



Germany Travel Planning Podcast

Ep 5 - Berlin for Beginners - Insider Tips with Matti Geyer

Transcript

Cate (00:00)

Welcome to episode 5 of the Germany Travel Planning Podcast. Today I'm joined by Berlin expert and private tour guide Matti Geyer, who is also one of our trusted partners who knows the city inside and out. Matti reveals the essential sights, experiences, and culinary delights of Berlin, plus invaluable insider tips for first-time visitors. Join us as we explore Berlin through the eyes of a true local expert.

Cate (00:24)

If you're dreaming of traveling to Germany, you're in the right place. Hey, I'm Cate co-founder with my husband Aaron of MyGermanyVacation.com and host of this podcast. Our goal is to help you plan and enjoy a meaningful and unforgettable trip to Germany and surrounding countries. So let's dive in.

Cate (00:42)

Berlin is one of the most fascinating cities in Germany, one of my favorites, and it is rich in history, culture, and endless things to see and do. It can be overwhelming as a first time visitor to narrow down what you want to see and do. Today, I am joined by a Berlin expert who's going to help us uncover the best of the city. Matti, welcome to the podcast.

Matti (01:03)

Thank you for having me.

Cate (01:05)



Why don't we start with a quick introduction? Go ahead and tell us who you are and what you do.

Matti (01:11)

Yeah. So I'm Matti. I am from Berlin, born and raised. I have been a tour guide here since 2008. Literally right after high school, I started working as a tour guide because I thought it would be a great job to show other people around my city. I love history. I love meeting people. I love Berlin.

I have my own website toursofberlin.com. Most of my customers are Americans, but also Germans, Brits, first time visitors, repeat visitors. And when I'm not a tour guide, when I'm not tour guiding, I work in a local radio station here. And I live in Potsdam now right next to Berlin, which we'll, I guess we'll mention later with my wife and son. So yeah, that's, that's all there is about me.

Cate (01:53)

Let's talk about the top things that you think every traveler should see and do on their first visit to Berlin. What's the first thing that you recommend?

Matti (02:03)

The first thing would be honestly to join a little walking tour of Berlin because the city center is quite compact. It's easy to walk around, but the sites and the stories, literally everyone who does a walking tour in Berlin says this elevated their visit completely. And it would cover all the main sites that I would recommend you visit anyway. So the Brandenburg Gate is obviously the main thing to see. The symbol of the city, one of the big symbols of Germany, that's where the wall used to be.

Seeing the Berlin wall, seeing the Reichstag, a parliament building, which is right next to the Brandenburg Gate, the Holocaust Memorial as well. And then Museum Island, those would be like the main sites that I think you need to see with the Berlin

Cathedral and the isle, like not so much to see the museums on the inside necessarily, but Museum Island is a really beautiful area in the old town.

Cate (02:55)

Yeah, I agree, absolutely. And I always tell people to go up the top of the Parliament building that I stuck, the glass dome. I really enjoyed that with the audio guide and as you're walking up and it tells you automatically, like it just automatically will tell you the things that you're seeing and you get this really great view of Berlin.

Matti (03:03)

Thanks.

Cate (03:18)

and this great overview, I really enjoyed that. And the same thing with the cathedral. We walked up the stairs, there's a lot of stairs to get up there, and then walked all the way around. And I liked that too. I loved like going up and seeing those views.

Matti (03:24)

Mm-hmm.

Yeah, the thing about the cathedral is, the bonus about the Reichstag is that it has an elevator, unlike the cathedral, right?

Cate (03:36)

Yes, I appreciated the elevator. I have to throw in there's a little cafe that I tell people about at the Adlon Hotel. And they have really good coffee and really good cake. And you get a really nice view of Brandenburg Gate as you're enjoying your coffee and cake.

Matti (03:53)

I would also recommend trying the local food. Currywurst is the one thing that everyone will always hear about when they're in Berlin, a sausage with curry sauce, curry powder, curry ketchup. not going to be, I would say it's not the most culinary experience, delicious thing that you'll ever eat, but it's what we're famous for. It's more of a street food thing, but there are so many nice local restaurants to try. And I would definitely recommend that.

Cate (04:19)

Where do you recommend somebody find that?

