

A DAY IN BERLIN

Gul Panag lived her dream of visiting the beautiful city of Berlin, but only for a day. Here, she shares her one-day affair with the historical metropolis and why she wished for it to last a little longer...

I first heard about Berlin when I was about 8 years old. My father, an avid traveller himself, gently instilled in me a desire to see the world by telling me of the numerous adventures he had on his travels. One such adventure was set in Berlin! But of course that would be another story.

Needless to say I added Berlin to the ever growing list of places I wanted to visit. (At this point I was too young to know its relevance in modern history.) The very next year, the Wall came down. I remember seeing it on Doordarshan. I was now hell-bent on visiting Berlin. More so, when I later read about the four quarters of the Victors of World War II, the Blockade, the Wall, the Check Points.

My first opportunity came, a decade later on a student visit to Austria. I tried desperately to change my ticket to allow me a day or two to Berlin. This was one of many unsuccessful attempts I made over the next 10 years. One attempt was when I was already in Frankfurt and yet could not make it to Berlin.

So, when I got an opportunity to be part of the Audi R8 driving experience in Berlin en route to the Frankfurt Motor Show, I knew my time had come. I put both my feet down and managed to ticket myself in a way that allowed me a day to myself in Berlin!

They say good things come to those who wait. Indeed. Not only did I get my wish to visit Berlin, I also got an R8 Spyder to drive around the city courtesy Audi India. Things only got better. The weather, for starters, was fabulous and gave me an opportunity to take the top of the R8 down. Here I was driving around this beautiful historic city, on its beautiful boulevards feeling the wind in my hair and the sun on my skin. It was perfect! I couldn't wait to go see Check Point Charlie!

Wait... let me start from the beginning. Upon landing in Berlin early in the morning on a sunny Saturday and getting my wheels (yup the R8) I rendezvoused with my guide and navigator for the day – Michael Perschke, Head of Audi India. With him giving directions and a running commentary on my surroundings, I slowly began to soak in Berlin.

I drove around the Victory Column (Siegessäule) a few times— which was easy, since it stands in the middle of a traffic roundabout- taking in its grandeur. The monument was built to commemorate the victory of Prussia over Denmark, Austria and France (in three separate wars also referred to as the unification wars) and the establishment of the 2nd Reich (Kingdom of Prussia) in 1873.

Taking one of the exits from the round-about, we headed to Brandenburg Tor, where I got my first glimpse of the remains of the Berlin Wall. (It is now a two-brick thick flat in-lay in the road. I had goose bumps as I drove over it thinking of all those who lost their lives trying to breach it.)

The Tor' with the Quadriga perched above it, is a major tourist hot spot. Apart from being a magnificently imposing structure, it is also a bygone symbol of a city that was politically and geographically divided.



I parked in Pariser Platz adjacent to the Brandenburg Gate, and we set off on foot, to explore the area around. Almost everything in the square has been rebuilt post the unification. Yet most buildings appear older, and that is by design. The architectural restrictions placed by the city mandated that the new buildings be reminiscent of the pre-World War grandeur of the square.

On taking a walk around the Reichstag, I marvelled at the juxtaposition of the modern Parliament Library and offices with the historic (and restored) Reichstag. The gardens around were teeming with locals and tourists, all taking advantage of the sunny weather. Soon enough, the sun got to us and I used that as an excuse to jump back into the car.

Our next destination was a short drive away- Potsdamer Platz. The place was new and shiny reflecting all things German-precision, planning and functionality. It was also time for the mid morning cup of coffee, which Michael and I indulged in sitting at a lovely cafe in the Platz. Looking at this square, it's hard to imagine that it was totally destroyed in the World War, and was left that way during the Cold War, when the Berlin Wall passed through it. Today it has a unique blend of art, entertainment and shopping, making it a must-see. The European head quarters of Sony are housed here at the Sony Centre—a spectacular eye catching monolith of glass and steel. The Berlin International Film Festival also has its principal venue at Potsdamer Platz. We walked around the square for a good one hour working up a good appetite for lunch. Still, we hadn't seen all there was to see. My stomach was already rumbling. However, there was one more place I wanted to see before

ending Berlin Tour Episode one-(of undoubtedly many more to come) -Check Point Charlie.

During the time that Berlin was divided, there were "crossing" points where one could (with the right papers) cross from allied controlled West Berlin (French, British and American) Berlin to the Soviet controlled East Berlin and vice versa. Check Point Charlie was one such crossing point and now it was a treat to be standing at for a history buff like me. I was transported to a time 40 years ago as I tried to imagine what things must have been like, felt like, looked like.

Sigh! It was time for lunch and for me to head to the Frankfurt Motor Show.

The lunch experience, though not touristy is definitely worth a mention. Meilenwerk Berlin appeared at first to be an old industrial unit, which it was... almost. High ceilings and a vast expanse of space were definitely characteristic of a warehouse. It was a historic Tram Depot of 1900! It turns out, apart from being a museum for classic cars, the complex also offered special humidity and temperature controlled storage for private cars. There were garages, services and dealers for classic cars, shops for parts, model cars and restaurants in this historic building.

When in Berlin, one can almost be forgiven for forgetting that it is the capital of a country, which produces arguably the best cars—so strong is the character of the city. But being at Meilenwerk is a reminder of the rich automobile legacy of the nation. We were now heading to experience the future of that legacy at the Gross Dolln driving track. I was a little sad to be leaving Berlin after having seen so little of it, but knew for sure that I would be back for more. ■

