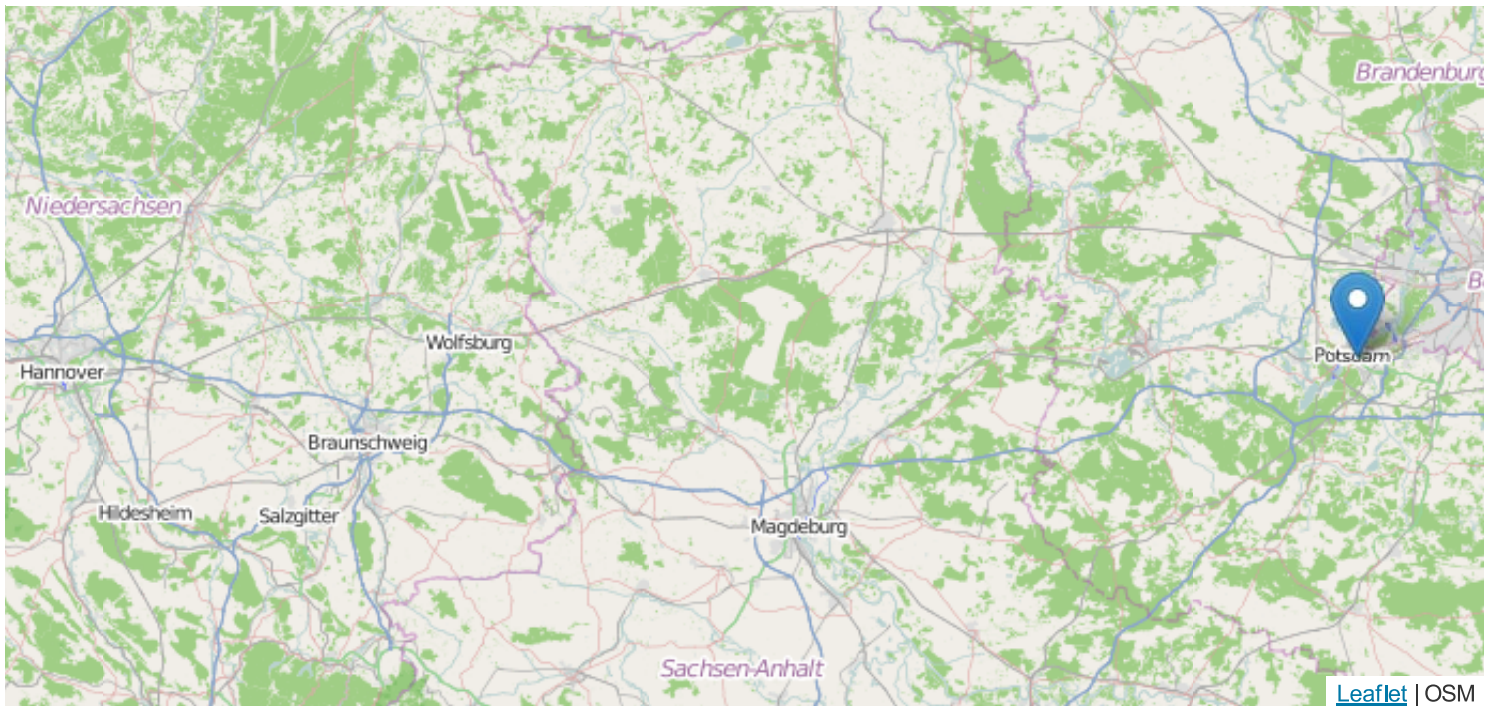


ISSUE 10

POTSDAM BY BIKE

– BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER –



I grip the handlebars of my bike and glide onto the bridge, braking in the middle where a red-and-white striped barber pole of a barricade separated the East from the West during the Cold War. My imagination

conjures up big-coated agents of the KGB and the CIA staring each other down as they swapped spies, the men stepping gingerly from the grip of their enemies.

Then a shiny red Audi honks as it rushes past, startling me back to the present. I take one last look at Glienicke Bridge, painted a dirty, Kermit green, and pedal back to the city centre.

Lying fifteen miles southwest of Berlin, Potsdam barely resembles the grey, oppressive place it was before the Berlin Wall came down. *Der Spiegel* calls it “The German Beverly Hills” in a nod to its burgeoning film industry. It has some of the highest real estate prices in Germany with incomes to match and is home to celebrities, mostly German TV and film stars and corporate moguls. Oracle has its European headquarters here and Volkswagen maintains a design centre.

Rapidly growing, with more marriages and births than in other parts of Germany, it has the appeal of a small city but lies next to a major European capital. The mayor of Berlin once boasted that his city is “poor but sexy,” to which Potsdam’s leaders replied theirs is “rich and beautiful.”

Developed in the eighteenth century on the wooded, marshy islands of the Havel Lakes, landscape architects created a necklace of parks and waterways dotted with Prussian palaces. Great swaths have been

declared UNESCO World Heritage sites.

