

THE QUIET CHARM OF QUEER BERLIN

AN ENTICING CITY WITH SOFT-SPOKEN APPEAL,
BERLIN REVEALS SOME OF ITS SECRETS TO WOMEN ONLY.
BY STEPHANIE SCHROEDER

Berlin is an understated metropolis with a quiet yet distinctive charm. Nothing is excessive, and even the one-napkin and water-on-request-only custom in restaurants seems to make sense in a culture conservative with its resources, but liberal with its hospitality and endlessly creative.

In this cool international city, the lesbian community is just as centered on *Kaffee* and *Kultur* as on *Bier* (beer) and *Kneipes* (pubs). In cafés, at cultural outposts for women only, as well as

along the activist spectrum, Berlin's lesbians are not opposed joining with others to form a solid counterculture. Queer-xxcentered anarcha-feminism (liebig34.blogspot.de) and the squatter's movement (tacheles.de, schokoladen-mitte.de) are major areas where lesbians fit within broader radical movements for social and economic change.

Cafés and other community gathering places are also points of entry for queer women who enjoy the arts, who want to provide or receive health outreach and community counseling, or who want



Lush life:
Artemisia is the
first women-only
hotel in Berlin



Relaxing at the Lustgarten,
Museum Island Berlin



to ensure the well-being and preservation of women's sexuality and lesbian herstory. Regularly scheduled women's parties are also a highlight of Berlin's lesbian scene.

The exchange rate between the U.S. dollar and the euro may not be optimal, but Berlin is an inexpensive city to visit. A euro goes a long way, groceries are cheap, dining out does not need to break the bank, and you'll find that you can easily stay within your budget, however modest.

Getting around Berlin is easy. The city has an excellent public transportation system (bvg.de); however, the best way to navigate Berlin and explore the city's delights is to rent a bicycle (approx. \$15/day, \$63/week or \$125/month). There are bike lanes and bike paths almost everywhere. You can plan specific routes and also allow for spontaneous stops at all the places where Berlin's cultural, architectural and gastronomical juxtapositions intersect.

If you're simply looking to have a beer or coffee among the sisterhood, the Begine Café Bistro Bar is a fun spot in central Berlin. You might also want to linger on a weekend evening when the café is open later and live music, dancing and other art and cultural activities take place (begine.de).

The Mondo Klit Rock Party for Girls and Friends—with its hardcore DJs, cheap drinks and sexy bartenders—takes place in a former motorcycle clubhouse, Roadrunner's Rock & Motor Club. This dance party, held every third Saturday, costs \$10 to enter and the doors open at 10 p.m. But the party doesn't really start rockin' until after midnight, when lesbians from all over Berlin fill this

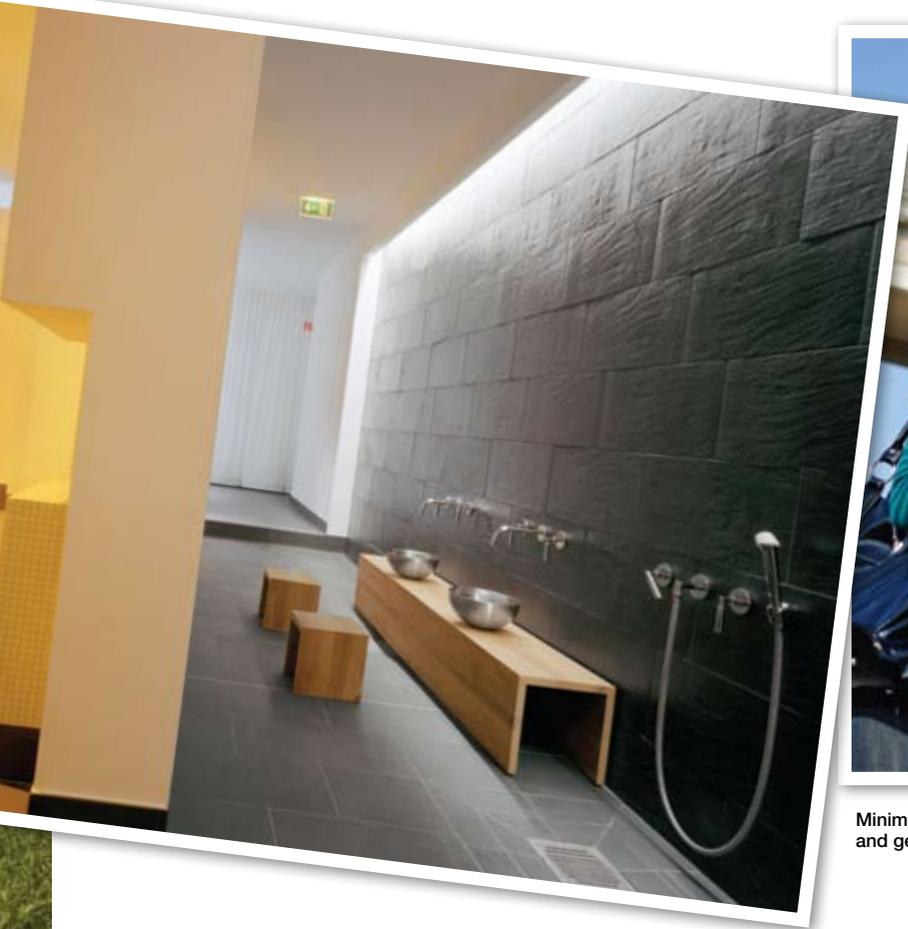
giant retro club (roadrunners-paradise.de).

