

Letter from Berlin

by [James Como](#) (April 2019)



Kurfürstendamm, George Grosz, 1925

First impressions. On the ride from Tegel airport to the Ritz-Carlton there are construction sites everywhere, or so it seems—whole blocks of massive ditches, looming cranes, concrete megaliths, protruding rebar—but no workers, with one exception; a single man bangs a nail. During our five days we would spend three nights at the Ritz-Carlton and two at the Adlon Kempinsky, join a walking tour of the city, visit six (out of the approximately one-hundred-and-fifty) museums, including three on Museum Island, visit Sans Souci, the castle of Frederick the Great in Potsdam, eat many a fine meal, pick the brains of some twenty people, luxuriate in those two greatest of hotels, and of course, shop, at the KaDeWe department store (*Kaufhaus des Westens*, “Department Store of the West”), the template for the Galeries Lafayette in Paris, which was *not* the first of its type, no matter its claim (1907 v. 1921/2).

The temperature hovered between the low forties and mid-fifties, the sun mostly winning against clouds and light rain. Though not commonly as in Amsterdam, English is spoken enough for the German-deficient visitor to more than just get by. Yet, unlike Paris, Amsterdam, Madrid, London, Lima, New York, Prague, and so many other cities, Berlin does not invite strolling: the city is not the sight. You will get to a park, inevitably, and see many trees along the way, which, by the way, are . . . numbered. You will visit much, and see more construction sites, all virtually empty of people, not unlike this broad, lightly trafficked, under-populated, fascinating, complex, melancholy city.

Our conceptual maps are often out of sync with the real thing, cities being no exception. Sure, my mental Madrid matched the Spanish capital when I finally came to know it, but my mental Granada was far less incantatory than its actual Moorish

splendor. So, when I have attempted travel writing, it has come after some familiarity: a number of visits, knowledge of at least clusters of words and phrases with a rudimentary reading ability of the language—though I could cheat, sort of, on Amsterdam, where English is spoken universally: I was not be describing a conception.

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I am certainly cheating on Berlin, though, since I'd never visited and have no German to reckon with. Worse, I have several conceptual 'Berlins'. There is the decadent Berlin—*Berlin Babylon*, *Cabaret*, so many depictions of the Weimar years—and then the between-the-war Nazi Berlin—Philip Kerr's *Berlin Noir* trilogy, David Downing's *Zoo Station* (the first in a series), and, especially, the fabled Adlon Hotel, epicenter of espionage, romance, betrayal, death, and luxury. Next door to those 'Berlins' is the historical 'Berlin', especially for one such as I, born soon after WWII: divided, air-lifted, eventually defaced by a barrier resembling a scar made by a blind surgeon after a botched belly operation.

Then—who would have guessed (besides Ronald Reagan)? —along comes a unified Berlin: a capital restored which, though certainly having lost the war, seems to have won the peace as the anglophonic, apparently prosperous, somewhat cocky city, the tuning fork of the globalist *coup de continent*, the European Union. [\[1\]](#) But I am educable, I think. My many 'Berlins' might evaporate like a morning mist.

Second impressions. The Ritz-Carlton Hotel, Potsdamer Platz 3, is across the street from a major train station, a short walk from the new (but routine) mall, and a short cab ride to the KaDeWe. Its front door, front desk, and front office service is second (barely) only to the Savoy. From doorman Terry (a transplanted North Carolinian song-writer), to Alexander, a master concierge, to Tino at the front desk and Nicole in the tenth-floor Club Room (cozy, comfortable, generous), to Marie-Luis Heroven, the concert master of this symphony—all conform to the Ritz-Carlton Credo and its twelve points of Service Values (e.g. “I own and immediately resolve guest problems”; would that *all* Germans would take the two-year training course that Tino had just completed). On the other hand, as well-appointed as the hotel certainly is, and spacious, it is not itself a *sight*, notwithstanding its balustrades, art deco, and ubiquitous Ritz-Carlton comfort.

The highlights of our visit were that walking tour (five hours: we would pay for that infraction), the trip to San Souci, the Berliner Residenz Konzerte at the Charlottenburg palace, and museums: Alte, Pergamon, and Neus on Museum Island, the magnificent Gemalde Galerie museum (where the German art is a revelation)—and the Adlon. In the center of town is the Tiergarten, an immense, heavily-wooded park that used to be a hunting forest. In fact, there are several parks to accompany the many trees everywhere else, but, it having been February, those are bare, ruined choirs. In warm weather the city would be lush. (Outside of Berlin, but not *that* far outside, are some wolves and wild boar, but they are not hunted.)

Did I forget the KaDeWe? Worth a special mention, not because

it's department-store special (somewhere between Bloomingdale's and Macy's), but because of the non-descript food counters—nondescript except for the food. Who orders lasagna at a lunch counter in a department store in Germany? Someone with character flaws, of course. Well . . . it turned out to be the very best restaurant lasagna I've ever eaten. Need I add that the counter was staffed by Italians? Score one for the EU. By the way, our farewell meal, at the Adlon and within full view of the magnificently illuminated Brandenburg Gate, was spaghetti Bolognese, same rating, an off-menu dish specially prepared by—you don't even need a guess. And not so expensive. Except for taxi fares, which rival those of New York, Berlin is not, even at its toniest, an expensive city.

The museums are impressive, not least for their variety and the intimacy of their displays. Truth be told, for a country that numbers its trees the layouts were unsystematic, for the most part. One part, however, that was perfectly located in the Neues Museum was the context for, and the bust of, Queen Nefertiti. A perfect—and perfectly painted and preserved—semblance of an astonishingly regal and beautiful woman (think Angela Bassett). The queen's husband, Akhenatan, is missing his nose, but that doesn't matter: he (briefly) established monotheism in Egypt, maybe roughly contemporaneous with Abraham: not a coincidence, I think; at least, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Third impressions. Already I've said enough to invite dispute from Alexandra, who was charmed by the city, insisting that there is much more to see than we could manage. I say, true, but more to see does not add up to more charm: the place simply does not cast a spell, as charms will do. Sure, it was leveled in the War, and half the place was re-built with all the imagination the Commies could muster; but that merely

explains, without diminishing, the charmlessness.

An exception to that judgment (though here I was far *more* charmed than Alexandra) were the dinner and concert at the Charlottenburg palace, a *schloss* vastly different from the drab, ill-managed, though impressively informative San Souci. True, the outdoor lighting and signage that would get you to the *Orangerie* of the sprawling palace made arriving a challenge—no fun in the cold. But once inside we found a total commitment to eighteenth-century elegance, from costuming and service to language and ritual. One hundred people fit comfortably in the large hall. The food and drink were top shelf, the timing relaxed, and the violin soloist who played before dessert elegant and moving. Then, after we moved across the large lobby to the intimate music chamber, we heard an ensemble play and sing Mozart, Bach, Handel and others: easily as accomplished and complex a performance as I've ever witnessed, and from front row seats.

Philip Kerr's anti-Nazi detective Bernie Gunther knows the Adlon hotel intimately, having been the house detective after leaving Kripo, the Criminal Police. Now in business for himself, he visits his old haunt:

I went through the hotel's handsome doorway and into the sumptuous lobby with its square pillars of dark, yellow-clouded marble. Everywhere there were tasteful *objets d'art*