley and London.

The IT sector has created many thousands of new jobs in the capital, with at least twenty or more top name Internet start-up companies now based in Berlin. The important role played by the IT start-up sector is

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becoming recognized at last by the Berlin city government and the Federal government.

So if you have know-how and experience in the fields of programming, Web design, graphics, etc. then there may be opportunities for you in Berlin.

## **Berlin Has a Non-Conformist Atmosphere**

There's a real sense of change and renewal which you can see and feel in Berlin. In fact, you could almost describe the whole city as a start-up.

Artists and creative people thrive in Berlin's bohemian, non-conformist atmosphere. In many ways you could say Berlin is probably Germany's most non-German city.

Berlin is famous for its “Berliner Luft”. This is the term given to the free cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city where it's said that anything goes.

Berlin or West Berlin at least, was also traditionally the

### **Advantages of Living in Berlin**

centre of West Germany's alternative non-conformist scene in the 1970s and 80s.

And in contrast to London, you do not find large numbers of people in office suits on the streets. Berlin does not even have a financial district. Germany's financial centre is located over in Frankfurt (they're welcome to it).

And last but not least....

## **Berlin is Unique**

What other cities in the world can claim to have seen all the history that Berlin has gone through?

Capital of a notorious dictatorship that sought world domination. Followed by devastation through war. Then division into opposing hostile communist and capitalist halves. With an impenetrable wall separating them for decades to prevent people escaping from East to West.

And then finally reunification into one single city once again and now the capital of a unified Germany.

### **Advantages of Living in Berlin**

Even two decades and more after reunification of Berlin, you can still sense and notice the differences between the two former halves of capitalist and communist Berlin.

In what other city can you experience all that?

It's all here in Berlin.

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# Chapter 3 Downsides to Living in Berlin



What about the downsides to living in Berlin?

I don't believe in sugar-coating or giving a one-sided impression of things like some people do.

Berlin IS a great and exciting city - but it's not all pluses and advantages living in Berlin. Like everywhere else, Berlin has its disadvantages - and some of these can come as a surprise to newcomers.

So let's do some straight talking about the biggest

## **Downsides to Living in Berlin**

downsides to living in Berlin.

Number one...

## **Berlin Has High Unemployment**

Probably about the biggest drawback of all with Berlin is its weak economy.

This is something that surprises many people from abroad. Given Germany's powerful economy, the capital Berlin must surely be a high pressure, dynamic place, bursting at the seams with opportunity?

Not so.

Germany's situation with its capital city is unusual to say the least. Unlike other countries like the UK or France, the powerhouse of the national economy is not found in the capital, but rather over in the regions of Western Germany.

The reason for this is history. World War Two devastated Berlin and then divided the city into two. The eastern half

### **Downsides to Living in Berlin**

(and which also contained most of the centre) became Communist East Berlin, whilst the Western capitalist part found itself cut off and surrounded by the hostile Communist Eastern bloc territory of the GDR.

This put the dampers on Berlin's economy and frightened off potential investors in Western Berlin. As a result, Germany's postwar economy grew up over in the relative safety of West Germany with West Berlin left at a disadvantage.

Whilst this was good for Germany's regions, it left the capital lagging behind even today. West Berlin was kept going largely through government subsidies.

For decades West Berlin was practically kept on permanent economic life-support by the West German government to try and keep it viable as a location and to maintain West Berlin as a showcase for western capitalism right in the face of the Eastern Bloc.

When the Berlin Wall opened up the subsidies enjoyed by West Berlin ended. And with the collapse of the Eastern

## **Downsides to Living in Berlin**



Communist bloc and their conversion to capitalism, there was, cynical as it sounds, no longer any need to continue to maintain West Berlin as a capitalist showcase.

The result is high unemployment and a distinct lack of job opportunities. Unemployment in Berlin is on average twice the rate of many areas over in Western Germany.

Another problem is simply Berlin's geographic location. The city is situated over in the North-Eastern end of Germany, far away from Western Germany's prosperous West and South West which clusters along the Rhine Valley.

## **You Need To Speak German To Work in Berlin**

Despite what some people might tell you, the fact is you'll need to speak German to even be considered as a potential candidate for many jobs in Berlin.

I speak fluent German so this is not an issue for me, but the fact is that Berlin isn't as accommodating of English

### **Downsides to Living in Berlin**

speakers as for example the Netherlands or Belgium, where it's possible to find a decent job without having to speak Dutch. Beyond simple tourist trade interaction, people in Berlin aren't so willing to speak English all the time with newcomers.

There are some exceptions, such as the new Web start-up sector. But generally speaking, you'll be placed at a disadvantage in the job market in Berlin if you don't speak German.

## **Berliner Schnauze**

Berlin has its famous Berliner Luft – but it comes in a package with the famous (or infamous) "Berliner Schnauze" (pronounced "Schnautzer"). This means literally "Berlin Snout" and it's the name given to the native Berliners blunt, direct and sometimes abrasive way of talking and replying to innocent questions.

Berliner Schnauze is maybe a bit like London Cockney or native New York City wit.

### **Downsides to Living in Berlin**

Ask a clever question in Berlin - and you will receive a smart-ass answer. It can be funny, especially when it's someone else on the receiving end of a Berliner's biting wit. But more often than not, Berliner Schnauze just grates.

In Berlin, you'll have to take Berliner Schnauze in your stride if you're going to survive living in the city long term.

Comfort yourself that if you do stick around long enough in Berlin and become fluent in German, you'll eventually become skilled in dishing out your own Berliner Schnauze and give as good as you get.

## **Service in Berlin - or Service, What Service?**

Service in Berlin - or the lack of it, takes some getting used to.

The saying goes that Berlin is a mix of East and West. It takes its prices from Western Europe - and its customer

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service culture from the old USSR.

Service throughout Germany often wouldn't win any prizes.

But in Berlin the combination of standard German attitudes to service mixed with Berliner Schnauze can make for a dismal service experience.

This can seem quite bizarre to newcomers to Berlin, and especially for people coming from North America.

So you'll just have to get used to the idea of rude waiters, indifferent shop assistants who don't seem to want your custom, and brusque public officials, if you want to live in Berlin.

## **Rents in Berlin Are On The Up**

Berlin is no longer as cheap as it once was - and it's getting more expensive every year.

When I first moved to Berlin, my rent was just 200 DM a month. That's 100 Euros, or about \$120 USD.

### **Downsides to Living in Berlin**

Not any longer. Cheap housing is becoming a scarce commodity in the inner areas of Berlin as gentrification proceeds apace.

Despite all this, Berlin is still cheaper than London, New York or Paris. But the days of ridiculously low rents in Berlin are now well and truly over.

