The Heart of Europe – 4 Days in Berlin

By Benjamin Parratt and Liam Belgore





Foreword (Ben):

I wanted to go on this trip because all my foreign school trips were cancelled due to the covid 19 pandemic.

I had only been abroad on my own for one day with the Lessons from Auschwitz project in sixth form, so I was very nervous about travel in general. And I felt like I had missed out on the opportunities to develop my confidence that those trips would have provided.

I also wanted to explore my personal interest in History, and Berlin is so closely linked to both world wars and the cold war, each a particular interest of mine.

I also wanted to develop my friendship with Liam. We met at the beginning of year 12, and he quickly became one of my closest friends and we were excited to share an experience that we could talk about for years to come.

Foreword (Liam):

I had always been interested in the city of Berlin. Whether it be its deep historical references -both pre and post-World War 2- which deeply influenced my understanding of empires, or the more local stories told by my mother about her time living there, it felt to me that there was no reason not to visit the city one day.

What's more, I believed that the experience would be a brilliant way to prepare myself for the independence of university and the reliance on others that comes with it, being more than happy to take on the trip with a close friend in order to solidify our bond.

Day 1:
We arrived at Stansted airport ridiculously early. The flight was exceptionally smooth, no turbulence, and it only took an hour and a half. Setting down in Berlin, it was warm with a pleasant breeze, and the streets were some of the cleanest we'd ever walked. After taking an Uber from the airport to our hotel, we went straight to the Berlin TV tower. It was incredible. We went to the observation deck where we had a panoramic view of Berlin and enjoyed a drink at the bar, 203 metres in the air!
We sat and ate dinner on a little grassy embankment opposite the radio tower, a pleasant end to a very pleasant day.



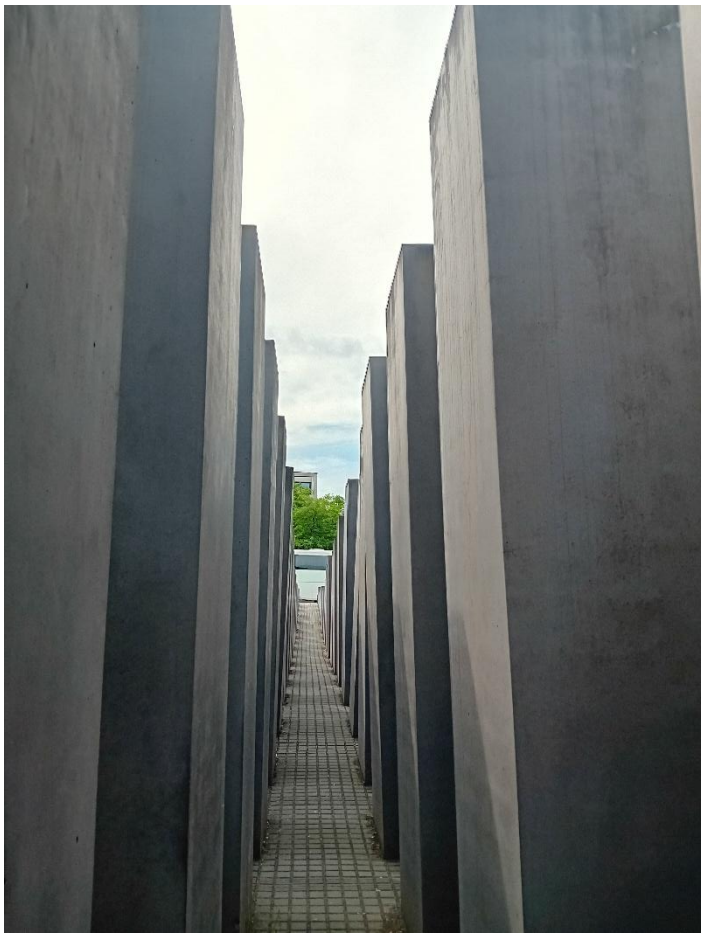


Day 2:
We woke up early and headed to small local place close to our hotel. The cafe was called the 'Sandwich Bar' and the staff were very friendly. After some embarrassing attempts at German, we managed to procure breakfast, a cream cheese bagel and a cinnamon bun.