Knowing that lesbian herstory is being preserved all around the world can be very reassuring. To find the Sapphic roots of Berlin, visit Spinnboden, the city's lesbian archive and library, in the eastern part of the city. Through two enchanting courtyards lies a comfortable second-floor space that will grant you access to German lesbian newspapers circa 1920, an extensive movie collection, a general lending library with books of every genre, and a separate research room of noncirculating books, periodicals and other material (spinnboden.de).

If you're undecided about what to do and where to go, you can find loads of information about community-related events at the Berlin Lesbian Community Center (lesbenberatung-berlin.de).

The low-key Das Verborgene Museum (translation: the Hidden Museum) is literally hidden in a courtyard behind a nondescript building along a mixed commercial and residential street. This museum is a nonprofit arts organization and features a gallery housing an archive of women artists while also exhibiting contemporary and historical women's art. The feminist artist and art historian Gisela Breitling was a founder of the Hidden Museum in 1986 (dasverborgenemuseum.de).

Also in 1986, Manuela Polidori and Renata Bühler opened the only hotel in Berlin that's just for women, Frauenhotel Artemisia Berlin. Seeing a need for accommodation for women traveling alone or in couples, the two best friends established this unique hotel, which occupies three floors of a residential



Minimalism and perfection at Q! hotel spa (left) and get your bearings at the Brandenburg Gate



Dine with the girls at Artemisia (left) and enjoy a suite and stylish stay at Q!



building in the older section of Charlottenburg. With 19 guest rooms, a conference area, a dining room, a lounge/Internet café, and a sunny roof deck overlooking western Berlin, Artemisia is a cozy, comfortable, and affordable choice for travelers on a budget. Standard single rooms start at \$74 and extra-large double rooms go for \$135 in the high-traffic seasons of spring and fall (frauen-hotel-berlin.de).

If you are looking for award-winning mad-mod design, check out the Q! Hotel. This funky hotel in the newer chi-chi part of Charlottenburg is a funhouse of contemporary architecture and top-shelf amenities. Some rooms have deep bathtubs, fun for a bubble bath with someone special, or just for relaxation after a long day of sightseeing. The guests- and members-only Q! Bar boasts quite an international clientele, including celebrities who like to frolic in their own private scene. The hotel's spa is a calm respite with reasonably priced massages, yoga and Pilates classes, and other wellness services. Prices for a double room range from \$73 to \$138; bathtub rooms are \$158 to \$175; studios, \$242 to \$269. Book well in advance to save 10 percent online (look-hotels.com).

Do not leave Berlin without visiting the Original Berlin Currywurst hut at the northwest corner of Savignyplatz, just a short walk from the Q! Hotel. For about \$5 the stolid German proprietor will serve you authentic grilled German wurst and pomme frites with a motherly smile and a generous helping of homemade curried ketchup.

If you prefer vegetarian fare, in Berlin's Mitte (center) across the way from the Arthouse Tacheles squat you will find Dada Falafel. The exquisite and utterly delicious plates run around \$9 and will fuel you for the day. You might even be lucky enough to catch a Dadaist performance while you're there (dadafalafel.de).

The Turkish Market in Kreuzberg is a highlight of any visit to Berlin. The Türkenmarkt lines the banks of the Landwehr Canal (Landwehrkanal in German), with dozens of vendors selling

everything from exotic spices and imported fabric, to salty licorice and other sweet treats, to fresh produce and savory homemade food. The market is open every Tuesday and Friday between 11 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. (tuerkenmarkt.de).

Another Turkish ritual is going to the Hamam, a Turkish bath for women only. It's dedicated to cleansing you, body and soul, and fostering relaxation and communication in a convivial environment. Housed in a former chocolate factory, the Hamam is a project of the Schokoladenfabrik Women's Center. A three-hour visit, including the Hamam, the sauna, and use of the salon and courtyard costs \$17.50 (hamamberlin.de).

The coffee in Berlin is strong, the flora is bright and lush and the charms, particularly for women, are many. The magic of the city and the nonchalant attitude of its residents lend an allure that is quite irresistible. ■

How to get there

Airberlin has regular midweek sales, so keep your eyes peeled (and your online travel alerts set) for incredible savings on direct flights to Tegel Airport. (airberlin.com)

Word on the street

L-Mag is the nationwide monthly magazine for lesbians edited by the sex-positive filmmaker and journalist Manuela Kay. (l-mag.de)

ExBerliner is an English-language magazine and website with guides to what's on and where. (exberliner.com)