## **German Health Insurance is Costly - and Compulsory**

Another big ticket item which comes as a shock to many newcomers is health insurance.

Particularly for Brits reared on the free NHS it can come as a shock to discover just how expensive health insurance is in a country that does not have a free health service.

In Germany everyone is required by law to have German health insurance - and this is expensive. In fact for many it's the biggest single living cost factor after rent.

### **Downsides to Living in Berlin**

And it has to be German health insurance, not insurance from overseas. This is a condition of residence in Germany, even for EU citizens.

If you're only staying in Germany for less than 90 days and not intending to take up residence or work there, then you are not required to take out German health insurance.

Taxes and social insurance deductions in Germany are also high. Plus there are a number of other oddities - such as the "solidarity surcharge". This is a tax which is added to tax bills to help fund the cost of reconstructing the old Eastern German economy and which is still in force years after German reunification.

There is also the "church tax" which you have to pay unless you sign a declaration to explicitly opt out.

There's even a monthly TV tax which finances the public TV channels. The law was changed so that this tax now has to be paid by everyone. You can't opt out of this - even if you don't have a TV.

## **Downsides to Living in Berlin**

So the money you save from the comparatively low rent you pay in Berlin may in part be wiped out by the health insurance and high taxes.

What you gain on the swings, you lose on the roundabouts, as the saying goes.

## **Hostility in Berlin towards Entrepreneurs and Hipsters**

For a long time, Berlin has relied on state subsidies to help get by. This stems from the years of the division of Berlin into East and West.

As a result, there's still a tendency for people to expect the government to bring everything to Berlin - jobs, industry, subsidies.

And there's a certain hostility to entrepreneurs to be found among some people which can seem pretty odd. Partly this is a hangover from the left-wing anti-capitalist mentality from the old days of West Berlin.

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I've experienced this myself, with people implying I was an enemy of the people for running my own business.

To avoid this sort of friction, some young entrepreneurs in Berlin even today keep a low profile about their businesses and tell people they are students instead.

There are cases of new boutiques, bars and other shops getting sprayed with "yuppies out" type graffiti or even being fire-bombed.

So if you're planning to start your own business in Berlin, be prepared to be treated as an anti-social outcast exploiting people for profit and the evil capitalist system.

There's also a more recent hostility to "hipsters". These are mostly young people from other western countries, who move to Berlin because it's cool, hip and cheap.

Funny thing is though that no-one openly admits to being a hipster themselves. It's always the other people who are the damn hipsters.

Anyway, this influx of newcomers, whether hipster or not, is forcing up rents and real estate prices and is leading to

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changes in the social composition of some districts in Berlin.

This resentment is not directed solely against migrants from other countries, but also towards Germans migrating to Berlin from other regions, particularly from Western Germany.

There's also a bit of an on-going problem in Berlin with so-called "neo-Nazi" inspired right wing violence against foreigners, particularly non-whites. This is mainly confined to parts of the eastern suburbs where there is very high unemployment.

There's also been incidences of hostility being expressed towards people who are heard speaking English in public. This tends to come from bigoted small-minded types, though it's also in part a reaction against the big increase in newcomers often only speaking English and little German that Berlin has experienced over the last decade or so.

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# **Germans Can Be Very Reserved**

Compared to Americans, Germans are socially reserved and take much longer to open up. They don't go in for the easy casual small talk of Americans.

Small talk isn't really done in Germany. Smiling too tends to be met with a puzzled and suspicious look rather than a reciprocated smile back. Germans don't smile unless there's a clear reason.

I've been to house parties where the Germans at one end did not mix or speak to the Germans at the other end.

People in Germany also don't usually mix work and free time. The relaxed after-hours drinks scene that you find in the UK for example doesn't really exist in Germany.

This means that it can be harder to penetrate people's social exterior and it can make socializing hard work at times.

Some Germans will tell you this is because in Germany people are more "loyal" when you do get to know them

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and become friends, compared to the "superficial" Americans. As if it's some special deal you get that applies only in Germany.

I don't buy this. I think people here tend to be too reserved and everyone would benefit if they would lighten a little and be more socially open.

## **Berlin Gets Very Cold in Winter**

The climate in Berlin also deserves a mention. Summers in Berlin are very hot and muggy and there's not much air conditioning to be found.

But winters in Berlin are brutal and more like Chicago than Europe. I always say winter in London is like autumn in Berlin.

Living in Berlin you get to discover a new meaning to the term "winter". Winter in Berlin is like an additional season which they don't have in London. Berlin doesn't get quite as cold as Poland or Russia, but believe me, it often feels like it.

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Spring and Autumn are probably the best times of the year to be in Berlin.

## **Don't Forget German Love of Rules and Regulations**

Finally, even though it's Berlin, German rigidity, love of regulations and abiding by the rules applies in the capital just as it does elsewhere in Germany.

You'll find plenty of unrelenting bureaucracy to cope with and fight your way through. And you'll still have to wait at the roadside for the green man signal before crossing the street - even if there's not a car in sight.

## **So is it Worth Moving to Berlin?**

Unless you're just planning to go and spend a month or two having a break or a sabbatical there, I wouldn't automatically recommend moving to Berlin. It depends...

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# Berlin Can Be A Difficult City To Thrive In

Berlin is a difficult city to live in if you don't already have a job lined up, an existing source of income, or if you don't have a specific skill to offer which is in demand in Berlin.

I also wouldn't recommend Berlin for a longer period if you aren't prepared to learn German.

Large numbers of people in Berlin live on social welfare. Jobs are scarce and well-paid career jobs even scarcer. Once the arrival gloss of Berlin wears off, quite a number of expats come to realize the limitations of Berlin. Salaries also tend to be lower in Berlin than in Western Germany.

It can be all too easy to become trapped in a low-level existence in Berlin. Expectations fall, people become used to living in low-rent apartments, with low outgoings, working (when they can find work) for little money, and generally just scraping by. All this for the sake of a city

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which prides itself on being "poor but sexy".

It's worth bearing in mind that not one of the top 30 biggest German companies has their headquarters in Berlin - although many do have representative offices, plant or other sites in Berlin. I'm not saying or assuming that you would necessarily want to work for any of them - I certainly wouldn't - but it gives you an indication of how the economy is in Berlin.

Some people find themselves losing out on career opportunities just for the sake of living in Berlin.

The fact is that Berlin is not a capital city which plays in the same economic league as London, New York, Hong Kong or Singapore.

Does it make sense to insist on living in a city - and region - where career opportunities may be limited? Obviously I can't answer for every situation because each person's circumstances are different. Only you can decide.

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# Things Are Improving For Berlin

But - things are improving for the economy in Berlin. After years of stagnation following German reunification there are now signs of economic hope in the capital.

