

Funky, friendly and remarkably good value, there's no better city destination than Germany's capital, writes **Sean Sheehan**



CITIES close to home can be surprisingly good value and, like Berlin, deliver new experiences. Cheap, and often free sights; accommodation which is affordable; food which costs noticeably less than in Ireland, bars galore and an astonishing range of beers at prices that beat most places in Ireland are on offer in the German city.

The historic Reichstag building (www.bundestag.de) and its stunning Norman Foster-designed glass dome is free and open until midnight; turning up before the last entry at 10pm is a sure way of avoiding the daytime queues for the lift to the rooftop terrace.

The Brandenburg Gate is free to see, stand under and be photographed by and a couple of minutes away on foot are the maze-like 2,711 black slabs that bear bleak testimony to the Holocaust (www.holocaust-mahnmal.de/en).

The Jewish Museum (www.jmberlin.de) has an entrance charge but a walk around the exterior is recommended.

The sense of absence and dislocation that haunts Daniel Libeskind's design can also be experienced when exploring on foot the old Jewish quarter in what became the Soviet sector at the end of World War II.

Before the Wall came down, this was a run-down and dingy area but gentrification over the last two decades has brought improvements without sacrificing a sense of the past. Start your walk at Rosenthaler Platz or Hackescher Markt, both served by city train stations, with Rosenthaler Strasse as the baseline connecting the two.

Nearby is the rebuilt New Synagogue with a magnificent gold cupola (www.cjudaicum.de); bullet holes still puncture an



CAPITAL GAINS: Berlin highlights include (clockwise from left) the Love Parade, the Brandenburg Gate, and the magnificent dome of the Reichstag. For a capital, the city is quiet and friendly, symbolised for many by its distinctive pedestrian lights, left.



adjoining wall from street fighting between Russian and German infantry in 1945.

Buildings in this neighbourhood that survived bombing and blasting were mostly left unrepaired by the old East Berlin authorities and it was only in the late 1980s that restoration fitfully began. A sense of what the Jewish quarter looked like in the 1930s is palpable while ambling past the art galleries, boutiques, little restaurants and bars.

Precious little of the Berlin Wall is left but head to the East Side Gallery (www.eastsidegallery.com), a short walk from Ostbahnhof train station, where the wall runs in parallel with the Spree river. Fragments of the Wall are to be found elsewhere and its course across the city is marked by a double row of cobblestones. It fell on November 9, 1989 and between now and the 20th anniversary, towards the end of this year, commemorative events will be taking place.

If you can be flexible about dates (and, ideally, stick with hand luggage only) there are affordable direct flights from both Dublin and Cork and there is an excellent range of mid-priced places to stay. There is a broad choice of what and where to eat in Berlin and pleasantly absent is that sense of being ripped off, even at the top end. At the Ritz-Carlton's Desbrosses restaurant, for example, seated amidst flagstones, art deco tables and mirrors transported from a dismantled 19th-century

brasserie in France, you can enjoy the lunch special and a soft drink for €14 on weekdays.

Or, in the course of exploring the old Jewish quarter of the city, drop in to Barcomi's Deli where for around the same price the tab would be covered for two people tucking into Mediterranean-style dishes or homemade bagels with tasty fillings. Berlin's famous Currywurst (pork sausage with a curry-flavoured sauce) is readily available, from a host of inexpensive eateries.

For a big-hitting capital, Berlin is a surprisingly quiet city and this makes exploring its streets and sights all the more enjoyable. Apart from a BMW motorbike factory, there is no large-scale industry and little sense of a rush hour. Of course, the city erupts into life for the annual Love Parade which sees thousands of people dancing to techno music in the streets. Berlin's economy is atypical and prices are lower than in other German cities; a smart, two-bedroom flat can be rented close to the centre for €450 a month, including utilities.

People can live here on small incomes and many are attracted to irregular forms of employment, helping create a bohemian flavour in the heart of the city. Best of all, there is an absence of extravagant consumerism that perfectly suits our Celtic-tiger-is-dead times. Berlin has been waiting for us.

The high seas have never been better value, writes **Jeremy Gates**

Setting sail



CRUISE CONTROL: Above, an artist's impression of the P&O Cruises' ship Azura, due for a maiden voyage from Southampton on April 12, 2010; left, the theatre in the new Queen Elizabeth, also due to be launched by Cunard next year.

CRUISE discounts for summer 2009 are sailing towards 70% of last year's prices, and spectacular price reductions are likely in the coming months as major lines try to fill 13 new ships launching this year, while others chase bookings for new ships due in 2010.

Cruise prices, which previously started a little over €100 per day on quality ships, are sinking towards €70 and even lower including full-board and a wide choice of entertainment and leisure facilities. In Europe, that's unbeatable value. Cruising out of Britain is looking particularly attractive for luxury cruising. Cunard claims that 50% of the maiden season for its latest ship, the €400m Queen Elizabeth to carry 2,100 passengers, sold out on April 1, the first day of marketing — even though it doesn't depart Southampton until October 2010.

Prices for its 22-night Christmas 2010 cruise to the Caribbean and back — no flying — start at around €3,300.

Prices for the 14-night maiden voyage leaving on October 25 next year to Barcelona, Florence, Rome, Cartagena and Gibraltar, began at €2,095 with Readers Offers, the agency specialising in newspaper campaigns. Cruise Thomas Cook can get you on board for less — a five-night voyage from November 26, 2010, from Southampton to Amsterdam, Bruges and Normandy is just €595. P&O Cruises is also mounting a mas-

sive campaign for the launch of its latest superliner, Azura, with a maiden voyage from Southampton on April 12, 2010 starting at €1,685, via Venice and Dubrovnik.

