

Weekend long reads

Cycling holidays

Ride on time: cycling the Berlin Wall

Thirty years after reunification, the former 'death strip' has become a trail for biking and hiking — a city playground full of poignant reminders

Martin Fletcher JUNE 7, 2019

The evening sun slants through the silver birches flanking the trail along which we're cycling. The air is filled with birdsong and the sweet scents of countryside in May. Two women pass on horseback as we stop to chat to an elderly man, Dieter Schulz, who is walking his dog. Yes, Schulz confirms, we are following the precise route of the Berlin Wall. "A watchtower stood just there," he adds, pointing to a glade 20 yards away.

Schulz, now 80, remembers the wall being built in 1961 — a mere fence at first, then workmen arriving in trucks and armed guards supervising them as they drove great concrete posts into the ground and built the wall that split friends from friends, neighbours from neighbours, communism from capitalism, east from west.

As the decades passed, this front line of the cold war became ever more elaborate, with trip wires, guard dogs and watchtowers. There was an inner as well as an outer wall, separated by a "death strip" 100 miles long and wider than a motorway, patrolled by an East German border force that shot to kill.

Most walls are built to keep people out. This one was built to prevent East Germans escaping their own country. It snaked not only through the very heart of Berlin, but right around Allied-controlled West Berlin — a tiny enclave of freedom inside the vast prison that was East Germany.



The Brandenburg Gate in central Berlin © Alamy

It seemed so entrenched, so permanent, but in 1989 the East German government abruptly collapsed. “I never believed it would happen,” says Schulz — and 30 years on, his face still lights up at the memory of those momentous days when the wall came down.

Today the route of the Berlin Wall could not be more different. Now called the “Mauerweg” (the “path of the wall”), it has been transformed into a hiking and cycling trail that weaves past the great sights of Germany’s reunited capital, along canals, lakes and rivers, and through lovely, gentle countryside.

The Mauerweg is worth cycling for its own sake, but its history makes it all the more compelling. Its bucolic charm is punctuated by jarring reminders of its terrible past: three dozen remnants of the wall itself, memorials to the 136 people killed trying to cross, commemorative plaques, even an occasional watchtower or crossing point. The wall survives, also, in the memory of any middle-aged Berliner, and like Herr Schulz they all have tales to share.

Four friends and I began our three-day ride round the Mauerweg at the Pension Sperlingshof, a comfortable, unpretentious hotel outside the town of Dallgow-Döberitz, a 25-minute train ride west of Berlin’s Hauptbahnhof

Gerd Koallick, the genial proprietor, rented us solid, heavy, sit-up-and-beg bikes (many Germans seem yet to have embraced lightweight models). He organised hotels for our next two nights, and for the onward delivery of our luggage each day, and provided tool kits, maps and sat nav devices with our route programmed in. Koallick once worked in old state-run East German hotels. “Unthinkable,” he chuckled when asked if he ever expected to be organising bike tours of the wall. And so we set off in high spirits on a sunny May morning. We joined the Mauerweg in a western Berlin suburb called Staaken, its route marked by a line of cobblestones in the road. We headed north — clockwise — so the former East Germany would always be on our left and West Berlin on our right.



Martin Fletcher (second right) and his group in front of one of the few surviving sections of the Berlin Wall

Amid the neat, compact homes we soon spotted the first of many tall orange posts marking where would-be escapers died. A shorter post next to it displayed a black-and-white portrait of Willi Block, 31, who became entangled in barbed wire as he tried to cross the wall in 1966 and died in a hail of bullets. His family, like so many others, was ordered to keep the circumstances of his death secret because escapers damaged East Germany’s attempt to portray itself as a workers’ paradise. Indeed its government even banned the word “wall”, preferring to call it an “anti-fascist protection barrier”.

Beyond Staaken, we rode through the tranquil Spandau forest, where the death strip has now

vanished beneath birch and pine trees and only a few crumbling concrete posts remain. We passed joggers, cyclists and a woman in a pony and trap. It was hard to believe we were on the edge of one of Europe's major capitals.

By the broad Havel river we found a memorial to Franciszek Piesek, who drowned trying to swim to West Berlin in 1967, and one of the wall's four surviving watchtowers — it once had more than 300. The tower now houses a small museum. Andreas Kuhn, its attendant, recalled how the day after the wall fell he rushed into West Berlin to buy Lego and comics. Other East Germans rushed to buy bananas. "People had money before, but nothing to buy. Now we can go anywhere and buy anything, but don't have the money," he said with apparent wistfulness for the relative simplicity of the communist era.

After lunch in a Hennigsdorf bakery the path took us through woods and fields, past another watchtower now used for nature conservation work, and more harrowing memorials to failed escapers that we felt compelled to stop and read. Most were young men desperate for freedom, a few disgruntled border guards, the black-and-white photos of their faces contrasting starkly with the lush green country all around.