The new Web and e-commerce start-up sector is one such hope. Technical research and development across a range of areas, and in particular bio-tech and energy technology are also strong in Berlin.

In Adlershof there's the new science, technology and research campus known as WISTA. And the developing "Mediaspree" district to the east of Mitte along the River Spree has attracted several top name companies, including MTV Europe, Universal Music, O2, Hugo Boss, BASF, Mercedes and Allianz amongst others.

Tourism is also big in the capital and there's been enormous growth in tourist numbers visiting Berlin over the last decade. Visitor numbers are still growing fast and so far there's no end in sight. Berlin is now the most popular tourist city destination in Continental Western

## **Downsides to Living in Berlin**

Europe.

And of course, the new Federal government quarter has been a success as has the reconstructed Potsdamer Platz - which was Continental Europe's biggest postwar building project.

Renovation and reconstruction still continues unabated throughout Berlin, even though there have been setbacks. One of which is the new Berlin-Brandenburg airport which so far has been an embarrassing fiasco with a series of costly project design and construction errors which are still being rectified.

But there have been a number of other more successful big infrastructure improvements such as the north-south road and rail tunnel, the new Berlin Hauptbahnhof or central station, and some new transport lines being constructed. New retail malls are also springing up throughout the city.

And Berlin's economic mainstream stand-bys such as higher education and the conference, exhibition and

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event sector are still as important and strong as ever.

Although some initiatives such as the alternative arts centre Tacheles have had to close, one of Berlin's hallmarks has always been the large number of alternative initiatives and projects throughout the city and especially in some of the eastern districts.

This has always been one of the most appealing features of Berlin which has set it apart from other big cities - and it's one of the aspects that gives Berlin its unique energy and atmosphere. Berlin is at least one big city where the bankers and bureaucrats do not have everything their own way.

## **My Verdict on Berlin**

So here's my final verdict on Berlin...

Whether you will be enthralled by Berlin or not depends partly on where you're coming from and what your expectations are.

If you're determined to experience the "big city" - and

### **Downsides to Living in Berlin**

Germany's - and Continental Western Europe's biggest and perhaps most unique city...

if you have a skill in demand in Berlin, if you work location independently, e.g. freelance, via the Web, or if you have your own business already established which you can run from anywhere...

if you want to escape the pressures of London's or New York's sky-high rents...

if you want to escape big corporate office horror or downtrodden commuter misery...

and if you are willing to put the effort in to make a successful go of it and to learn German and integrate...

- then it can be well worthwhile moving to Berlin.

And if you intend to study, then Berlin can also be a good choice of destination.

To sum up, here's a quick overview of the main pros and cons of living in Berlin as I see them:

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# **Advantages of Living in Berlin**

- lively and plenty of energy with a real feeling of change and renewal
- creative atmosphere with lots going on
- unique city with a fascinating history which can still be felt
- cosmopolitan, plenty of expats
- non-conformist lifestyle
- Web entrepreneur start-up culture
- low living costs, especially rent and transport
- relaxed and good quality of life and urban environment
- good location for exploring Eastern Europe
- Berliner Schnauze - it can be funny

## **Downsides to Living in Berlin**

# Disadvantages of Living in Berlin

- weak local economy with few jobs available
- rents increasing fast and strong competition for affordable housing in good areas
- less readiness to speak English than e.g. in the Netherlands
- hostility to entrepreneurs and persistent welfare mentality
- some xenophobia towards foreigners and "hipsters"
- compulsory - and expensive - health insurance and high taxes
- socially reserved
- rigidity and love of regulations
- long cold winters
- Berliner Schnauze - it can get on your nerves

So that rounds up this look at the pros and cons of living

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in Berlin.

For me, whatever the pros and cons of Berlin, at the end of the day I love this city.

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# Chapter 4 Planning Your Move



Should You Take Your Stuff With You To Berlin?

In a word: no.

From personal experience it isn't worth the cost of moving furniture, books, clothes, appliances, or most other possessions from one country to another. Nor is it worth putting things in storage.

Believe me, I've been there and done that. And it wasn't cheap.

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But I've since learned. When I move from one country to another I no longer cart all my stuff with me. I sell it and buy new at my new destination. And I use the opportunity to downsize.

Anything you can do to reduce your mountain of stuff is well worth it.

Obviously you'll want to take some clothes, and almost certainly your laptop, mobile, tablet, and some other things. Plus maybe even a few books.

Keep it to a minimum. It makes life much easier when you are setting up somewhere new.

When I first came to Berlin I made the mistake of putting most of my stuff into storage in London and then having it sent on to Berlin several months later when I found a permanent apartment.

When this stuff arrived in Berlin I was shocked by what a load of unnecessary junk it was. Whatever possessed me to pay to put all this stuff into storage in the first place - and then pay to have it transported over here. Never

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again.

**My advice:** Give away, junk, or sell your stuff and pocket the money. You'll find the money far more useful than the stuff.

## **What About Bringing Electrical Devices to Berlin?**

If you're from the UK or Australia, then your electrical devices will work in Berlin straight away. There's no problem with the voltage. But - you'll need to buy an adapter plug or two to convert your UK or Australian plugs to European power sockets.

However, if you're coming from North America, then your appliances won't work in Berlin because Europe uses 230 volts, whereas North America runs on 110 volts. The higher voltage used in Europe will fry them and that will be the end of them.

You can buy voltage transformers which will let you use your appliances in Europe, but they're expensive, heavy,

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cumbersome, and most only supply a small amount of current.

You may be able to plug in your laptop - provided its power supply unit or the laptop itself has a switch to change voltages from 110 to 230 volts.

But be careful - make sure you check your laptop before you risk plugging it in. Don't just plug in to try it out. You might not destroy your laptop - though you can't rule this out - but you will risk destroying your laptop power supply unit.

Same goes for charging devices for mobile phones and tablets. If they are US make, then they probably won't work in Europe.

**My advice:** don't waste time and money buying voltage transformers. Sell or dump your North American electrical devices before you leave for Berlin and buy new ones here when you arrive. That way you'll have the correct voltage and the correct plug all in the one device.

## Planning Your Move

# **Entering Germany - The Border Formalities**

To enter Germany you must have a valid passport with at least 6 months validity remaining.

## **EU Nationals in Berlin**

For EU nationals from countries which form the Schengen Area a national ID card is sufficient to enter the country.

The Schengen Area comprises countries which have abolished border controls between each other and who participate in maintaining a common computer database of migrant movements into the Area.

Once you've entered the Schengen area, there are no further border controls when you travel from one Schengen Area member country to another.

Non-EU citizens can remain for a maximum of 90 days in any one period of 180 days at a time within the Schengen Area.

