



Cutting-edge art,
architecture and
fashion thrive in
Düsseldorf, says
Mike Gerrard.
Welcome to
Germany's city
of surprises

High sense of style



In Orbit by artist Tomás Saraceno is a temporary installation at Ständehaus am Kaiserteich, otherwise known as K21

From the outside, it's a distinguished late 19th-century neo-Renaissance building that looks exactly like what it was used for previously: a parliament building. Its vast glass roof looks like it could have been designed by Gustave Eiffel, and the building would look perfectly at home on the banks of the Seine in Paris.

Step inside, though, and you're greeted by a bright and dazzling white open interior, a towering atrium soaring for four floors and acres of open space. It's like stepping through a door onto another planet: high above you, suspended from that glass roof, is what seems to be a giant spider's web, and crawling and rolling around in the web – like spiders playing some kind of game – are people.

This is the Ständehaus am Kaiserteich, more commonly called the K21, in Düsseldorf, Germany. It is the city's home for 21st-century art, and the spider's web is *In Orbit*, a temporary installation by the Argentinian-born artist, Tomás Saraceno. →

In K21, you never know what walking through a door will reveal, and you learn not to judge something from the outside. The city of Düsseldorf really should be treated in the same way. From the outside, this major hub in the Rhine-Ruhr region, Germany's industrial heartland, may seem nothing more than a place to do business – 'trade fair city' is its nickname in certain business circles, after all. Yet, unless you've stepped inside, you won't know the dazzling city of style, art, architecture, fashion – and fun – that it is.

Take a shuttle bus from the K21 to the K20 museum of 20th-century art. The K20 is on Paul-Klee-Platz, a nod to the fact that they have about 100 works by the great Modernist artist, who lived and taught in Düsseldorf. He's just one name in a breathtaking collection of 20th-century art, featuring almost every significant figure: Warhol,

Francis Bacon, Dalí, Picasso, Max Ernst, Miró, Matisse, Magritte, Braque, Mondrian, Chagall... the names simply go on and on, and their works are all well-displayed in bright and cheerful rooms.

Düsseldorf is a city where art is clearly alive and well. It's the seventh largest city in Germany and one of the most prosperous. Yet probably like many outsiders, I hadn't expected Düsseldorf to be ranked as high as sixth best city in the world for expats (out of 272 cities) by consultancy firm Mercer, but I quickly grasp the city's appeal with a stroll along the Rhine's spectacular waterfront. One of the dockyards on the Rhine has been transformed into the MedienHafen, or Media Harbour. Here, smart hotels and restaurants sit among warehouses that have been transformed by modern architects into a remarkable and eye-catching creative hub. Despite a biting wind gusting off the Rhine,

I'm happy to linger a while, admiring the brilliance of American architect Frank Gehry's Neuer Zollhof. These three adjacent buildings are a different yet complimentary mix of surfaces, swirls, towers and glass, combining the starkness of industry with the grace of an ocean liner.

Feeling a little chilled by the weather, I seek out some warming lunch. Thankfully local speciality dishes – *senfrostbraten* (steak coated in strong, locally made mustard) and *flönz mit ölk* (blood sausage with onions) – seem specifically designed to satisfy frozen sightseers.

Such hearty, rib-sticking fare is slightly at odds with the next part of my tour of Düsseldorf's style scene. As I arrive at my hotel, the Indigo, I feel like I've entered a fashion showroom. Mannequins stand and sit around the big open lobby, like another art installation, and a tall bookshelf is filled with books by and about the likes of Helmut Newton,



From far left: Enjoying a refreshing local Altbier in a beer garden beside the Rhine; a Miró exhibition at Düsseldorf's Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen; night view of the MedienHafen

PHOTOS: STUDIO TOMÁS SARACENO/KUNSTSAMMLUNG NRW; GETTY IMAGES; CORBIS; DÜSSELDORF MARKETING & TOURISMUS GMBH



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Vivienne Westwood and Grayson Perry.

Each floor of the small boutique hotel is devoted to a different fashion decade, and I find myself in the Sixties looking up at a Twiggy lookalike, who fills a wall of the room. For as well as being a city of art and architecture, Düsseldorf is also a fashion hub.

Several fashion companies have their headquarters here, there's an acclaimed Academy of Fashion and Design, and the main street, Königsallee (King's Avenue) is lined not just with chestnut trees but also with names like Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Max Mara, Jil Sander, Prada, Tiffany, Swarovski and more.

Düsseldorf clearly prides itself on developing a unique style. This doesn't just apply to things like high art and culture, either. The city even has its own style of beer, a

copper-coloured malty ale known as Altbier. I arrange a brewery tour with guide Dietmar Schönhoff, who leads me round the five alehouses in the Old Town that all brew their own distinctive kind of Altbier. We manage to find ourselves a table in one of the oldest, Füchschen, whose Altbier recipe goes back to 1848.

"Brewing in Düsseldorf goes back to about the year 1000," Dietmar says, "but they had no hops so they used things like myrtle, honey, herbs and caraway to make the beer palatable. It was probably horrible stuff, nothing like the beer we know today."

Altbier is traditionally served in a 200ml glass, shorter and stubbier than the usual beer glass. The waiter will also automatically bring you another when he spots an empty, until you signal your surrender by putting

your beer mat over the top of your glass.

From Füchschen we go to Kürzer and, having polished off two more breweries on the way, we end the evening in Schumacher – the Shoemaker – which Dietmar says is the oldest of the remaining brewpubs, dating from 1838.

"In 1870 there were 75 house breweries in the Old Town," he tells me, "but today there are only these five. And it's in these house breweries you'll find the real Düsseldorfers. Prost!"

I realise that Altbier is just another way that Düsseldorf is distinctly different. From beer to Braque and from Rubens to Renzo Piano, it's a city where culture of all kinds courses through its veins. ■

Singapore Airlines will fly three times weekly to Düsseldorf from 21 July 2016 using the all-new Airbus A350-900.

Right: The Neuer Zollhof building complex designed by American architect Frank Gehry.
Facing page, from top: Pub-lined street of Altstadt (Old Town); the fashion-inspired [a]dress bar at chic Hotel Indigo



The city even has its own style of beer, a copper-coloured malty ale known as Altbier



Style file

Hotel Indigo

The Indigo showcases its local neighbourhood with its fashion theme, as well as in its food. Its kitchen sources ingredients from local producers – one of the staff even brings in the breakfast eggs from her neighbour's hens. Two spacious 50-square-metre suites feature roof terraces and city views. indigoduesseldorf.com

K21

The city's collection of modern art includes thought-provoking installations with both permanent and visiting displays. kunstsammlung.de

Altbier safari

For an expert introduction to the Altbier scene (one recommended by the local tourist board), join a tour of five of Düsseldorf's leading microbreweries, going behind the scenes to learn the processes involved and sampling the tasty results. altbier-safari.de

Personal shopper

Delve into the city's superb array of luxury fashion stores in the company of your personal shopper. A two-hour tour of the designer boutiques between Altstadt and Kö costs €140 and includes expert advice on the latest fashion trends. duesseldorf-tourismus.de