Matti (04:21)

They're all over town. There's an area I always like going around or going for food around Hackescher Markt, which is only really a 500 walk from Museum Island. And there's a lot of good restaurants there, local German restaurants and international restaurants. If you don't want to venture into the districts where it's a bit more local, Hackescher Markt is a good in between, like touristy and not so touristy.

So there's a restaurant there called, Sophie and Egg, for example, like the name Sophie, Sophie and Egg, really old school, traditional Berlin pub, which has all the amazing food.

Cate (05:00)

Mm, that's a great tip.

So let's go back to the museums. Go ahead and tell us a little bit more about that.

Matti (05:07)

So there are two museums that I would recommend first time visitors to go to if they're open. So the German history museum is my number one favorite museum in Berlin. It is closed for renovation as of early 2025 with an unknown opening date. So it



could be 2025 or later. But that museum tells you the entire story of Germany from the beginning until the end. it's

Really, really, really well done. So anyone that is interested in the German history, be it 20th century World War II Cold War or earlier, this is your museum basically. And then right next to it, you have Museum Island with five museums. And the one that I always recommend there is the Neues Museum, the new museum for two reasons. Architecturally, it's crazy. It was destroyed in World War II. It was left as a ruin throughout East German times because they had no money to renovate it. So they renovated it only a couple of years ago.

but by keeping the war damage visible. So inside and outside, it's full of bullet holes, cracks in the ceiling. Some rooms look like they're falling apart. And then some rooms look super modern because when there was nothing left, they built something modern there to have that contrast between the old and destroyed and the new additions. So that's super fascinating. And inside is the Egyptian collection, which is not so maybe the thing you want to see when you're in Berlin, but it has the bust of Nefertiti, which is probably the most famous museum item that Berlin has. The old Egyptian, the famous bust. I everyone knows it.

Cate (06:38)

See, this is why you need a guide when you go to Berlin, because there's so much of that that you can completely miss if you don't know where to look. someplace you take people on your tours?

Matti (06:50)

We definitely walk around Museum Island and I talk about the museums. I don't guide inside the museums because then my specialty is the German history. And I don't know if I know enough about the Egyptian pharaohs to guide in there.

Cate (07:04)

I think Aaron went to that museum a couple years ago and he really enjoyed it too.

What else would you recommend?

Matti (07:11)

So lastly, one thing that I also recommend, once you've seen the main sites, which are in the district of Mitte, which literally means middle, right? You haven't really seen West Berlin yet. So the Tiergarten area, the big central park, and then on the west side of that, you have the main shopping area around Kurfürstendamm, which is more about shopping, but it has also that one site, which is pretty impressive, the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, which is a bombed out church, which they left as a ruin completely. And you can visit the old church ruin and there's a little exhibition in there for free. And right next door is the modern church that they built after World War II, which most, or a lot of people might not go in because from the outside it looks like a pretty ugly fifties building, but on the inside it is amazing the way that the light shines through the blue windows. So visiting both the old ruin and the new church is definitely worth it.

Cate (08:04)

I so agree. you know, every time I see that building on the outside, I think, it's such a shame that it looks like that because I agree. So many people just walk right by it and you walk in and it's just like, whoa, it's so beautiful. It really is impressive. So definitely, definitely go in there.

So Berlin is so full of fascinating history. What is something that you find most interesting about Berlin's history?

Matti (08:33)

I had to think about this and I couldn't decide on one. There's a couple of things that I find really interesting and starting with the oldest, I Potsdam where I live, the city next



to Berlin for its Prussian history. So that's the older 17th, 18th, 19th century history. There's a lot of palaces there, but I love talking about all the little anecdotes and intrigues within the royal family and Frederick the Great. you can see his grave right next to his palace. He's buried with all his dogs there. Also a little Russian colony called Alexandrovka because one of the Kings in the 19th century loved Russian music and built these little wooden houses, timber houses to host Russian singers. So they would feel like home, like Potsdam. There's a Dutch quarter because one of the Kings wanted to invite Dutch, tall Dutch people to live there. There's a lot of weird little stories there, the Prussian history. And then I also really love the golden twenties, as we call the roaring twenties in Berlin.