Gills Cruise Centre has a €995 lead-in on Azura's seven-night voyage from Southampton in September 2010, via Dublin, Cork, Bilbao and Brest.

Virgin Holidays Cruises currently offers 14 nights in the Med on Ocean Village, sailing from Crete on April 16 to Greece, Venice and Dubrovnik from €885. That's barely €55 per day, with return flights from the UK thrown in.

There's literally an Irish connection in the schedule of Royal Caribbean's mighty 5,400-passenger Independence of the Seas, which is taking short cruises from Southampton to Le Havre (Paris) and Cork, as well as 14-night Mediterranean and 10-night Canary voyages. Prices start at €450 for shortest three-night cruise.

Princess Cruises also puts a summer 2010 programme on sale from April 20, with seven-night Mediterranean voyages likely to start around €665.

Thomson Cruises adds Island Escape to its fleet this summer with prices from around €665 on Mediterranean cruises and various perks including €55 per person deposits and free parking at port of departure.

Travel Counsellors offers a 14-night Med voyage on P&O's Ocean Village One ex-Gatwick on May 5, sailing from Palma from €995, and 14 nights on P&O's Aurora in the Norwegian Fjords, ex-Southampton on June 3, from only €995.

briefcase
Barry Coughlan

Rio and the falls calls

Abbey Travel has packaged a five night trip combining magical Rio de Janeiro and the Iguassu Falls. Prices for the full package are priced from €1,390, including taxes, with flights from Dublin to Rio, three nights in a three star hotel, half day tour to the Statue of Christ, Corcovado and a cable car ride to the top of the Sugar Loaf Mountain. Two nights at Iguassu Falls, which features a half day tour on the Brazilian side of the falls and a full day tour of the Argentine side — including the train ride to Devil's Gorge is included. Visit www.abbeytravel.ie or call the company on 01-804 7100.

SLATTERY Travel has cut the cost of an eight day trip to South Africa by 25%. The company offers flights to Cape Town with four nights accommodation, a rental car, two further nights accommodation in the Cape Winelands and two nights safari in the Malaria-free private game reserve of Kariega. The price has been reduced to €1,553 including flights, accommodation and taxes for travel during May to August. For enquiries and reservations local 1890 200 525 and from Northern Ireland 0800 515 900 or log on to www.slattery.com

SCOTTS Hotel, Killarney has teamed up with Nathan Kinglerlee from Outdoor Adventure to create a tailor-made package, combining hotel accommodation with active fun. Nathan specialises in hill walking, rock climbing, mountaineering, kayaking and canoeing. The event takes place from June 12 to 14 and takes in Carruntuohill as well as kayaking on the Lakes of Killarney and rock climbing in the Gap of Dunloe. The three night package costs €375 and includes accommodation with breakfast, one evening meal and transfers. Call 00 353 (0) 64 6631060 or email info@scottshotelkillarney.com

TOPFLIGHT'S family holidays to Lanzarote and Portugal this summer have prices starting from €1,799. The prices quoted are for two adults and a child for a one week holiday or €2,399 for two weeks at the Sol Lanzarote Aparthotel in June. Prices rise to €2,899 for July.

Prices for the Algarve start from €1,999 for a one week stay for two adults and a child, with a special deal at the four star Hotel Pestna in Delfim (two adults and two kids) is available for €3,459 on a bed and breakfast basis.

www.topflight.ie or call in to any local travel agent for a brochure.

travelwise
EMERGENCY CALLS: If you are travelling to Europe, it's useful to remember that they have a different emergency number, namely 112.

gettingthere

Getting there: Flights with Aer Lingus take about two hours from Dublin and Cork (www.aerlingus.com).

Accommodation: The modish Circus (www.circus-berlin.de), a new hotel and hostel in the old Jewish quarter, is a good example of value-for-money accommodation in the city: €88 single/ €78-88€ double, including breakfast, in the hotel; €40 single/ €56 double for private rooms in the hostel, €50/€70 for en-suite private rooms. Free WiFi, bike hire, restaurant, café and bar, helpful and informative staff.

Getting around: From the airport a €2.80 ticket, covering ABC fare zones, will take you into the city centre (be sure to activate your ticket in one of the separate ma-

chines). For getting around the city, a ticket for AB zones will suffice at €2.10 a single but €6.10 for a day pass covering all public transport is likely to be better value. Berlin is bicycle-friendly and getting around on a hired bike would be a whiz.

Splashing Out: The most imaginative idea for celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall comes from the Westin (www.theberlingrandhotel.com), built in East Berlin as the government's showcase hotel, where guests are given a hammer and chisel to chip their own piece of wall from an original section. For a special meal, the restaurant Vitrum (www.restaurant-vitrum.de) boasts a Michelin star.

Information: Berlin Tourism's site, www.visitberlin.de,

is good for general information, accommodation, tours and budget options. There are tourist offices at the airport and at the Brandenburg Gate (030 250025); see also www.inyourpocket.com. For events, see www.whatson-when.com; for cyclists, www.warmshowers.org; for alternative forms of accommodation and eating, see www.bewelcome.org and www.dinewithlocals.com.

Backup: The most up-to-date guidebook with pin-point mapping is Lonely Planet's Berlin City Guide, published last month. For literary fiction, Hans Fallada's Alone in Berlin is a gripping thriller. For history, Berlin: The Downfall by Anthony Beevor. Movies: Goodbye Lenin, Run Lola Run and (with its Russian scenes also filmed in Berlin) The Bourne Supremacy.