

Post



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# Checking out Checkpoint Charlie - August 7, 2024

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## ***SUMMARY***

Not one of our better days IMHO. This morning we're off to the airport to pick up our rental car. There is a lot of road construction along our route to Berlin which is never fun. We get off the highway for lunch and almost give up just before we find a little hole in the wall selling Doner (like gyros) plates. We have arranged for a private 1.5 tour to get our bearings since Berlin is a big city. It was not a particularly good tour and we did not feel particularly oriented afterwards. Walking back to our hotel we see a Mexican restaurant and, because hope really does spring eternal, we sit down. The margaritas are pretty good, the food

pretty meh. Our meal is accompanied by the sounds of a homeless person yelling at full volume somewhere out of sight, an overhead train passing by and a tram running on the nearby tracks. - Karen

[Photos](#) | [Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Index](#)

### ***DETAIL***

Up somewhat early. Karen asks if I still intend to dress and walk to the nearby bakery for breakfast breads and coffee. I say yes. We didn't have the maid in yesterday so we only have one Nespresso coffee pod. Thankfully we also have three sleeves of instant coffee (in case of such emergencies).

We alternate between sitting on the bed and surfing the web and sitting out on the balcony and surfing the web. Outside it's a very blue sky (albeit with a tinge of brown from being in a big city). In the distance we can see the "new" city hall, other old church spires, the ugly modern VW tower (off of which VW has taken its logo). The old stuff that we can see is impressive but most of the view is new, unattractive office buildings. Alas.

At one point Karen asks about the results of my outing to the bakery. I equivocate and she's unclear as to why there is neither coffee nor yummy baked German treats in the room for us. They are closed? You forgot your wallet? They didn't have anything good? They don't serve Americans? She's really confused. Sitting there in my pajamas I offer up the right answer that she didn't guess. I never went.

We dress, pack, and head out together to the bakery, without our luggage. It's a short-two block walk. We manage somehow not to get hit by any of the bikes. The cars own the road, but bikes are very common and split their time between the bike lane and the sidewalk.

The bakery is busy and the display case is overflowing with goodies. Lots of breads and breakfast sweets, but also big cakes with and without fruit. A few of the cinnamon/sugar/ nut/bread things are bigger than a dinner plate. Karen gets a bread mit cheese and I get a gooey delicate pretzel-shaped crispy thing with toasted slivered almonds. And two coffees. We eat them outside on our balcony.

Downstairs we check out, paying for our cocktails of the other night. I inquire about the cost of breakfast "for next time". If we add it to our room with our reservation it's 22€ each. After? It's 29€ each. So 58€ for breakfast, yikes. Our two treats and two coffees were close to 8€ so we just saved a bunch.

At the train station the robot kiosk confuses us. There's two ways to get to the airport (where our rental car is, hopefully). The subway or the regional train. We don't know and so pick one randomly. Our credit card isn't accepted (again) so we pay cash.

Waiting for the train it lists two times for our airport train without explanation: 10:00 and also 10:10. We guess scheduled and actual. Our train is next. Then it isn't. Then it is. At 10:15 we board the train and sit, counting off the six stops to the airport. An agent comes by, checks our tickets, smiles, and walks on. We guess he's thinking "ok, they screwed up... but they paid something, they're about to leave the country, they surely don't speak German... not worth my time". We say, "Thanks" in our best Deutschespeak.

On the short walk to the rent-a-car desks, we pass a picture of Barack Obama smiling and waving from the doorway to Air Force One. The rolling stairs leading down from the plane say 'Hannover Airport', obviously a picture from his visit here.

Alamo Rent-A-Car has a very nice, big VW Tiguan for us, but it's not an automatic like we'd requested. I envision myself getting gears confused on the autobahn with a big Mercedes roaring up behind us. We pay a few more euros for better car and do get automatic. It's a BMW three hundred series. Nice but no warning if I'm going to change lanes into another vehicle.

