

Berlin - History

History of Berlin

The settlement was founded around the year 1200. Originally, there were two towns - Berlin and Cölln - which formed a unity from 1307 onwards. Compared to other European capitals, Berlin is a young city. Few rests from the middle ages have survived and can still be seen today; most are to be found in and around "Nikolaiviertel", the quarter situated around St. Nicholas Church, the oldest parts of which date back to the year 1230.

On a visit to Berlin, the visitor easily gets the impression of constant transformation, which is no wonder considering how turbulent German history has been, especially in the last one hundred years.

In the 14th century, Berlin is the most important town in the Margraviate of Brandenburg, the region East of the river Elbe that had only been colonised by Germans since the 12th century BC. The city's constant growth is accompanied by a strong wish for independance, so in 1430 Berlin associates with the Hanseatic League in order to put up resistance against the German sovereigns. In the 16th century, the publication of Martin Luther's theses meets with general approval, therefore the electors and the city become protestant (1539). The Thirty Years' War (1618 - 1648) leaves Berlin and the surrounding Brandenburg region in a desolate state.

After the war, the Great Elector - Frederick William - started to rebuild the town, securing it by the construction of a fortification. In order to regain inhabitants and economic strength, he invited French protestant refugees to settle in his land: the Huguenots, who were expelled from France after the revocation of the Nantes Edict in 1685.

The city continues to grow during the reign of Frederick I, the first Prussian king (1701). Medieval Berlin-Cölln merges with new quarters like "Dorotheenstadt" and "Friedrichstadt" to form a thriving residence city in 1709. His successors contribute to this development of the city as a representative seat of kings, attractive to foreign visitors and intellectuals. Frederick II (the Great), who strived to be an enlightened monarch, invited philosophers like Voltare and Rousseau and founded cultural institution like the opera "Unter den Linden".

19th century brought industrialisation (iron and steel industry, textile factories) In 1871 Berlin (800,000 inhabitants) becomes the capital of the newly founded German Empire, established as a result of chancellor Bismarck's clever policy. Berlin remains capital of Germany, when, after the end of World War I, democracy is installed - a period later called the Weimar Republic - and when, in 1933, the Nazis seize power.

Consequently, the city is an important target for air raids during World War II. In the final battle against the Red Army the Berlin streets become theatre of war. Most of the city is badly destroyed, its centre almost entirely reduced to rubble and of the 4.2 million counted in 1939 only 2.8 million inhabitants remain, most of them women who start to clean up the damage.

At the end of the war Berlin is divided in four sectors controlled by the four powers of Anti-Hitler-coalition: American, British, French and Soviet . The sectors of the Western allies later merge under one administration forming West-Berlin while East Berlin, the sector held by the Soviets becomes capital again when the socialist German state - the German Democratic Republic - is founded in 1949. During the Cold War, West Berlin is a constant spot of trouble. The conflict starts to escalate when, on June 24, 1948, the USSR, hoping to break the grip of the Western allies, puts up a blockade in order to isolate the Western part of Berlin completely. Thanks to the initiative of the Americans, on the following day the legendary Airlift is organised to supply West Berlin thus ensuring its survival as a free city. Although the blockade ends in May, the Airlift is kept up until the end of September 1949. During the operation that comprised a total of 213,000 cargo flights, 70 pilots lose their lives.

On August 13, 1961 East Berlin authorities start building a wall at the inner-Berlin border, with consent of the Russians. During 28 years of separation, West Berlin is a stronghold in the middle of the Soviet sphere of influence, often scene of demonstrations and, in any case, a permanent focus of international attention. On the other hand, since the late 60s the Western part of this city that had always had a strong attraction for artists gradually turned into an experimental zone for alternative lifestyle.

Today Berlin is once again the capital of reunited Germany and the city that, at times, played a decisive role in world history now gives its visitors the occasion to go on a journey through the eventful and troubled stages of its existence.

800 years of Berlin history

1237/1244 First written mention of Cölln / First written mention of Berlin >>> 1415 Frederick I >>> 1415-40 of the House of Hohenzollern becomes Margrave and Elector of Brandenburg >>> 1443 A castle - residence of the Hohenzollern - is built in Cölln (demolished in 1950) >>> 1618-1648 Thirty Years War /Pillaging - siege - pest >>> 1640 -1688 Frederick William, the Great Elector >>> 1658 Fortification of Berlin according to plans by Memhardt >>> 1685 Edict of Potsdam, immigration of refugees (Huguenots) >>> 1688-1713 Elector Frederick III, since 1701 King Frederick I in Prussia >>> From 1688 on Armoury - Renaissance extension of Berlin residence (by Schlüter - Eosander) >>> 1713-1740 Frederick William I "Soldier King" >>> 1713-1740 Town extension of Friedrichstadt Construction of a new tax wall >>> 1740-1786 Frederick II "the Great" >>> From 1740 on French and German cathedrals, Opera, Sanssouci palace >>> 1750-1753 Voltaires stays at Potsdam >>> 1786-1797 Frederick William II >>> 1797-1840 Frederick William III >>> 27. Oktober 1806 Napoleon enters Berlin through the Brandenburger Gate >>> 1838 First train line Berlin-Potsdam >>> 1840-1861 Frederick William IV >>> 1861-1888 William I >>> From 1862 on development plan for Berlin and surroundings by James Hobrecht >>> 1871 Berlin becomes capital city of the German Empire >>> 1888 Emperor Frederic III (99 days) / Emperor William II (until 1918) >>> 1902 First high and underground train >>> 1918 The Kaiser (emperor) abdicates (William II dies in exile in 1941) >>> 1921 Law on the formation of a new urban community with 3.8 million inhabitants and 878 sq. km. >>> January 30, 1933 Adolf Hitler ceases power >>> 1936 The XI. Olympic Summer Games take place in Berlin. >>> July 17 until August 2, 1945 Potsdam Conference of the Allied Powers >>> 1948-1949 Blockade of Berlin by Soviet troops / Airlift >>> October 1949 Foundation of two German states >>> August 13, 1961 The Berlin Wall is built. >>> November 9, 1989 The Wall comes down. >>> Oktober3, 1990 Germany is reunited.