**HAMBURG** suffers from image schizophrenia. To many of its tourists, Germany’s second metropolis is simply sin city – a place of prostitutes and strip shows in the Reeperbahn red-light district – while in its homeland it is revered as a cosmopolitan, stylish city-state, rapaciously commercial and home to the highest head-count of millionaires in the country. Either way the cause is the same: through one of the greatest ports in Europe it has sucked in wealth – and probably vice – ever since a canny piece of diplomatic manoeuvring in 1189 led Emperor Friederich I (also known as Emperor Barbarossa) to grant tax-free imports down the Elbe. Hamburg never looked back. The good times began to roll in the early Middle Ages after it fostered links with Hanseatic leader, Lübeck, and the city paused only to congratulate itself when declared a Free Imperial City by Emperor Maximilian I in 1510.

Today a restless boom-town, forever reinventing itself, Hamburg still flaunts its “Freie und Hansestadt” (Free and Hanseatic Town) title. And that umbilical link to maritime trade continues in a sprawling container port that grounds the city, adding a workaday robustness to the sophistication that comes with its postwar role as Germany’s media capital. Though the port makes Hamburg fairly grimy in places, seedy even, it adds an earthy flavour to the rich cosmopolitan stew. It brings dive bars to a city renowned for its arts and theatre; nurtures a strong counter-culture movement alongside hip media types; and helps support a nightlife that is as depraved as it is refined. Even the drizzle that blankets the place for days at a time can’t dampen the spirit of Germany’s most life-affirming city.

The surprise, then, is that Hamburg is so manageable. Despite a population that nudges towards 1.8 million, just under a fifth of which has immigrant roots, Hamburg has the lowest population density of any European city. Only around a third of the land area is urban development, the rest is parks and water. Canals that once carried produce now provide breathing space among the offices as they thread from the mercantile heart on the Elbe’s banks to the shimmering Alster lakes. The city’s 2302 bridges are more than Venice, Amsterdam and London combined.