



## HERBST GLÜCKLICH!

While awaiting the reputed German winter, Megan Spencer finds herself struck by the sheer beauty that Autumn brings to this European capital city.

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"If you make it through the first winter, you'll stay," an ex-pat friend declared upon my arrival in Berlin last April. The city was to be my new adoptive home. Winters in Berlin have a scary reputation: they're bitterly cold with drizzling rain and sleety snow. And just to add insult to injury, they're long.

"Nine months of the year long" my friend added cheerfully. "As soon as you see the sun, go straight outside. And start taking vitamin D, or you'll get sick."

Her words haunted me as my first Berlin summer dwindled, replaced by the pinch of cold on my cheek. What she didn't tell me however, was how glorious Berlin is in autumn – or *herbst* as it's called here.

It snuck into my experience like a winning lottery ticket. Albeit brief, it was truly spectacular: temperate, colourful and special. Dazzling even. Locals love it so much they issue *herbst glücklich!* (Happy autumn) greeting cards just as the leaves begin to fall.

Like Bendigo, Berlin is known for its green spaces and multitude of tree-lined streets. The similarity perhaps rests in the cities' shared German ancestry: German botanist and Australian émigré, "Baron" Ferdinand

von Mueller (1825–1896), is oft-cited as the person responsible for transforming Bendigo's once "treeless landscape" into the "city in the forest" for which it has become known.

And like Bendigonians, Berliners love their trees: 440,000 line the city's cobble-stoned streets – an average of 80 per kilometre. (A sixth of Berlin's geographic size, Bendigo boasts an impressive 100,000.)

Come September parks such as historic Tiergarten (near the city centre), and massive Grunewald (at its western edge) become big tourist destinations. Popular with mushroom hunters, the latter boasts 3000-hectares of forest; considered the "green lung" of Germany's capital, the former is renowned for spectacular walks through a sea of colourful leaves, dropped by arcs of linden, oak and maple.

Wandering down nearby Siegesallee one day – returning from photographing Victoria, the Avenue's gleaming Victory Angel statue – I watched a council worker wrestle with endless piles of autumn leaves on the footpath.

Squeezed into a tiny street-sweeper and

smoking in the driver's seat, he repeatedly shooed away the golden-coloured refuse only to be met by mountains more. As he shook his head in despair he caught me staring.

I waved. He smoked.

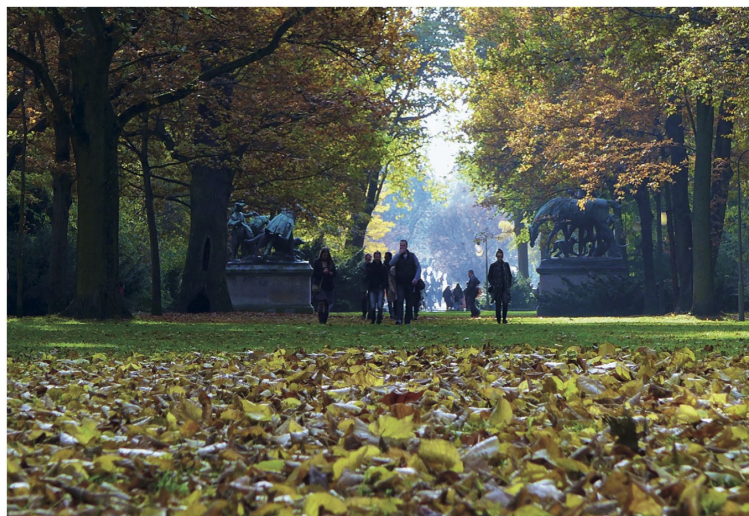
"It's like working at the post office," I muttered, scurrying away, red-faced.

Another memorable instance spent in the company of leaves involved my (German) husband, his nine adult cousins (plus families), and a sightseeing pilgrimage to two houses in an old, leafy Berlin kiez (neighbourhood).

A decision was made to visit the two former family homes of their parents, then go to dinner at a pub where two elderly aunties had met weekly for five decades, to share schnaps and gossip. It was the stuff of family legend. It fell on Halloween weekend.

They came from as far away as Munich. On approach, you could hear the cousins gleefully swishing through the leaf-covered sidewalks and talking in the orange sunlight. Snaps were taken in the street while neighbours looked on in mild amusement. A Sunday walk the next day through





Tiergarten topped off a perfect family reunion. Together they watched leaves fall from trees like snowflakes; the Berlin ancestors would have approved.

Tempelhofer Airfield also gave me a chance to marvel at how autumn transforms the city.

Late September I went for what was to be one of my last long bike rides in the sun. (When you live in an unforgiving Northern Hemisphere climate, you take note of days like these.)

Once known as Hitler's airport, Tempelhofer Feld is now one of Berlin's biggest public spaces, reclaimed by the people from the clutches of developers and its sordid military past. Simply an abandoned airport, it's one of Berlin's most magical spaces where people come to exercise, picnic, fly model planes, ride bikes, land-sail, swing dance, and on a good night, practise the bagpipes.

Feeling an unfamiliar chill beneath the sun's warmth, I rode through the gate. Hundreds



of kites hovered. It was a scene straight out of Spielberg's *War Of The Worlds*. Giant creatures silently floated in the sky for miles: Tweety Bird, an octopus, giant Papa Smurf... Big kites, little kites, flown by big kids, little kids... Transfixed, I slowly rode along the runway, dodging people, absorbing the sights, sounds and space, feeling the kind of awe that only comes from experiencing such a spectacle.

Autumn is kite-flying competition season in Berlin; unwittingly I'd ridden into the last of it. Eventually I stopped and laid on the grass, keeping my eyes on the sky before sinking into a sun-drenched snooze.

In only a matter of weeks it would snow and the light would dissolve earlier each day. It's astonishing how vociferously winter adheres to Berlin, like the hook and loop fastening of Velcro: once it takes hold you think it may never let go. Those beautiful golden trees are now bare silhouettes against a grey sky.

Thanks to its autumnal magic however, Berlin may just keep me for another year. ■