Our first destination was Checkpoint Charlie. Despite being relatively small in the face of a modern Berlin, it still felt like you were walking through history. We spontaneously decided to visit the checkpoint museum and uncovered stories of escapees fleeing the GDR, in a surprising amount of microlites. One story that we found particularly engaging was an armour-plated saloon which literally tanked its way through the checkpoint, taking surprisingly little damage, before the owners ditched it to escape.

Next was the long-awaited destination: the Brandenburg Tor. It was a momentous structure, and something that Ben had wanted to see for years and certainly lived up to his expectations of grandeur. The large stone columns loomed over the gathered masses, with the angelic figure atop standing proud amidst the overhead clouds, facing forward towards the sun like a brilliant beacon of hope. Truly, it was a sight to behold.

We took a detour through the beautiful Tier Garten for a peaceful walk to victory column, which was a pillar memorial dedicated to Prussian victories over Denmark, Austria and France respectively, over the 1860s and early 1870s. These victories allowed for the establishment of the German Colonial Empire in 1871, showing the columns significance to German history, before heading to the holocaust memorial.



There was something foreboding about the blocks of grey stacked in the distance. The Holocaust Memorial was as eerie as imagined. Walking through the field of stelae we expected to see names carefully inscribed on each and every surface, brilliant gold glinting in a bright sunlight that shone down on the thousands of millions of victims systematically killed in one of humanities worst crimes against itself. But reality is rarely ever so grand. No names plastered these walls; no initials had been chipped into the stone. We stared wordlessly at a slab of bleakness, and it said nothing in return. And that, we believed, was its purpose. To shatter the expectations, we so often associate with tragedies, numbers, and names that we are bound to forget as we inevitably soldier on with our own lives. For as much as we try our best to remember them, to immortalise them, crystallize their memories as if they were our own, it is impossible. No feat of human endurance could ever hold such unimaginable horror and retain itself. But in that silence, there is room for contemplation. The blocks will not move one day; they will not magically disappear. They remain tall despite their tiny cracks; they continue to loom despite the follicles of moss growing atop of their heads. They are not going anywhere, and neither is their message.

Below the field of stelae, the information center explained the harrowing events of the holocaust and the stories of many systematically murdered Jews was recounted to us. As a Holocaust Memorial Trust Young Ambassador, Ben was familiar with a lot of the stories, but they were presented so well in a building designed in a brutalist style, which really ignited our passion for History, to learn about the past and prevent future tragedies.

That evening, we walked to the east side gallery. Throughout GCSE history, we learnt about the importance of the Berlin wall for the cold war, and the history of international relations. Getting to actually see, touch and walk a section of it felt like achieving a life goal, and truly realising a piece of history, even buying a piece to bring home.



We ended our busiest day mulling over what we had seen and learnt at Republic-Berlin, a beer garden with a double decker bus seating area, where Ben bought his first ever legal beer called Hells.

Day 3:
On day 3, we had booked the Deutschland Museum for 10:00, so we hurried over, making a stop at espresso world for a pain au chocolate and a carrot muffin We were unsure about an interactive museum as we feared it may have infantilised history, but the museum was actually brilliant. The set pieces were very well integrated with the information, and you really felt like you were getting hands on with the history. We got to make our own bookmarks in a medieval digital press, as well as experience life in the trenches of WW1. We did not expect the Museum to be that good.

The next Museum was The Berlin Story Bunker, set in an air raid bunker which was flooded in 1945 and then drained and turned into a museum. It's full of harsh lighting, black information boards and a comprehensive audio tour. The bunker followed an incredibly detailed collection of accounts and documents following Hitler's rise to power. It homed in on how he turned to extremism after WW1, the persona he created in the NSDAP and the inevitable horrors that followed his chancellorship in 1933. Although we found it quite uncomfortable, is definitely worth a visit for a history lover.