We start our almost three hour drive to Berlin, our longest drive of the trip. The GPS and Apple CarPlay are a godsend but still we miss our first exit. The autobahn is nice but they're doing construction on (improving) a lot of it so we were crawling much of the time. Around noon our stomachs growl and we stop for lunch. We find a cute trailer selling kabops (Gyro meat). We get one with everything and they give us a ton of meat and everything else, then more meat. Three sauces. It's divine. We thank them and say 'zehr gut!' and they beam, tapping the shoulder of the chef as if to say, "see, we're going to do alright!".

As we near Berlin we realize we're going to be really tight to meet our tour guide. Given how late we decided to take a tour it's a private tour. We carefully pick "Betty" as our guide then find that all of the guides are book, other than Uygur. His picture looks like the 911 mastermind who was nabbed in the middle of the night. We're able to WhatsApp with him and us being late won't be a problem.

At the hotel we hurriedly check in and ask about our car. Where are we parked? Just out front, in front of the hotel. We can leave it there. Nice! We meet our tour guide and ask how to pronounce his name Oo-ee-goo. The final R is silent. He's a jazz cello player from Turkey with a 7 year-old daughter. He's been here 10 years. He's fairly understandable. He shows us the Brandenburg Gate, where the Berlin Wall was here (going off in both directions for a total of like 95 miles).

We see the parliament, which rebuilt the bombed out dome out of clear glass, saying the from here on the government will be transparent. We walk through the jewish memorial, which goes on in all directions a long way, the floor undulating and the monstrous cement blocks repeated endlessly at different heights, sometimes towering over your head. We see the seemingly abandoned North Korean embassy and then Checkpoint Charlie, where we get our picture taken. (Everyone's getting their picture taken there). We see the impressive Konzerthaus with the French Cathedral on one side and the German Church on the other. Alas they're doing massive work on the huge esplanade in front and between the three. Next time.

Before long we're done with our (sadly underwhelming) tour and say our thanks and goodbye. We get a beer and then off for another Mexican food dinner. Finally we head back to the hotel (in the huge old telegraph building) and crash. Tomorrow we have the whole day to learn about the city. Four hours of that will be a foodie tour deep inside East Berlin.

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## Photos



Yummy baked goods at the Konditorei.  
This is the view in one direction. More in  
the other direction. So much yum.



Tried a shortcut back to our hotel. It didn't  
work, but we did get to see this delivery,  
for a restaurant, just sitting out, beautiful  
oyster mushrooms on top.



Back at our room, on the balcony, we enjoy our coffee and baked treats. In the background is the old VW tower, now looking quite dated and without the glowing VW logo of yesteryear.



A break in our drive to Berlin for lunch. Doner (gyro) meat. Piled high with all the trimmings, overflowing the plate. He added a bit more meat before he gave it to us, to ensure we didn't go hungry. More yum!



Quickly left our car at our hotel and checked in. Ours is the black one on the left (not the silver one). This old (~1910) telegraph building is our hotel. At the time, uber high tech, state-of-the-art. Now redone and fun.



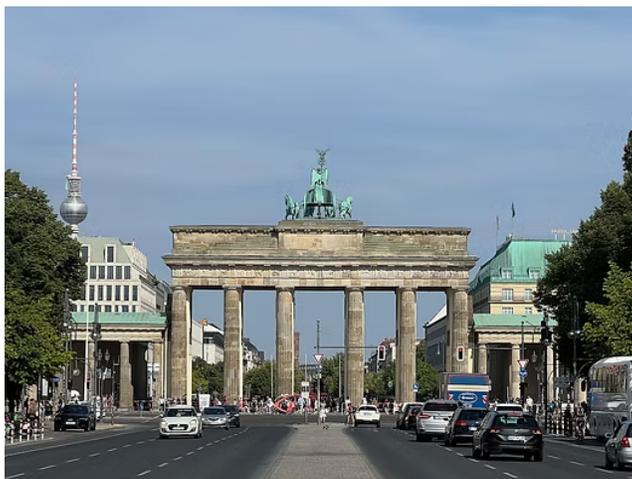
Our Turkish, cello-playing tour guide, Uygur (Oo-ee-goo). Nice guy, probably a good cello player. Not the best guide we've ever had. The Brandenburg Gate in the background.



