

Humble yet proud: experiencing the magic of Berlin



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Morag Evans talks about her study tour around Berlin's stunning and historic libraries, and discovers in Berlin feelings of pride versus modesty and a city which is hopeful for the future.

WHEN I saw that CILIP and Jon Baines Tours were organising a study tour of the libraries of Berlin, I jumped at the chance. I was born in Berlin and studied German history for my degree 20 odd years ago – so all this, plus improving my knowledge of librarianship seemed like too good an opportunity to miss.

Our study tour started on 6 October and was led by the very knowledgeable Ian Stringer whose humour and anecdotes were much appreciated, especially during his welcome talk on mobile libraries around the world on the first evening. Some of the group joined Ian and his son Paul, who accompanied us during the tour as translator, on an optional orientation walk of the local area. Later, the nine of us had a lovely welcome dinner at a local Italian restaurant; it was time to network and get to know each other. We were a diverse group of library staff, ranging from those of us in training to those whose experience inspired the rest of us.

Staatsbibliothek

Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin ('Stabi') is one of the largest libraries in Europe. It is a library of kings and one could see this by its grandeur, the height of the ceilings and the vastness of the reading rooms. Famous items in its collection include Biblical illustrations including a Gutenberg Bible. The oldest handwritten book is a Coptic codex of the biblical book of Proverbs, dating from the third century. It collects texts, media and cultural works from all fields of knowledge in all languages, from all eras and all countries of the world.

The holdings and collections are impressive: they include printed work from many centuries, manuscripts, maps, globes, newspapers and periodicals, books for children and young people. The transactions are also impressive: some 1.2 million are recorded annually, including regular loans, ILLs and document supply. Regarding funding,



the Stabi is generously supported by the German Research Foundation as well as other foundations, companies, individuals and associations, in particular the Friends of the Berlin State Library. The artwork in the reading rooms was particularly outstanding.

German Bundestag

Next on our tour was the library of the German Bundestag, an impressive building. With more than 1.4 million books and around 8,000 specialist journals, the library is one of the largest and most modern parliamentary libraries in the world. It primarily serves the members of the Bundestag, the German government, the parliamentary groups and administration. Our tour guide was extremely knowledgeable and proud of the library and for good reason.

Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin

The group next visited the Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin (Berlin Central and Regional Library) – the official library of the City and State of Berlin and the largest public library in Germany. It was established as a Foundation by two State laws, initially in 1995 and amended in 2005. The library system contains more than 3.4 million electronic and printed media.



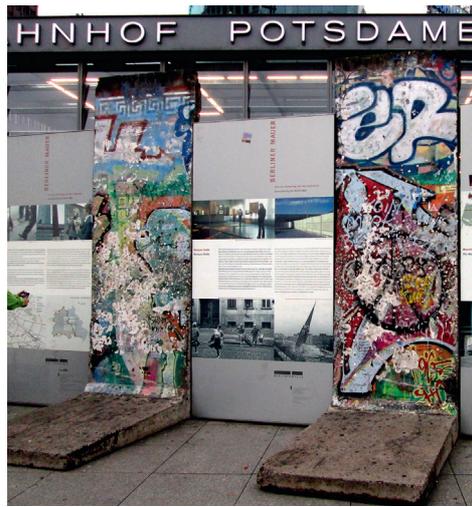
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Berlin's fernsehturm (television tower) behind St Mary's Church.



State Library's reading room.



Berlin wall.



Bundestag dome.

Amerika-Gedenkbibliothek

At the Amerika-Gedenkbibliothek in Kreuzberg (the American Memorial Library), the humanities and fine arts, fiction, films, music resources can be found. The children's and young adult library is also located here, along with its learning centre. The ZLB is one of the most frequently visited cultural and educational institutions in Berlin. It is hoped that future plans will consolidate the library at one location.

After another lovely evening meal, with some of us drinking Kindl beer (well, as library staff it was a must?) and the obligatory currywurst we headed back to John F Berlin Hotel for a good night's sleep, ready for the following day's visits.

German Bundestag

We were given a tour of the German Bundestag, the national parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany and its location is at the restored Reichstag building in Berlin.

The German Bundestag is elected by the German people and is the forum where differing opinions about the policies the country should be pursuing are formulated and discussed. The most important tasks performed by the Bundestag are obviously the legislative process and the parliamentary scrutiny of the government and its work. The Members of the German Bundestag also

decide on the federal budget and deployments of the Bundeswehr (Federal Armed Forces) outside Germany. Another important function performed by the Bundestag is the election of the German Federal Chancellor. For me, the most striking part of the Bundestag was the glass roof which represents transparency in government but also allows light into the senate room where the chairs are the colour of 'Reichstag blue'. Also striking was the giant sculpture of the bald eagle which dominated this room, a symbol which pervades German history and politics.

Stasi Museum

The itinerary next took the group to the Stasi museum. The Stasi museum is located in House 1 on the former grounds of the headquarters of the GDR Ministry for State Security (MfS). The building was erected in 1960-61 as the offices of Erich Mielke, who served as Minister for State Security. His offices are preserved in their original condition and form the centrepiece of the historic site.

Walking tour

After lunch, the group was treated to an interesting walking tour of the history of Berlin. The tour started in the Mitte (city centre) and finished at Checkpoint Charlie. Significant aspects of the tour included the Brandenburg Gate, the Memorial to the

Murdered Jews of Europe and sections of the Berlin Wall, as well as important buildings constructed during the years of the GDR.

The group had a farewell evening meal at another local restaurant and the following morning some of the group had time to visit Museum Island. It was then time to return to the UK for most of us. It was a study tour which had just the right ingredients, interesting locations, lovely participants and great tour leaders in Ian and Paul.

Humble yet proud

Berlin is a city to behold. Its neo-classical architecture suggests it was once inhabited by the gods of Roman and Greek mythology. This is a city proud of its history, its traditions and culture. It is a microcosm of Europe as it reveals the wounds and scars of wars and rebellion. The juxtaposition of East and West is seen everywhere, even in the traffic light symbols and the mosaic laid streets. This is a resilient and resourceful city, humble yet proud, modest yet self-assured of its place in Europe. Berlin's various libraries follow this theme of pride versus modesty. They are simply huge. This is a city which is hopeful about its future; so too, it seems, are its libraries. [1]

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