By late afternoon we were zigzagging into Berlin through its northern suburbs. In places the death strip has disappeared beneath new apartment blocks, shopping centres and petrol stations. Elsewhere it has been converted into parks and recreation areas. On Am Bürgerpark the lights that once illuminated it now serve as street lamps.



Memorials to East Germans killed trying to escape over the wall

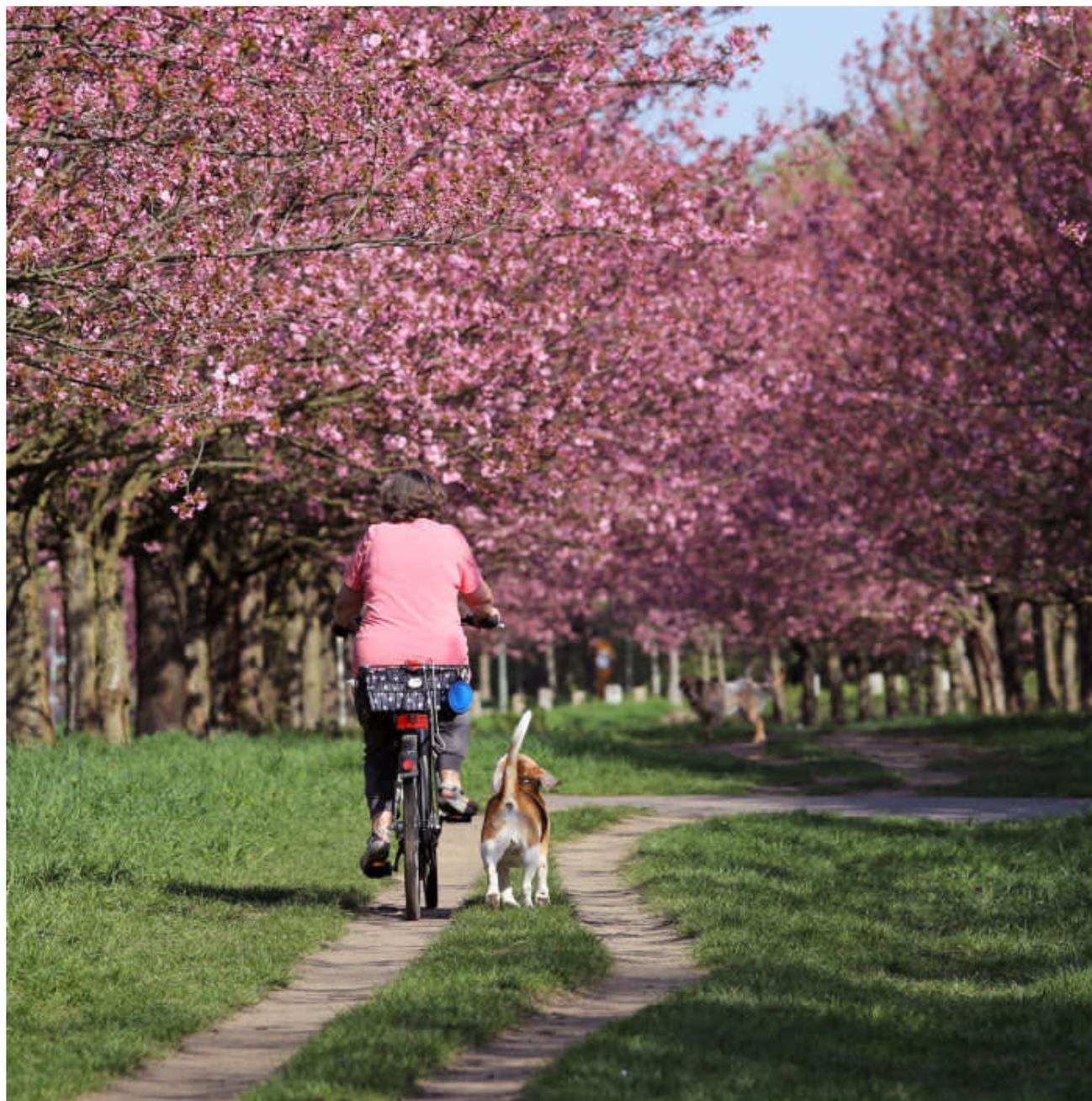


One of the group riding in the Düppel forest, southwest of the city

We stopped at Bornholmer Strasse, the first crossing point thrown open as the East German government collapsed on the night of November 9, 1989. There Klaus Goldammer, a friend of a friend, told us how he was one of thousands of East Berliners who poured across the Bode railway bridge into West Berlin and were greeted by bars dispensing free beer. “It was unreal. You’d never have dreamt it even a few hours before,” he said as he stood by a remnant of the wall and some explanatory signs at the bridge’s eastern end.

We retired to a city centre hotel for the night, exhausted after 40 miles on our tank-like bikes, and began day two at the deeply moving Berlin Wall Memorial on Bernauer Strasse. It includes a stretch of the original wall, a fine museum, a chapel of reconciliation, underground stations that were bricked up to prevent escapes, and any number of wrenching human stories: people jumping from windows or sliding down ropes as the wall was erected down the middle of the street, escape tunnels dug, a couple trapped in East Berlin tearfully waving to their newly married daughter and son-in-law in West Berlin.