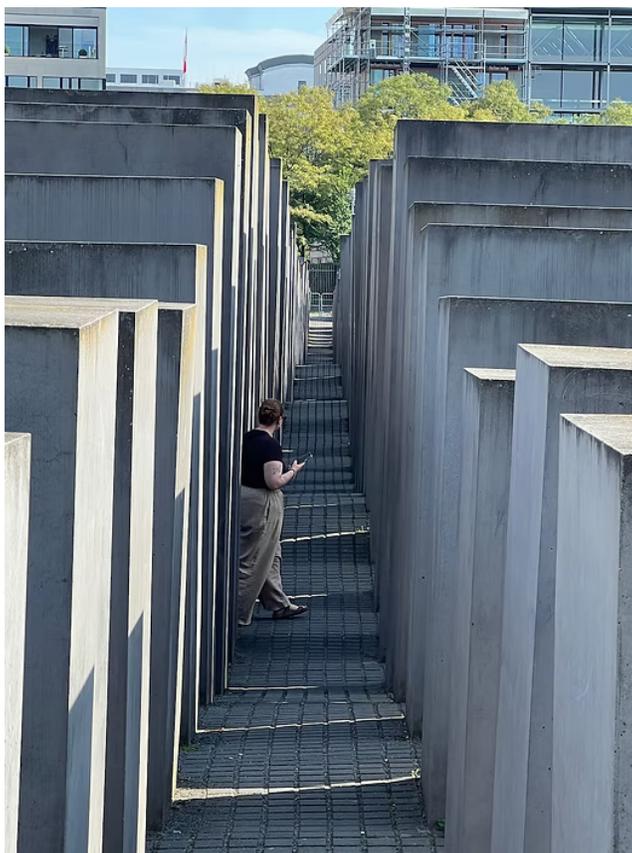
The view of the remainder of the Berlin Wall from the Brandenburg Gate (the double row of stones). The entire 95 mile length of the old wall is similarly memorialized and you can walk it if you wish. We'll see some of the actual wall tomorrow.



The Parliament Building with its clear glass dome. Clear to indicate that the government will be transparent from now on.



The Brandenburg Gate from the front (or is this the back?) Lots of iconic buildings and monuments in the city. I (for one) was impressed.



This is the Jewish Memorial. It's enormous. These slabs are all the same width and depth, but vary in height and the ground goes up and down as well. At first the slabs are a few inches tall, and as you walk through it, you get swallowed up. It's really long in this direction and similarly in the other direction.



"Stumbling Stones" - Originally a clandestine art project and now a distributed monument all over Berlin, Germany, and countries around the world. They commemorate where people were born or worked, giving names, birthday, when they were taken away, and when they killed and in what concentration camp. We saw "stones" for a couple taken on the same day and murdered on the same day a week later. We must never forget.



The big instagram photo spot in the city:  
Checkpoint Charlie.

## FARNSNIENTE



The Berlin Konzerthaus (right). On the left is the German Church and to the right (out of the frame) is the equally impressive French Cathedral. Alas the front and the entire esplanade is being redone. Nothing to see here, move along.





Happy hour prices for margaritas at the mexi-food restaurant. We should not have been crossing the street here. Karen was sure she could squeeze through the bars (forgetting she had on her backpack purse). She shrieked and yelled for help (laughing). This galliant British gentleman came to her rescue.



Our room in the old Telegraph building. Very cool (once you figure out how to operate the light switches).

[Previous](#) | [Next](#) | [Index](#)

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