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# How To Stay in Berlin For Longer Than 90 Days

## EU Nationals in Berlin

If you're from an EU member country, or a country of the EEA (the European Economic Area - a customs union of European countries which are not full EU members), then you are entitled to remain in Germany indefinitely - provided you have means of support.

This is interpreted as meaning you have recognized health insurance and sufficient funds - either savings or else regular income from employment or business.

If you are coming here to study then you're also permitted to stay. Provided, once again, you can demonstrate means of financing your studies and your health insurance whilst you're a student here. This could be from a student grant, a student loan, or a part time job if you have one, or alternatively your own savings, if they are considered adequate.

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If you're a citizen of a member EU state, then you no longer have to go and register with the immigration authority.

However, you still have to register in person at the registration office known as the Einwohnermeldeamt or Bürgerbüro of the borough in which you are living. Everyone has to do this, Germans included, whenever they change their address.

So what you'll need to do is find a job within the 90 day period.

If you have the resources, you are permitted to stay beyond the 90 days. The crucial thing to satisfy the immigration department on is to show that you have recognized health insurance.

## **Non-EU Nationals in Berlin**

For non-EU citizens who want to stay longer term in Berlin, things are a bit more complicated and there are a few more hoops to jump through.

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Germany maintains a list of favoured nations for visa purposes whose citizens are given an easier time than those from countries which are not on this favoured list.

Australia, Israel, Japan, Canada, South Korea, New Zealand, and the USA are all currently on Germany's favoured nation list for granting visas. So if you are a citizen of one of these countries and you want to move to Berlin, the good news is: you're in luck.

What's more, citizens of these countries who want to live and work in Germany do not have to leave Germany in order to obtain their visa, unlike the case with visas for some other countries. You can arrange all the formalities perfectly legally whilst already living in Berlin with no need to exit and re-entry the country.

However two things you need to get sorted out as a pre-requisite to applying for a visa.

The first is to register your address in Berlin with the local Bürgerbüro of the borough in which you live.

The second thing you will need is valid health insurance.

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Generally speaking this has to be with a German health insurance provider. This is something to which the German authorities place great importance so don't underestimate it.

## **Getting German Health Insurance in Berlin**

Normally when you find a job in Berlin, your employer will arrange your health insurance for you. This will normally be with one of the public health insurance funds called Krankenkassen.

There are a number of different Krankenkassen and you are legally free to choose which one you want to be insured with. They are all tightly regulated by law and so the coverage they offer, and the premiums they charge are all roughly the same. The biggest Krankenkasse are AOK, Barmer and Techniker.

Health insurance premiums with the Krankenkassen for employees are calculated on a percentage of income

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basis, with half of the amount paid by the employer and half by the employee. If you become unemployed and qualify for unemployment benefit, then the unemployment office (Agentur für Arbeit) pay your full Krankenkasse insurance whilst you are unemployed.

If you are self-employed or earn over a certain amount, you have the right to opt out of the Krankenkasse system and take private insurance (from a German-based provider).

This is a complex issue and I'll discuss the whole subject of German health insurance in detail in a later chapter.

## **The European Health Insurance Card for UK Citizens**

The EHIC or European Health Insurance Card entitles UK citizens to free medical treatment in Germany for up to 90 days from arrival – provided that you are only staying in Germany for that time as a tourist or visitor and are not intending to live, work, or study in the country.

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Officially the EHIC is only meant for tourists or short stay visitors, and not for people planning to stay longer term in Germany. But that aside, it can be a useful stopgap during the first few months of your arrival while you get your health insurance sorted out.

Visit [www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcareabroad/EHIC](http://www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcareabroad/EHIC) for more info. This is the official government NHS link.

Be aware there are a number of privately run sites who offer to arrange the EHIC for you for a fee. There is no need to use any of these sites. The EHIC is issued free of charge to UK citizens.

**My advice:** if you're a UK citizen, order the EHIC European Health Insurance Card in the UK before you leave for Germany.

## Getting a Visa To Stay in Berlin

Once you have your health insurance confirmation (Krankenversicherungsschein) and your residence registration certificate (Anmeldebestätigung) you can

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then apply for your visa.

As mentioned earlier, EU Nationals do not need a visa. So the information below is specifically for US, Canadian, Australian, Japanese and other nationals on Germany's "favoured nation" list.

There are two main types of visa available for these groups of non-EU nationals in Germany:

- the freelance or self-employment visa, and
- the language student visa.

## **What is the Freelancer Visa?**

The freelancer or self-employment visa (sometimes known as the "artist visa") is a work permit which isn't tied to a particular employer or employment contract.

This is a VERY useful thing to have as it is more generous than many other visas. You might complain about the bureaucracy involved in applying for it, but it's not something that is granted to every non-EU migrant to

Germany.

So if your nationality is on the favoured nation list, then you can be truly thankful that you have this option available to you.

These are the main pre-requisites for being granted a freelance visa in Berlin:

- Residence registration (your Anmeldebestätigung)
- Proof of German health insurance
- Proof of sufficient funds to cover the duration of your language course
- Proof of registration with a recognized language school in Berlin
- Your CV and a copy of your higher education diploma or degree certificate
- Proof of at least 3 freelance contracts for future projects

**My advice:** check out

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[service.berlin.de/dienstleistung/305249/en](https://service.berlin.de/dienstleistung/305249/en) for the precise details and requirements for the freelancer visa program.

## **What is the Language Student Visa?**

An alternative to the artist visa is the simple language student visa. This is for non-EU citizens who want to spend time in Germany for the purpose of attending a German language course.

To be granted a language student visa in Berlin the main pre-requisites are:

- Residence registration (your Anmeldebestätigung)
- German health insurance
- Proof of registration with a recognized language school in Berlin
- Proof of sufficient funds to cover the duration of your language course

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For both the freelancer visa and the language student visa you have to make an appointment with the Berlin Ausländerbehörde (Foreigner's Office) for an interview in person as part of the application process for the granting of the visa.

According to the Foreigners Office there is a waiting list for appointments of at least 4 to 6 weeks.

You'll need to make sure all your paperwork is in order and ensure that you bring it all with you for the interview. If you don't speak any German, then it's also best to have a German-speaking friend accompany you to the office as this will help make things go more smoothly.

**My advice:** check out

[service.berlin.de/dienstleistung/324289/en](https://service.berlin.de/dienstleistung/324289/en) for the precise details and requirements for the language student visa program.

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# Do You Need to Speak German To Live in Berlin?

Basically yes.

This is one area where it really does pay to be prepared in advance.

German is of course the native language in Berlin. Many Berliners have at least some knowledge of English, but it varies from person to person. Younger people generally speak good English. With older people there tends to be less knowledge or ability with English.