So the Weimar era, there's not a lot left to look at from that era, but there are some places like Clärchens's Ballhaus, which is an old 1920s ballroom, which is unchanged completely, which is now a restaurant and still a ballroom in the evenings. You can go from dancing there to dance there. And then of course there's World War II, the World War II history, which I know a lot of visitors come to Berlin for specifically.

But it is obviously a super interesting part of the history there. There's an area called, in the former Jewish area, there's a street called Große Hamburger Straße, which I love bringing people to. Because there's still bullet holes on that street. There's a memorial called the Missing House where they

A house got bombed out during World War II and instead of rebuilding it, they put plaques on the walls next to the building of the last tenants of the destroyed building and roughly where their apartments were and how long they lived there for. And it's also the old Jewish neighborhood. So there's a lot of Holocaust history there. I know we both went to the museum about the Museum of Otto Workshop for the Blind, kind of Berlin's Oskar Schindler, which is a super interesting part of the German history of Berlin history.

And lastly, of course, there's the whole Cold War stuff. see that, mean, I'm ticking all the big ones, but obviously the Berlin Wall, there's another site that is a bit off the beaten path. But whenever I bring tourists there, everyone's always mind blown. It's the Soviet Memorial and Treptower Park. Have you been there? It's this enormous statue in the middle of a park of a Soviet soldier holding a baby and

Cate (11:08)

Yeah, yeah, we've been there.

Matti (11:17)

In one hand and a sword in the other hand that has just smashed a swastika. And it's also a Soviet cemetery for fallen soldiers. during the Cold War, during the communist times, this was the main place to see. Whenever visitors came to East Berlin, the guides had to bring them there. And now it's like this almost forgotten, very eerie almost place. When you go there, there's not many people there. And suddenly there's this enormous statue there.

Cate (11:45)

Yeah, we went to that, there's two Soviet war memorial areas, I know we've been to both and they were just, yeah, it was kind of mind blowing to see both of them. It just was unexpected and so big, like just the scale of it. I thought it was just fascinating to visit those.

Matti (11:50)

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Yeah. So I couldn't really decide, those would be the eras. The 20th century, of course, is what made Berlin so unique.



Cate (12:16)

I agree. And there's so much of that. As somebody like I grew up during the Cold War, I was a kid during the Cold War, I just find it endlessly fascinating to see those sites.

Matti (12:29)

And then I can also add that my parents were East Germans and my mom used to be a tour guide in East Germany as well for Soviet visitors. And she failed her first ever test tour was Tell the Story on my Tours 2 at the Brandenburg Gate, which was right by the border. She was asked to explain the wall and she accidentally called it the wall and they canceled her or failed her because you were supposed to call it the anti-fascist protection barrier and not just the wall because it was built to protect East Germany from the fascist West, according to the propaganda.

Cate (13:02)

So then did she have to say that on every tour after that?

Matti (13:05)

On every tour and she showed her on Soviet visitors and so she would say, and this is the anti-fascist protection barrier and they wouldn't know what she was talking about because everyone just called it the wall. But you couldn't say that because there was always a spy in the group.

Cate (13:17)

right, I hadn't thought about that.

Matti (13:19)

Yeah. Yeah. The Soviets always had a KGB agent. They usually knew who it was, but it was such a privilege to travel and then they were going to make sure that everyone behaves.

Cate (13:25)

Okay, so I have to ask, what were the sites that your mom would show during that time? Like what were the big sites in East Berlin at that time?

Matti (13:41)

Yeah.

So definitely the Soviet Memorial that I mentioned, right? That was literally the number one. And you usually had to bring flowers to lay down there. yep. And then Museum Island, of course, was one thing. The Pergamon Museum was already open. And then, but it's interesting because I once looked through her script, like there's a little booklet that they gave, they had, and they talk about Unter den Linden, the old Royal Boulevard, like that, that's the old town.

Matti (14:10)

And every building that was there, they go into the history of it within one sentence. And then there's multiple sentences on why this building is important for communism. So that wasn't really a very historic tour. was a lot of propaganda. And there wasn't a lot of things were not rebuilt yet, like Gendarmenmarkt, like this really nice square in the old town. So yeah, was Museum Island, a little bit of Unter den Linden, the Soviet Memorial Alexanderplatz, which was the main square of East Berlin, but architecturally.

