

Illuminating 20 Berlins – Episode One: Mitte

Berlin grabbed me, spun me around, and said “Hey, let’s dance!” I felt an awesome rush when I first saw the Brandenburg Gate and discovered this historic city’s iconic landmarks. Hidden venues known only to the locals drew me in, I wanted to learn more and explore more deeply. There were so many connections to what I love - photography, urban design, contemporary culture, and my German heritage. And “Oh Yes, coffee houses.” I extended my hand and heart and happily replied “Yes, let’s dance.”

This began a daunting quest to explore and photograph the 20 unique boroughs that in 1920 created present day Berlin. With a luminous contemporary outlook, I set out to capture Berlin’s dynamic urban scene, overlaying history, culture and architecture onto trendy coffee houses, street art, and night life.

In 1920, the Berlin we know today was established by uniting its surrounding towns, rural communities, and estate districts creating 20 distinct boroughs. As Germany’s capital it now spans 344 square miles, 3.7 million people and carries 800 years of history as it advances into the future. I saw Berlin as immense, fast paced, and complex. Getting my arms around it would not be easy but thanks to a partner with exceptional navigation expertise and local knowledge this daunting quest became attainable.

Berlin’s dualities, past and present, energy and elegance, destruction and renewal, are reflected in my street photography. This 20 Borough series responds to Berlin’s proud but at times fraught and anguished history and to the innovative spirit and resilience that has created a 21st century Superstar. Berlin is now one of the leading cities of the world.

Illuminating 20 Berlins, Episode One Mitte, reveals layers of old and new in Mitte, the original Berlin, and is the first book in a series of an enduring and fascinating city. What makes Mitte so fascinating, the area so meaningful, the experience so unforgettable? Located in the central heart of the city, it is where royalty lived in palaces, scholars studied at prestigious universities, worshipers attended historic churches, and enthusiasts visited opulent museums. Many of those buildings were damaged by war, destroyed, and demolished, yet they reappeared, were rebuilt, beautifully restored, and creatively repurposed. The area’s architectural design now cuts across timelines from ultra-modern contemporary to finely chiseled reproductions of bygone eras.

Construction cranes loom everywhere raising new structures and restoring and replacing older ones. Present-day features give new life to historic buildings. Verdant parks, hidden walkways, and bustling plazas surround the gently flowing river Spree, and are accented by bold graffiti, third wave coffee houses, trendy techno clubs, and the iconic television tower, the Fernsehturm. Through it all Mitte has emerged with an urban environment that speaks of culture, history, technology, and uninhibited coolness.

Adjacent to Mitte and following close behind in this project are two borough works in progress - Tiergarten and Wedding. The first, Tiergarten, is anchored by a lush green park accented around the edges with a world-famous zoo, a vibrant creative shopping area in an historic star shaped intersection, a parliament building topped by a stunning glass dome, and an entire neighborhood designed in Bauhaus style, all of which emerged after 1945 from a desolate flattened landscape. Wedding, in contrast, is a collage, a bubbling stew, unsettled, evolving with repurposed buildings. Originally an agricultural estate, it transitioned to a spa town also know for gambling and prostitution and is now dominated by shops of ethnic diversity and a vibrant artists’ colony. A transit bus repair shop has become a popular café, a crematorium is filled with artists’ studios, and a public bath house has become a public library.

My dance with Berlin continues with discovery and delight.