After trying a currywurst for the first time, which was a delicious Bratwurst sausage covered in curry ketchup and curry sauce, we crossed the road to the topography of terror. An open-air timeline that detailed civilian accounts and terror tactics deployed by Hitlers Nazi Party, and the subsequent state of Germany after the war and the terror tactics deployed during the cold war. We spent about 30 minutes here, but a shortened version of events talked about in the BSB was very welcome to consolidate our knowledge.

In another moment of spontaneity, we booked tickets to the Humboldt forum of Museum Island, where we found a beautiful cathedral and Arts museum, serenaded by a wonderfully off-key harmonica. The forum had an Ethnology collection, of artefacts from Germanies Colonial Empire in 1815. from Africa to Australia, we particularly enjoyed admiring the feather headdress display, from comfy hammocks.

Our two final stops were a 'restaurant' called Frittenwerker and the AleXa center mall. Frittenwerker was a joy, combining funny pop-culture codenames (ours being Messi and Padington) and loaded chips. The mall was huge, the biggest we've ever been to, but our time there was short after a quick chocolate shop, we headed back to the hotel for some R&R. A wonderful, and spontaneous experience.

<u>Day 4:</u>

Having packed the night before, we hauled our surprisingly light bags down the elevator and out into Berlin. We took an uber to the Reichstag building and had to go through a security check before being led by a guide into the building. We took an elevator up to the glass dome, (which Ben's Grandfather saw being lifted onto the building by helicopters, so seeing it here felt a little like a cross generational full circle moment). The dome looked like something out of back to the future two, so avoiding the rain, we went inside. We climbed a long spiral footway that offered an outstanding panoramic view of Berlin with an open top at the highest point.



Afterword: Ben

I was sorry to leave Berlin; the city was something special. It had an undercurrent of energy, a thrumming, beating heart that presented itself in a calm, orderly yet exciting way. "Berlin was a city of ordered mayhem" is how I described it at first, but I'm not sure that quite does it justice. The city has a rich history, presented in a fascinating way by museums like the Deutschland Museum and The Berlin Story Bunker. It ranges from its time in the holy roman empire, to the cultivation of a city of culture, to famous philosophers like Emmanuel Kant, and its time as the centre of the Napoleonic Empire. It also has a darker history, of war, of dictators, and of atrocities. Yet Berlin felt like a modern city that had found its feet, and it is a thoroughly enjoyable place to be. With incredible tourist sites like Victory Column, to wonderful eateries and bars like Republic Berlin, and breathtaking memorials of acknowledgement to its past. It truly was something special and I am so grateful to have been able to go. It is a memory that I will never forget, an experience that made me realise the world isn't as scary as I thought, provided you have excellent company to experience it with, and I would certainly not have done it without Liam. I feel like our friendship has become very strong having shared this first experience of independent trave, and it will remain a talking point for the rest of my life.

Afterword: Liam

Although myself and my family have travelled overseas before, with some prominent trips including Rome and Athens, Berlin felt particularly special to me. Though it was as bustling and busy as London, it retained an astonishing sense of order, and we never once found ourselves feeling uneasy whilst roaming the streets. The architecture was as grand as imagined, with monuments of the past seamlessly blending in with the more modern elements around them. The culture was as energetic as it was respectful, allowing us to feel completely at ease in our attempts to learn more about it from locals. But by far the greatest takeaway from my trip in Berlin was the incredible memories I made with Ben, ones that I have no doubt will live in my mind as some of the greatest I have ever made.

Thank you:

Without the funding of the Henry Morris Trust this project would simply not have been possible. We would never have been able to make it to Berlin, to experience the glory that is independent travel, to make the memories that will undoubtedly stay with us for the rest of our lives. From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you sincerely and wish future applicants the very best in their own adventures.