In the eastern part of Berlin knowledge of English among older people is definitely weaker. This is due to the fact that in the Communist GDR days Russian rather than English was the first foreign language taught in schools.

Bank ATM machines, public transport ticket machines, public phones and so on can usually be switched to display English.

But for job seeking in Berlin, despite what some people

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might tell you, the fact is you'll need to speak German to even to a chance to be considered as a potential candidate for many positions.

The city isn't as accommodating of English speakers as for example the Netherlands, where it's possible to find a decent job without having to speak Dutch. Beyond simple tourist trade interaction, people in Berlin aren't so willing to speak English all the time with newcomers.

There are some exceptions, such as the IT and Web start-up sector. But generally speaking, you'll be placed at a disadvantage in the job market in Berlin if you don't speak German.

You also need to know German for your interactions with the public authorities, such as for visa permits and the like.

Government officials in Berlin are officially required to speak German in their dealings with the public. This they say (ironic as it sounds) is to avoid the potential for mistakes in understanding.

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Being able to speak German will also be to your advantage when viewing and renting apartments. Not to mention day to day living and socializing in Berlin.

**My advice:** start learning German before you arrive in Berlin.

I'll talk about the best ways to learn German and advice and tips on learning the language in a later chapter.

## **Finding Accommodation in Berlin**

Should you find accommodation before you arrive?

In practice it's hard to organize permanent accommodation in Berlin before you arrive. Most landlords and real estate and lettings agencies will want to interview you in person before deciding whether to let to you.

In any case it's also better from your point of view for you to be present in the city so you can visit places and meet landlords yourself before making a decision.

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Another good reason to wait until you arrive in Berlin before looking for accommodation is that there are a number of online scams targeted at people looking to rent in Berlin. If you're trying to do your accommodation search "remote" then you will be an easy target for these scammers. I was - almost - taken in by one of these scammers, and it was an annoying waste of time.

What you can do is to fix up some temporary or short-term accommodation before you arrive.

For example for the first few nights or a little longer, in a pension, youth hostel, or maybe an airbnb room. This is the way I always do my moves abroad and it's the way I moved to Berlin.

It's a good idea to approach the accommodation searching task in stages: initial few nights -> first month -> long-term.

**My advice:** book yourself some tourist or visitor type accommodation for the first few nights.

During this time, you can then fix up a short-term sublet

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of a room for the first month or two.

This gives you much more time to get to know the city, sort yourself out, get to know people - and get to hear of potential apartments of the type and in areas which will suit you best.

And from there, you can then move on to rent a long-term permanent apartment.

This takes the stress and the pressure off your accommodation search and you'll be less likely to accept something which isn't what you really want.

**My advice:** check out airbnb in Berlin: [www.airbnb.com/s/Berlin-Germany](https://www.airbnb.com/s/Berlin-Germany)

## **How Easy is it to Find Accommodation in Berlin?**

Vacant visitor accommodation in Berlin can be hard to find at short notice. There is big demand for pension and hotel rooms and hostel places can also fill up fast. Berlin

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has been seeing both a big growth in tourism and in the number of migrants to the city.

That's why I strongly recommend you pre-book your first few nights or preferably longer, at the very least.

Short-term accommodation can also be hard to find. However, there are always plenty of sub-lets available in Berlin for short periods. Short meaning anything from a few days or a week or two to several months or more.

Unlike permanent long-term apartment lets, sub-lets in Berlin are usually furnished or semi-furnished. They can be a good way to get a foothold in the city. They tend to be easier to fix up than long-term permanent lettings and there's usually less formality and bureaucracy involved.

See the separate chapters about finding visitor accommodation and short-term accommodation where I talk about this process in more detail.

Longer term or permanent accommodation is a different matter. Landlords are very choosy in Berlin and they think differently from many in the UK. They tend to take a long

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term view in which stability, security and reliability are everything.

This means that for renting permanent unfurnished accommodation it's important to appear to be stable, have a regular income, and be committed to staying in the apartment long term. Landlords in Berlin don't generally want tenants who are likely to terminate the contract after several months or even a few years.

Strangely enough, there's also a certain prejudice against self-employed people and freelancers. This is because their income and circumstances are considered to be less stable than those of regular employees.

Finding a permanent apartment in Berlin is a whole subject in itself. I'll discuss the business of finding an apartment in Berlin in a later chapter.

## **How Much Money to Bring to Berlin?**

Luckily Berlin is not an expensive city as big Western

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European cities go, but I would say the absolute minimum you should budget for in Berlin is 1000 Euros a month.

You might be able to get by initially at least on a little less by being extremely frugal - and depending of course on how much rent you are paying, but life will not be much fun.

In fact, it's better to budget for a little more to cover unexpected and irregular expenses and items, plus nights out, meals out, entertainment, etc.

You'll need to have enough money saved to finance yourself while you look for a job, and to pay for rent, deposits on rooms and apartment, as well as to pay for health insurance while you are searching for a job.

As always, it's better to have more money saved for your Berlin move than you think you will need rather than less.

## **The Official Berlin City Website**

The official Berlin city website is at [www.berlin.de](http://www.berlin.de). They have versions in several languages as well as German,

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although only some parts of the site are translated.

This address is for the English language version. The site is corporate glossy PR in style and the emphasis may seem more on tourism than residents, but it's the official main portal site run by the Berlin city authorities. If you're looking for definitive info about a public service in Berlin, then the [www.berlin.de](http://www.berlin.de) site is the best place to turn to.

## **When is the Best Time to Move to Berlin?**

As the saying goes, there's no time like the present.

You probably have to tie up loose ends at home, gather resources and do a little prep first (the fact that you're reading this article is also a good sign).

**My advice:** move as soon as you can. Put things off and you can put them off continually. The time is never perfect and you can always find some excuse not to take action.

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If I had only one thing to say about when to arrive in Berlin, it would be: try to avoid arriving in the winter.

Berlin in winter is grey, cold, overcast, and often icy. It depresses the spirit and makes some Berliners even more bad-tempered than usual. Berlin in winter can feel the opposite of upbeat and you may find yourself wondering why you came if this happens to be your first experience of the city.

By the way, in Berlin "winter" effectively means the period from November to the end of March. So we're talking about 5 months or so of "winter", even if officially winter doesn't start until the end of December.

"Unofficially" as far as I'm concerned, in Berlin winter starts in November.

Much better to wait until April at the earliest.

**My advice:** April through October are the best times to arrive in Berlin. But bear in mind that Berlin summers get hot and muggy and this can make apartment and job-hunting extra hard work.

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# Start Learning German BEFORE Your Move to Berlin

One of the best things you can do to prepare for your move to Berlin is to get started learning German.

And an excellent way to get started is to use an MP3-based audio course. This is what I did prior to moving to Berlin and it was by far the best investment in learning German I ever made.

