“Poor but sexy” is how hipster Berlin mayor, Klaus Wowereit, proudly describes his city. Its poverty stems back to World War II devastation when bombs razed 92 percent of buildings and provoked serious debate about leaving the city in ruins and starting afresh nearby. Decades of rebuilding have since almost totally rejuvenated Berlin, but have also left it broke. Its sexiness dates back even further to the debauched 1920s, but began to take on its present-day form during the Cold War when a military service loophole and the huge West German **arts** scene subsidies attracted hippies, punks, gays and lesbians, artists and musicians. Subsequent waves of economic immigrants from Greece, Italy and Turkey; those linked to the occupying American, British and French forces; and the current crop of adventurous urbanites from all over the developed world, have all made Berlin Germany’s most cosmopolitan city by far.

This multiculturalism is readily reflected in the excellent variety of **cuisines** on offer in the city’s restaurants, cafés and bars, but the “poor and sexy” combination has also created a vibrant place where cutting-edge designs and offbeat concepts have plenty of room to breathe, with both elements especially evident in Berlin’s legendary, nonstop **nightlife**, and energetic **contemporary arts** scene. By day, however, it’s the city’s remarkable museums, memorials, historic sights and modern buildings that tend to capture the imagination of even those with little interest in history or architecture. The city’s medley of architectural styles range from its reconstructed sixteenth-century core, the **Nikolaiviertel**, and a grand nineteenth-century Neoclassical imperial showpiece quarter, all the way through to neighbourhoods that were mainly crafted during, and by, the conflicting ambitions and philosophies of the Cold War. Then, when the German government decided to move back to Berlin, it both brought with it, and stimulated, a whole host of contemporary building projects.

Berlin’s Mitte district – literally “centre” – is huge, cosmopolitan, varied and packed with enough attractions and parks to keep you busy for days. The city’s most famous landmark, the **Brandenburg Gate**, is here, as is its parliament and main train station, but what really sticks out on any Berlin map is the Tiergarten, a giant central park. At its southeastern corner, lie the world-class art museums of the **Kulturforum** and the thrusting modern skyscrapers of Potsdamer Platz – Berlin’s Piccadilly Circus or Times Square. Northwest of here along the city’s premier boulevard Unter den Linden, Neoclassical Berlin asserts itself in districts built during the city’s time as Prussian capital. Here Museum Island incorporates Berlin’s most magnificent museums, while further east again lies the GDR’s 1960s socialist showpiece quarter, centred around the broad concrete plaza of **Alexanderplatz** and the distinctive **Fernsehturm** TV tower. The only real break from the area’s modernity is the **Nikolaiviertel**, a tiny rebuilt version of old Berlin, and the **Spandauer Vorstadt**, an old Jewish quarter, with fascinating reminders of those days, though today better known for its fairly touristy restaurants, bars and nightlife, and a loosely-defined fashion district full of stylish urbanwear boutiques.

**Brief history**

As heart of the Prussian kingdom, cultural centre of the Weimar Republic, headquarters of Hitler’s Third Reich and a key frontline flashpoint in the Cold War, Berlin has long been a weather vane of European and even world history. Its story began in the twelfth century when violent settlement of Slavic regions by Germanic tribes in the Dark Ages led to the creation of the margravate of Brandenburg in 1157. Berlin slowly rose to become the capital of this marshy frontier territory and from 1415 Brandenburg became the possession of the Hohenzollern dynasty, who embraced Protestantism in 1538. Brandenburg merged with Prussia in 1618, then became entangled in the Thirty Years’ War, which left the whole region devastated and depopulated. Rebirth was slow, but gathered momentum on the back of Prussia’s social tolerance – towards Huguenots and Jews in particular – which helped produce rapid industrialization throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With increasing economic power came military might and ambitions, which sparked two centuries of martial adventures and horse-trading diplomacy, bringing about German unity and the creation of a second German Reich in 1871.

Within two centuries Berlin had gone from also-ran provincial town to Germany’s capital, but these drastic changes would be matched the following century by its demolition in World War II and subsequent division in the Cold War. Brandenburg was radically transformed too, losing all its territory east of the Oder and falling under the sway of communism. Then, in November 1989, the world’s media converged on the Brandenburg Gate to watch Berliners chipping away at the Berlin Wall and witness the extraordinary scenes of the border opening for good. This triggered a series of events which saw Germany’s federal government re-established in the city, sparking a pace of urban change unrivalled in the developed world.