

Life & Style / Travel

Best way to learn about Berlin Wall is on a bike



Sticks now mark the path of the Berlin Wall, which fell almost 26 years ago. (Michaela Urban / Chicago Tribune)

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Twenty-six years after its destruction, the Berlin Wall remains one of the world's most famous icons of the Cold War, and one of the best ways to learn about it is via a bike tour — particularly poignant now at the time of year when Germans are celebrating the 25th year of reunification of East and West.

Hearing chilling stories of life from the time of the wall while you are standing right on the site where these dramas played out makes it so much more real.

At one of my first stops on a tour by Berlin on Bikes, Kieler Strasse, an old man was placing flowers at the foot of one of the city's few remaining wall guard towers. Our guide told us the man is Gunter Litfin, and his brother, Jurgen, was the first person killed trying to cross into West Berlin. Who would have known?

At each stop, I heard compelling stories of the hardships people faced when the wall stood, from 1961 to 1989, and it was not just the East Berliners who suffered. Many West Berliners didn't want to live in the city, the guide said. Trapped by a wall 200 miles inside the Iron Curtain, they felt isolated and cut off from the free world.

To make life there more attractive, the West German government provided tax breaks and abolished military service and closing times for bars, giving birth to West Berlin's artist culture.

Although I had visited the museum at Checkpoint Charlie and taken numerous self-guided tours of the wall, I learned more about Berlin on the bike tour than in all previous visits combined.

Info: Berlin on Bikes, www.berlinonbike.de/en. The 3 1/2-hour tour and bike rental cost 19 euros (about \$21).

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