One such course that I can recommend is the excellent [GermanPod](#) audio language course. This extremely popular and successful course will give you a head start in becoming able to understand and speak German.

I'll talk about GermanPod, language classes and other advice and tips for learning German in the separate chapter on learning German in Berlin.

## Preparing To Find a Job in Berlin

Finding a job in Berlin can be hard work. Berlin has high

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unemployment and strong competition for what jobs are available. Needless to say, German speakers tend to get priority over other candidates.

Bring your higher education, technical or professional training certificates. Or at least copies of them.

Don't forget you can put also scanned copies of your certificates and CV in the cloud for safekeeping.

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# Chapter 5 Arriving in Berlin



## Arriving in Berlin by Plane

Berlin's brand new airport, Berlin-Brandenburg International (code BER) was supposed to open for passengers way back in 2010.

But the project has been plagued by a series of budget, project design, and construction errors. As a result, the projected opening date has been delayed yet again.

This means you definitely won't be arriving at Berlin-

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Brandenburg Airport as yet, but instead at one of the two smaller Berlin airports: Tegel or Schönefeld.

## **Berlin-Tegel Airport**

Tegel (airport code TXL) is located in north-western Berlin. It's a 1970s style airport, small in size as capital city airports go and with an unusual hexagonal concourse layout.

Surprising as it sounds, Tegel Airport does not have a train station, neither S-Bahn nor U-Bahn. Note that Tegel S-Bahn station confusingly is NOT situated at the airport.

This means the only way to get to and from Tegel Airport by public transport is by bus.

There are buses from Tegel to the S-Bahn and U-Bahn station at Alexanderplatz, as well as to the Hauptbahnhof central rail station and to Zoologischer Garten station (buses X9 109 and 128).

You can take the bus X9 or 109 to Jakob-Kaiser-Platz which is about 5 minutes away and then transfer to the U-

## **Arriving in Berlin**

Bahn line U7

Alternatively take bus 128 to change onto the U-Bahn line U6 at Kurt-Schumacher-Platz.

if you want to change onto the S-Bahn, then Express Bus TXL stops at S-Bahn station Beusselstraße which is about 10 minutes away.

The quickest route into the city centre is to take the Jet Express Bus TXL to Alexanderplatz (City East) or alternatively the Jet Express Bus X9 to Zoologischer Garten (City West).

This takes around 45 minutes from the airport to Alexanderplatz with the Express Bus TXL or around 30 minutes if you change onto the S-Bahn at the Central Station (Hauptbahnhof).

Zoologischer Garten station is about 20 minutes away by Express Bus X9.

## **Berlin-Schönefeld Airport**

Berlin's other airport, Schönefeld (airport code SXF) is

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located on the edge of south-eastern Berlin. It's also a small and old fashioned airport which was the old Communist East Berlin airport. Schönefeld is situated right next door to the brand new Berlin-Brandenburg airport which is still being built.

Schönefeld Airport is better served by public transport than Tegel. Unlike Tegel, it has it's own S-Bahn station and is also served by regional trains.

S-Bahn trains run every 10-20 minutes from Schöneberg. The station is located in zone C so you'll need a 3-zone ticket for zones ABC to get into the city centre.

If you want to get to the Central Station (Hauptbahnhof), Friedrichstrasse or Zoologischer Garten stations or beyond, you'll save time by taking one of the regional express (RE) trains. Trains run roughly three times per hour and cost the same as the S-Bahn trains.

The quickest route into town is to take either the RE7 or RB14 trains (also called the Airport Express). These cost the same as the S-Bahn and usually take about 30

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minutes to Alexanderplatz and about 45 minutes to Zoologischer Garten.

There are also a number of bus routes serving various destinations which stop just outside the airport terminal building.

Don't forget to validate your ticket when you catch your train or bus!

One oddity of Berlin is that there are relatively few international flights beyond Europe to and from the city. It's Frankfurt, rather than Berlin, which serves as Germany's main international airport and connecting hub. This is a leftover from the old days of divided West and East Berlin.

Berlin may see more transcontinental connections flying to the city when the new Berlin-Brandenburg International airport opens. But for the moment, if you're coming to Berlin from America or Asia then there's a chance you'll be flying in via a connecting service from Frankfurt or elsewhere in Germany.

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Schoenefeld and Tegel airports are due to be taken out of service when the new Berlin Brandenburg airport is finally opened for business.

## **Arriving in Berlin by Train**

Berlin now has a smart new multi-level, all-steel and glass central station known as Berlin Hauptbahnhof.

Berlin Hauptbahnhof is actually a through junction station with lines serving north, south, east and west, rather than an end-of-line terminus as such, but it's where almost all long-distance express trains that serve Berlin stop or terminate.

The Hauptbahnhof is situated roughly halfway between Mitte and the Zoo Tiergarten area and this is where you'll most likely arrive if you're coming to Berlin from elsewhere in Europe or Germany.

From here you can easily transfer to local S-Bahn train connections to most other parts of Berlin.

The Hauptbahnhof also has a U-Bahn subway stop on the

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line U55.

U55 is perhaps Berlin's most pointless subway line. As yet it consists of just 3 stations and is not even connected to the rest of the U-Bahn system. At present it runs only as far as Brandenburg Gate.

If you have a national DB train ticket to Berlin, then it's useful to know your ticket is valid for travel on the S-Bahn to your final destination on to anywhere in Berlin. Note that DB tickets are NOT valid on the Berlin U-Bahn, trams or buses.

The Hauptbahnhof is also served by a tram which stops just outside the station, the M5 line which runs to Hohenschönhausen via Oranienburger Strasse, Hackescher Markt, Alexanderplatz and further east along Landsberger Allee.

## **Arriving in Berlin by Bus**

If you're coming to Berlin by long distance bus, then you'll most likely arrive at the Zentraler Omnibusbahnhof

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(Central Bus Terminal) on Masurenallee in Charlottenburg in Western Berlin, some way from the city centre.

From there you can catch city buses in many directions of the city, or else walk the 5 minutes or so to the U-Bahn stations Theodor-Heuss-Platz or Kaiserdamm.

Alternatively there is an S-Bahn station at Messe Nord.

## **Arriving in Berlin by Car**

If you're coming to Berlin by car, then you'll probably pass at some stage along Berlin's outer orbital motorway, known as the Berliner Ring, otherwise known as route A10.

Try to avoid rush hours if you can as the traffic can be heavy at those times.

## **Getting Your Bearings in Berlin**

First thing you'll want to know is, where exactly is the centre of town in Berlin?

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Not surprisingly, for a city which was divided for four decades into east and west, Berlin even today has not one, but two city centres.