Matti (14:40)

Hmm, questionable, very, very communist. The TV tower, the tallest building in the city. And then maybe some of the local neighborhoods like Prenzlauer Berg is a really trend. Well, it was a very trendy area. It's now very gentrified, but it's a very beautiful neighborhood, but it was completely run down during communist times. But there was one street that they renovated and then they brought people there to kind of pretend, well, this is, this is how nice our old streets look like.

Cate (15:03)

Let's circle back to food, because everyone always asks us, where should we eat? What should we drink? Where should we go? And I know you have a lot of great recommendations on your website. And I always tell people to take a look there. And we have a lot of your recommendations on our digital planning map as well. So people can find that, for those of you who have that. But what would you recommend? Where would you recommend people go or eat? You said currywurst. And what else? Yeah.

Matti (15:09)

The currywurst, can get that everywhere basically. And it's just a street food. Then the other thing that Berlin is famous for and visitors will realize that pretty quickly is the Döner Kebab, which is also more of a street food. So Berlin has the largest Turkish community outside of Turkey. So the Döner Kebab in Berlin is usually really good. But the one food that I recommend trying, which is typical

Typically Berlin, German, so much even German, but our region is known for it. Are the Königsberg a Klopse? Which I know you've tried. Yep. They're meatballs, but they're boiled meatballs in a caper sauce. And I love them. And you can get them at any traditional German restaurant.

Cate (16:12)

Yes, yes, we had it on that food tour that we went on.

Matti (16:28)

During the summer months, I always recommend going to my favorite beer garden called the Zenner beer garden. In near Treptow or in Treptow, it's right by the river. They have a really delicious food for a beer garden and they do really amazing Königsberger Klopse. Or also I mentioned it when I talked about the golden twenties, that Clärchens Ballhaus, which is the original 1920s ballroom, also is a

restaurant during the day and they also serve really good Königsberger Klopse in this amazing Weimar Berlin setting.

Cate (16:59)

They were delicious. I really, really liked those. And they normally come with potatoes, right? Yeah. Yeah. they're so good. What would you drink with that? What do you recommend?

Matti (17:04)

Yeah, potatoes, potato mash.

And beer if you're in Berlin, I mean, beer is the main alcohol for us. I personally, and we also tried that on the food tour, believe. Yeah. Berliner Weisse. I love that beer, but it's not for everyone. It's a sour beer, but that's what we're in Berlin famous for. It's sour though. it's not, yeah, I don't know how to describe it other than it's sour and a lot of people don't like it, but I love it.

Cate (17:24)

Yeah, yeah, Berliner Weisse.

Matti (17:40)

So a lot of people, you can either get a pure, so just the sour beer, or you mix it with raspberry flavor.

Cate (17:47)

Oh, right, yeah. And that comes in that special glass and it's red. And then usually it comes a little straw, right? Yeah, so it's kind of funny to like drink beer from a straw But yeah, I definitely recommend trying the Berliner Weisse. I like it just plain. I actually really liked the beer just plain without the flavoring in it.

Yeah, those are good, great recommendations. I like all of them. I'm not a huge fan of the currywurst, but I do like the Döner.

Matti (18:17)

You used to be able to get a Döner which is so big and filling for just three euros, but I think they've adjusted the prices now with inflation.

Cate (18:23)

yeah, they've gone up. I think the most expensive one we've bought was about 10 euros, but that was in Munich.

Cate (18:32)

But they are filling. you know, I feel like it's still pretty good deal. But yeah, more expensive than it used to be.

Matti (18:35)

I guess a tip for if you want to try the Döner kebab. It can be a little bit overwhelming, but you basically will be asked after each you ordered it, whether you want all the vegetables and most people say every, everything. Some people don't want onion and then you'll get, you'll have to choose the sauces and that'll either, either the spicy sauce, the garlic sauce or the herbal sauce, or you can get all three.

Cate (19:05)

A question that we get all the time is, how should I get around Berlin? And I always recommend public transit and walking. What do you recommend for visitors?