We then followed the Mauerweg as it snaked through Berlin’s vibrant heart. To our surprise we found a grey concrete watchtower ringed by colourful modern flats in a cobbled backstreet. A resident told us it was saved only because a homeless man had occupied it. It is now a memorial to Günter Litfin, 24, shot as he tried to swim across an adjacent canal, 11 days after the wall went up.



Cherry trees, donated by the Japanese public, lining what was the 'death strip' © Alamy

We followed the route round the Reichstag and past the Brandenburg Gate where, in 1987, US President Ronald Reagan urged Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall”. We pedalled on through Potsdamer Platz, past another length of wall outside the Topography of Terror museum, the tourist mecca of Checkpoint Charlie, and a commune by St Thomas church whose inhabitants live in old East German military trucks.

We did not linger at the East Side Gallery — a 4,300-foot stretch of wall where visitors can buy East German passport stamps and teenagers now pose for selfies in front of somewhat pretentious murals. We preferred to search for lesser-known remnants of the wall such as the plaque on a nondescript apartment block next to the bakery in Heidelberger Strasse where we lunched. The plaque recorded how, from the cellar, a young West Berliner named Heinz Jercha dug a tunnel through which 50 East Berliners escaped before the Stasi discovered it. Jercha was shot but

crawled home to die.



We briefly left the wall at this point. It was May 9, the anniversary of Nazi Germany's surrender, so we visited Treptower Park, with its vast and imposing memorial to the Soviet soldiers who died liberating Berlin at the end of the second world war. Thousands of relatives had come to remember them. They held aloft the soldiers' photos, laid flowers, played accordions and sang sad songs. Their patriotism was moving, their commemoration of the dead admirable, but there was no acknowledgment of the misery the Soviet Union imposed on "liberated" East Germany for the next 44 years.

In glorious sunshine we rode out through Berlin's southern suburbs, and were soon back in semi-rural countryside. Turning west, we rode past lakes, meadows, stables, allotments and clusters of simple wooden summer chalets. We followed an old East German patrol road through dappled woods, dodging joggers, dog walkers and parents pushing baby buggies.

But history kept intruding — a memorial to a 1,500-foot tunnel built by the British and US militaries to eavesdrop on Soviet adversaries until British double agent George Blake betrayed it; former crossing points that gave West Berliners access to Schönefeld airport; and yet more markers relating harrowing human stories like that of a disillusioned East German politician with lung cancer who simply walked towards the border guards until they shot him.

That evening we rode wearily through fields of spring wheat to the town of Grossbeeren for schnitzels, cold beer and sleep. Three days, we realised, were too few for all there is to see.

Our final day began with an encounter with two elderly cyclists, Gieselher Eberhardt and Gunter Frummer, by a line of cherry trees donated by Japan to commemorate Germany's reunification. "Beneath the branches of the cherry tree nobody is a stranger," a plaque proclaims.

The pair remembered the wall going up, and the East Germans blasting propaganda across it — "Socialism will triumph". They remembered the US riposte — a deafening firing range and a ghost town built for training where the cherry trees now grow. They remembered thinking the wall would stand for ever. "It was unbelievable when it came down. We all cried," said Eberhardt, his eyes watering even now. But they took no chunks for souvenirs. "We didn't want to keep any because for us it was a terrible memory," Frummer added.

The Mauerweg carried us through the Düppel forest to the Kohlhasen bridge, where we found another piece of wall inexplicably left standing — most of it was taken for souvenirs, given to museums or crushed for building roads.



A cyclist passes remains of the wall, and memorials to the dead, at Rudow © Alamy

We continued past the fine mansions overlooking Griebnitzsee, past Babelsberg Palace, to the notorious Glienicke Bridge — the “bridge of spies” — which leads across the Havel river to Potsdam. A couple of plaques record how the US and Soviet Union used this steel structure to swap prisoners, most famously the U2 spy plane pilot Francis Gary Powers. Cars now roar across while the odd tourist takes pictures.

The magnificent domes and spires of Potsdam beckoned, but we were running out of time. A gorgeous five-mile path took us along the bank of the Havel, past *biertagens* and swimming beaches, to affluent Wannsee. From there a 20-minute ferry ride swept us past the lakeside mansion where the Nazis planned the “final solution” to Kladow on the Havel’s northern bank.

By late afternoon we had completed our loop. We cycled happily back to the Sperlingshof hotel through lush green fields, marvelling at the wall’s astounding transformation from a cold war ring of terror to Berlin’s playground.

Details

The Sperlingshof Pension (aktivreisen.de, info@aktivreisen.de, +49 3322 2560) can organise a three-day ride around the Mauerweg for €395 per person (€425 for an e-bike). The price includes bike rental, luggage transfers and four nights accommodation, plus breakfasts.

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