One is the Alexanderplatz/Mitte district in the centre of what used to be East Berlin. It still has an old Communist Eastern Bloc feel to it in parts.

The other centre is the area around Zoologischer Garten or Zoo Station, with the big Kaiser Wilhem Memorial Church and the Ku-Damm boulevard. This used to be the city centre of old West Berlin back in the days of the Berlin Wall.

But the main and official city centre district of Berlin is now officially Mitte, which is German for centre. Mitte stretches from the Brandenburg Gate to Alexanderplatz, although the governmental borough called Mitte actually covers a wider area and includes districts of what were once West Berlin.

The famous Brandenburg Gate or Brandenburger Tor is situated to the east of the large central park, called the

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Tiergarten. Alexanderplatz and the Fernsehturm are located a few kilometres further to the east.

Alexanderplatz and Brandenburger Tor are linked by the wide Unter den Linden boulevard, mostly lined with museums, hotels, government buildings, and the Humboldt University. The big redbrick Berlin City Hall is located opposite the Fernsehturm to the right when you are coming from Unter den Linden.

The TV Tower or Fernsehturm at Alexanderplatz is an obvious landmark which can be seen for miles around.

The Government Quarter and the Reichstag (Parliament building) are situated just a little along to the west of the Brandenburg Gate.

The reconstructed Potsdamer Platz district which used to be the no-man's land of the Berlin Wall is located due south of the Brandenburg Gate.

Over in western Berlin, the Zoo Station area, officially known as Tiergarten, the famous Ku-Damm or Kurfürstendamm boulevard stretches in a straight line

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from the Zoo area out towards the Grunewald forest to the south-west.

The Berlin Hauptbahnhof central station lies roughly halfway between the Brandenburg Gate and the Zoo station.

Prenzlauer Berg is situated a few kilometres to the north of Alexanderplatz, with Friedrichshain just to the east. Kreuzberg lies to the south-east of Potsdamer Platz.

An easy and practical way to get to grips with the layout of Berlin's city centre is to take a trip on the 100 bus.

The 100 route is a double-deck bus that runs between Zoo station in the centre of Western Berlin, and Alexanderplatz in the centre of Eastern Berlin.

The bus passes through much of historic Berlin – and it's much cheaper than travelling on the tourist buses.

**My advice:** take a trip on the 100 bus as soon as you can. The 100 bus is an ideal way to get a basic handle on the layout of the city centre when you arrive.

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# Getting Around by Public Transport in Berlin

Berlin has a population of around 3.5 million, and an area covering some 700 sq km. This compares to London with 500 sq km and about 8.5 million people. So Berlin is very spread out and the distances shouldn't be underestimated.

Berlin is not a city where you can easily just stroll around from district to district. It's not unusual for some people to spend up to an hour or more travelling to their place of work or study, in each direction.

Fortunately Berlin has an extensive underground train network, known as the U-Bahn, as well an overground train network called the S-Bahn.

There's a dense network of bus services as well as night bus services covering most parts of the city.

Eastern Berlin has an extensive tram system. However only a couple of lines link up with the Western half of the

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city. West Berlin also had a tram system some decades ago, but this was dismantled in favour of expanding the U-Bahn network.

There are even ferry services in Berlin, mainly in the outer West around Wannsee, and in Kopenick and districts in the outer south-east.

The city transit authority is called the BVG and they have an excellent website (also in English) at [www.bvg.de/en/Welcome](http://www.bvg.de/en/Welcome). You can find plenty of info about the transport system in Berlin on the website, including map downloads and full ticket and travel pass details.

The BVG also have an online search engine at [fahrinfo.bvg.de](http://fahrinfo.bvg.de) which provides detailed schedules for journeys including exact times, transfers and fares.

**My advice:** get yourself a free map of the BVG system when you arrive.

Fares in Berlin are lower than in London and there is not the extreme overcrowding found on the London tube.

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# What's the Difference Between U-Bahn and S-Bahn in Berlin?

The Berlin S-Bahn – “Stadt Bahn” or city overground railway is operated by the national German railway Deutsche Bahn. However ticketing is integrated with the Berlin U-Bahn, buses and trams.

The U-Bahn is the underground or subway system and is run by the city transit authority known as the BVG.

One other way of looking at it: the U-Bahn runs underground – except when it runs overground, whilst the S-Bahn runs overground – except when it runs underground.

There's also a network called the Metro which is also run by the BVG. Whilst in other cities, a "Metro" would mean a subway or underground railway, in Berlin it refers to a special network of selected buses and trams that run 24 hours a day, seven days a week. These are marked with a large orange sign displaying a white M.

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At weekends most of the U- and S-Bahn lines run all night, as do the M-network buses and trams.

For historical reasons, the tram network only covers Mitte and the other eastern Berlin districts with just a few link-ups with the western part of the city.

There's also a comprehensive network of night buses serving many parts of Berlin.

## **The Ticket System For Public Transit in Berlin**

The Berlin BVG ticket tariff is based on a zone system consisting of three concentric zones labelled A, B and C.

In practice, there are no tickets available just for zone A or B. Instead there are three fixed combinations: AB, BC or ABC.

Unless you'll going to be travelling to further away places like Potsdam or the airport at Schönefeld, you'll most likely be spending all or most of your time within zones A

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and B.

In this case, you'll most likely only need a travel pass covering zones A and B.

**My advice:** get yourself a monthly travel pass on the first day you arrive. It will save you money and hassle.

Tickets cost around €3 for zone AB, with higher prices for zone BC and zone ABC.

They're valid on all transport with unlimited transfers within 2 hours in one direction.

For short journeys there's a cheaper short distance ticket (Kurzstreckenfahrkarte) valid for 3 stops on the U-Bahn/S-Bahn or six stops by bus or tram, but with no transfers.

There's also a day ticket (Tageskarte) priced according to the number of zones you wish to travel through.

You can obtain weekly and monthly passes, priced according to the number of zones of travel you require.

You can also obtain a yearly 12 month pass for the entire network which works out at approximately the price of 10

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monthly tickets.

You can purchase tickets from automatic machines at all stations mostly situated on the platforms.

You can switch the ticket machines to English and the other major European languages. Staffed ticket counters are only found at the larger stations.

## **Make Sure You Validate Your Ticket!**

Validating tickets (entwerten) is something expats from the UK are not used to having to do, but it's the usual procedure with single tickets in Berlin.

What validating means is that if you have a single ticket, then you have to stamp the ticket before you use it by inserting it into the yellow and white machines on the platform entrances and in buses and trams. This stamps the date and time onto the ticket. You're then ok for using the ticket for two hours right from the time of validation.

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# Watch Out for Plain Clothes Ticket Inspectors in Berlin

Since both the S-Bahn and the U-Bahn stations are all open-entry with no ticket gates, some newcomers to Berlin from abroad think this means they can easily get away with not buying a ticket.