Matti (19:12)

Mm-hmm. Same. Public transit and walking. It's super easy. I know, so the main sites in Mitte, the central neighborhood, definitely walking distance. If you want to venture into another neighborhood or West Berlin or Potsdam, public transport is super easy. And a lot of people are scared of it or get overwhelmed by it, but once you figured it

out and there's an app you can download, the public transport company in Berlin is called BVG. So just look for the BVG app, which gives you directions. But Google Maps will do the same, by the way.

Google Maps will tell you exactly which train to get a watch time from what platform, what will be written on the train because on the trains you always have the final stop so you know which direction it's going. So just trust Google Maps and it's easy.

Cate (20:02)

I totally agree. We use Google Maps every single day to figure out if we want to walk or if we want to take public transit. And I love that it tells us exactly where to walk, which station to go to, and sometimes even which platform to get on. So it's super easy. What about the scooters? Yeah, I see the scooters all over Berlin. We haven't tried that yet. But do you ever use those scooters?

Matti (20:26)

I did when they came out. Yeah, why not? know a lot of locals don't like them because they tend to be in the way. People park them anywhere and just throw them on the road sometimes. And then anyone can drive them with or without a license. A lot of people, kids sometimes drive them and there's been a couple of accidents. there you can do it, but you might not be the most popular if a car for the locals that drive next to you on the street.

Matti (20:55)

As you're not supposed to drive to ride them on the sidewalks, you're supposed to ride them on the streets.

Cate (21:01)

That's interesting. Because I do see people on the sidewalks with them. You're supposed to ride them in the bike lane, right? What about ride sharing? Is that

something that you would recommend in Berlin? Like free now? Yeah, like Uber or free now?

Matti (21:05)

Yeah, we have Uber, FreeNow, Bolt. Bolt tends to be the cheapest of the three. I don't know why they probably exploit their drivers a bit more, but they're easy. They're everywhere. And taxis, Ubers will be relatively cheap if you just stay within the city.

Cate (21:36)

Yeah, so if people drive to Berlin, they should park their car and then just not use it while they're in Berlin.

Matti (21:43)

Probably wise. Have you driven in Berlin?

Cate (21:46)

I have not driven in Berlin, but Aaron has driven in Berlin.

Matti (21:49)

I think Germany generally has more rules than America and more street signs. that right? think Germany has a lot of street signs and rules. And then yeah, there's all these different zones and rules. and parking is tricky. So probably not the best idea to drive into Berlin.

Cate (21:56)

Yeah, way, way more street signs, yes.

On one of our trips, we picked up the car at the airport at Tegel. this was probably five or six years ago now. And we drove down to the Brandenburg Gate. It was a Sunday, so it wasn't very much traffic. And we actually got a place to park right by the Brandenburg Gate, surprisingly. But it was fine at that point because there wasn't



very much traffic. And then we headed out of town. But yeah, I definitely wouldn't recommend doing it at another time.

So let's talk about your private tours. Tell us a little bit more about how they work and what should somebody who is thinking about doing a private tour, what should they know?

Matti (22:46)

On my website, I am listing a couple of tour options. And generally when people contact me, then I ask, what are you interested in? How long do you want to tour for? And the most popular tour would be the main sites tour. So two, three, four hours, depending on how much you want to see, how much you want to do. And that would just be in the center. But then I have other tour themes, World War II, Cold War, Off the Beaten Path, Jewish Berlin, Weimar Berlin, Potsdam. And either we can do them on their own or we can combine different tours. The best, beauty about private tours is that it's up to the client what they want to do. So it's not like I tell them what to do unless they want me to. I mean, I have all these tours that I offer. They have itineraries. So if people say, yep, we want to do exactly that, then we do that. But usually I ask what they're interested in. And then also when we meet each other, we get talking. Then I also realize, you know, maybe there's an interest here or we can maybe add this or we can skip that. So it's always up to, up to the clients.

Cate (23:53)

I think one of the best things about having a private guide is, know, when you're traveling around and you see things and you start wondering, you're like, I wonder why it's like that. Or you start having questions about culture or food or, you know, practical questions as well about getting around the city or the country. And you start thinking about these things and you wish you had somebody to ask. And when you have a private guide, you can ask those questions. And so those questions don't just go unanswered and it...

makes your trip so much more fulfilling and meaningful and interesting. And I have always found that, you know, that whenever whenever we have had a private guide like that, it just has added so much to our experience. It's priceless. Absolutely.