Not so. Plain-clothes ticket inspectors from the BVG transit authority patrol the trains, usually in groups. You'll have to be the most sharp-eyed observer with a nose for seeing through their excellent disguises and spotting them before they spot you.

There's now a 60 Euro fine if you're caught with either no ticket or an unvalidated ticket. And these guys have heard all the excuses, so don't bother trying your luck.

Fact is, you can never be sure whether the person sitting next to or opposite you on the U- or S-Bahn is a secret agent for the BVG, no matter how they might be dressed.

And they always wait until the train doors have closed

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and all the passengers are captive before springing their surprise on you. It's just not worth running the risk.

**My advice:** always have a valid ticket and then you can travel around Berlin without any worries.

## Cycling in Berlin

A great way to get around Berlin and get some exercise at the same time is to buy a bike.

Berlin is mostly flat and the city has excellent cycle lanes going pretty well everywhere, even with their own mini traffic lights and road markings.

Deutsche Bahn provides red and white coloured bikes for hire from the main stations throughout the city. Tariff charge is per minute or alternatively per day (€9-15).

You have to pay by credit card. The initial admin details can take several minutes to process by phone, but once cleared and given the ok, you can then unlock one of the bikes and use it straight away.

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But a much better idea is to buy your own bike as soon as you can,

**My advice:** If you like cycling, get a bike as soon as you can, even if just a second hand one. This is what I did when I first arrived in Berlin.

You can buy a used bike in Berlin for between about 50 and 100 Euros at a market such as the Boxhagenerplatz market held on Sundays. You can also try the German version of eBay at [www.ebay.de](http://www.ebay.de). You'll need to select Berlin as location.

Alternatively you can buy a brand new bike in Berlin from a bike shop or at one of the large stores from about 250-300 Euros or so upwards.

Another option for buying a bike – if you have a receiving address – is online from the [www.fahrrad.de](http://www.fahrrad.de) online store. This is about the cheapest and most popular online bike store in Germany with a great selection and very competitive prices.

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# Taxis in Berlin

Berlin Taxis are usually Mercedes with a yellow taxi light on the roof.

You can hail a taxi cab or else find one at a taxi rank (Taxistand), usually located near the busier U-Bahn and S-Bahn stations. A short taxi trip (Kurzstrecke) of around 2km – 3km or so will cost from around 5 Euros.

# Driving in Berlin

It's not necessary to drive in Berlin as the city has excellent affordable public transport. Berlin isn't as overloaded with traffic as London but there can be heavy traffic jams on some main streets and intersections in peak hours.

Bear in mind petrol or gasoline in Germany is not cheap (currently around 1.40 Euros per litre). Auto insurance in Germany does not come cheap either.

Berlin has a low emission zone called the Umweltzone

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which extends broadly over the area within the inner S-Bahn railway ring.

All vehicles within this zone are required to purchase and display a Feinstaubplakette or Emission badge. This includes cars with non-German registration plates.

For more info and current prices for the Emission badge visit the official city authority website at [www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/umwelt/luftqualitaet/umweltzone](http://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/umwelt/luftqualitaet/umweltzone)

## **Money in Berlin**

Germany of course uses the Euro (divided into 100 cents). The easiest way to obtain Euros is to use your bank or credit card at ATMs to withdraw cash.

Euro banknotes are the same in all Euro zone countries, but the inscriptions on the reverse side of the Euro coins varies according to the country of issue. However, they are all legal tender in all Euro zone countries.

Berliners rely heavily on the electronic direct debit card

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system known as the EC-Card. As a result, credit cards are used much less in Berlin than in the US or UK. Only the very largest stores and some smaller ones accept them. Relatively few restaurants or cafes accept credit cards.

Banks in Berlin are open Monday to Friday from around 9am and usually close around 4pm.

There are bank ATMs to be found throughout the city. The banks belong to a number of separate ATM networks. There is one covering the main big commercial banks such as Deutsche Bank, Dresdner and Commerzbank, and another for the Sparkassen, and another for smaller banking chains.

## **Finding Arrival Accommodation in Berlin**

The demand for accommodation in Berlin has gone up considerably in recent years as more and more people have been moving to the city.

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That's why I strongly recommend that you pre-book your first few nights - or preferably longer before you arrive. For example, in a pension, youth hostel, or perhaps an AirBnB room.

This is the way I have always done my moves abroad and it's the way I moved to Berlin.

**My advice:** book yourself some initial visitor type accommodation for the first few nights of your arrival in advance.

From there you can then look for a short-term sublet of a room for a month or two or more.

This way you'll allow yourself more time to get to know the city, sort yourself out, get to know people, and get to hear of potential apartments of the type and in areas that will suit you best.

This takes the stress and the pressure off and you will be less likely to end up taking something which isn't what you really want.

**My advice:** check out airbnb in Berlin:

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[www.airbnb.com/s/Berlin--Germany](http://www.airbnb.com/s/Berlin--Germany)

Once you've got your initial arrival accommodation fixed up you will want to start looking for some short-term accommodation. I'll talk about finding short-term accommodation later on in the book.

## **Some Practical Tips on Safety in Berlin**

Berlin has a bit of a problem with beggars, drunks, and nutcases hanging around some public places. All big cities suffer from this, but Berlin seems to get more than it's fair share.

The last few years has seen an increase in Eastern European and other beggars and gypsies with babies, practising various scams, hard-luck stories, tricks and ruses on unsuspecting newcomers.

These scammers can be thick on the ground in the tourist parts of town, most notoriously the Brandenburg Gate/Reichstag area, Alexanderplatz and the Zoo station/

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Kaiser Memorial Church area.

But they also pop up at the main train stations as well as some S- and U-Bahn trains and stations, particularly at night. For this reason security guards with dogs regularly patrol the system. Beggars, scammers and buskers also sometimes come into bars and cafes to try doing the rounds of the tables and cafe terraces.

The best approach is to remain firm and stonewall any attempts to wheedle money out of you.

Some areas of Berlin can be unsavoury at night, in particular some of the streets in Lichtenberg, Marzahn and Hellersdorf. Plus the northern end of Prenzlauer Berg and some parts of Neukölln.

As a general rule of thumb, try to avoid deserted side streets late at night and stick to main thoroughfares as best you can.

If you're a member of an ethnic minority, the sad fact is you will need to be more on your guard in these areas because of a tendency for extreme-right wing inspired

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violence from some groups.

Other than that, the usual warnings about pickpockets and street thieves in city streets and on public transport apply in Berlin just as they do in most other big cities.

Also make sure you get a good lock for your bike - preferably one of the fixed bracket iron locks.

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