Matti (24:39)

Well, if you're, if you do a group tour, right, then you have to do adjust, you have to adjust to the pace of the group. And when it's just you, we can take a break, a coffee stop here and there, we can go for a toilet break. We could do the tour either by walking in public transport, or we could hire a car as well. If people feel like they don't want to do walking, we can do, like I said, two hours, three hours, four hours, you can do an entire day. It's, it's whatever, however much you want to do will make it work, I would say.

Cate (25:16)

it's a great way for people to maximize their time. Because a lot of people go to Berlin, they only have a couple of days, and Berlin is big. And a lot of the sites are kind of spread out, and it can be hard to figure out, you know, how do you work everything in? And so if you have a private guide, you can actually see and do quite a lot and maximize your time, which is just another benefit to having a private guide.

So for first time visitors to Berlin, what would you say is your biggest tip?

Matti (25:45)

I had to think about this and I'm going to say, especially for Americans to carry some cash always on you. Right? Because Germany is surprisingly backward when it comes to accepting card payment everywhere. So it's always good to have a little bit of cash handy. Then also, especially for Americans, don't be surprised if, for example, in a restaurant or generally speaking to locals in some service position, like waiters, etc., might not always be the friendliest and the most helpful, which I think is generally a thing in Germany. also Berlin is no Berliners are known for in German, the Berlinerschnutze. Whereas we're known for being very direct and some people are



maybe more like just come off as rude, maybe if you're not used to it. So don't be taken aback. And that's just normal.

Cate (26:37)

Yeah, yeah, less smiling, right? Like as an American, like we always smile like I'm doing right now, right? I always kind of tone it down when I'm in Germany. And that's something I've always noticed. Like I remember sometimes I would smile at people and they would look at me I'm like, God, I'm doing it again. I'm just like smiling at random people. Right, right, I know. And it's like, yeah, it's so hard not to do that, as an American.

Yeah. And then shops are closed on Sundays, which is, I guess, something that Americans wouldn't be used to, but restaurants, museums, everything else is open. And then another, just a little tip. If you're using public transport, always remember to validate your tickets before you get on the train. There's a little machines, have to just stamp them. Otherwise, if you bought a ticket and didn't stamp that, then it's like you don't have it when you get caught on the train.

Cate (27:26)

which you do not want to do because you will get charged a very high fee. And they do not really accept excuses, do they? I mean, they will give you that ticket.

Matti (27:35)

Mm hmm. Yep.

On my website toursofberlin.com and that's where I list all of the private tours that I offer. So you can look at them and see what interests you and then just message me and say, I would like this tour or that tour. Can we do a combination or we can do it longer or shorter? Always up to you. There's also a little blog with tips, et cetera. And then on Instagram, I'm Berlinwithmatty and I'm also on Facebook.



under Private Tools of Berlin with Matti.

Cate (28:09)

And you're in our Facebook group as well. So for anyone who is in our Germany Travel Facebook group, you can tag Matti and yeah, and so you can chat with Matti in there. And we will link up your website and all of your information in our show notes. So listeners, be sure to go check that out.

Cate (28:30)

And I have to say I highly recommend if you're going to Berlin definitely book a tour with Matti. He's fantastic. He will make your experience so much better than if you just go on your own and definitely definitely worth it. Matti, thank you so much for joining us today.

Matti (28:46)

Thanks so much for having me.

Cate (28:50)

Thanks so much for listening to the Germany Travel Planning Podcast. If you enjoyed today's episode, please leave us a review. Leaving a review is a fantastic way to support the podcast because it helps others discover our Germany travel content and trip planning tools. We also encourage you to share this podcast with your fellow travelers. Be sure to check out the show notes for the links and resources I mentioned in today's episode. And visit our website, mygermanyvacation.com for expert travel resources that make planning your Germany trip easier and stress-free, including free travel guides, our step-by-step DIY Germany travel planner, and personalized services like custom itineraries, one-on-one trip planning consults, and itinerary reviews to ensure that you make the most of your time and enjoy the best of Germany. Until next week, happy travel planning!