I find plenty of sights worth seeing in this former Prussian capital, but difficult to get to on foot because they are scattered across these ample green spaces and network of waterways. With a bike, though, no problem. “A bike is the only real way to experience this place,” says Oliver Gondring, who leads bicycle tours of Potsdam’s attractions.

But even if you don’t join Gondring’s guided tour, it’s easy to get around on your own. Plenty of Potsdamers take to two wheels to travel about, using dedicated bike lanes and pedestrian streets, such as the Brandenburger Strasse with its swanky shops and sidewalk cafes.

I rent a bike from my hotel, Grossen Waisenhaus, and set off to join them.

Following my fascination with the Cold War, I pedal through the “Forbidden City,” a neighborhood of upper-middle class homes seized by the Soviets and walled off from outsiders until 1994. When the Red Army arrived, residents were given just two hours to pack up and leave. Vladimir Putin served in the KGB headquarters here. Who knows what went on inside the thundercloud grey prison next door where unfortunates waited to die or be sent to Siberia.

Many of the homes have been restored to their former glory, but several

remain as shabby ghosts of the past, their windows boarded up, their masonry chipped and sagging. After Germany reunified, there were as many as 30,000 claims on 8,000 houses, a legal logjam that is taking years to unravel. Some of the former owners disappeared, their property left in limbo.

I push on to Cecilienhof, the palace where historians say the Cold War began on what was then Joseph Stalin's turf. In the summer of 1945, "Uncle Joe" sat down with Harry Truman and Winston Churchill to hammer out new boundaries for post-World War II Europe in the Potsdam Conference. Each of the world leaders and their delegations were housed in separate villas in nearby Babelsberg and arrived at Cecilienhof using separate entrances so there was no chance they would encounter one another outside the conference hall. The KGB bugged the villas of the US and British delegations and Stalin insisted the conferences not begin until the afternoon to give his eavesdropping experts time to listen to the wiretaps.



Cecilienhof, Germany's last royal palace

Inside the conference room, I feel history hanging as heavy as the red velvet drapes on the 25-foot-high windows. Wooden beams support the high, vaulted ceiling, dwarfing the red oriental carpet and straight-back wooden chairs where representatives of the three world powers sat staring each other down.

World War II was still going on in the Pacific, and Japanese leaders were given an ultimatum to surrender or face annihilation by a secret weapon being developed by the US. Near the end of the Potsdam Conference, Truman received a coded telegram: “The baby is born,” telling him the atomic bomb was ready. From a modest office set up for him at

Cecilienhof, he gave the order to drop “the baby” on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

Japan surrendered after a second bombing and the war ended, but the boundaries drawn up at this conference table set up political and military tensions that fermented into a Cold War that would stretch on for more than four decades.

I walk through the gardens outside the palace and imagine Truman, Churchill and Stalin seated just there on the lawn. The grass and shrubs are still well tended and flowers bloom in bright beds, including red flowers planted in the shape of a star recalling Stalin’s ubiquitous symbol of Soviet power.

The last royal palace built in Germany, Cecilienhof was the residence of Crown Prince Wilhelm who lived there until March 1945, when he and his family fled in advance of the Red Army. Completed in 1917 in English Tudor style of peach stucco and mossy-brown half timbers, it has 55 chimneys, a sign of wealth, though most of these are fakes. Though it has 176 rooms, the design of the palace makes it appear smaller than the grand structures of Prussia’s royal predecessors. With World War I on and Germans starving, this Kaiser thought it best to conceal its opulence.

The palace sits on one of Potsdam’s pretty lakes, but when the Wall went up on the lawn, the only view was of ugly grey concrete and barbed wire.

I mount up and ride where border guards once walked on patrol, taking a lakefront path past the Neuer Garten, or New Garden. Commissioned in 1787 by Friedrich Wilhelm II, the garden was landscaped in a naturalistic way in the style of an English country garden, with outbuildings to mimic scenes from a play and vistas stretching to distant palaces. The garden, too, was walled off, not by the Red Army, but on orders from the royal family to keep their enjoyment of this pleasure garden from the prying eyes of the populace.



Sanssouci

In fifteen minutes of leisurely pedalling, I reach Potsdam's most famous royal palace, Sanssouci, summer residence of King Frederick the Great.

Wild grapevines ascend trellises to a small but opulent structure in a warm mustard colour capped by a dull green copper dome.

Built according to Frederick's own sketches, Sanssouci showcases Prussian opulence with 2,000-year-old statues, Meissen porcelains and crystal chandeliers that cost \$2,000 in eighteenth-century currency. Still, the most costly work of art here is a twentieth-century portrait of Frederick the Great by Andy Warhol seen in a small gallery near the exit.

Prussia's King Frederick the Great despised women, so when he built Sanssouci, meaning "free from care" in French, he banned them. "The hatred of women is built into this palace," says Kevin Kennedy, a doctoral student at the University of Potsdam who moonlights as a tour guide. In one of the opulent rococo rooms, he points to the seats of the rose-petal pink brocade sofas, far too narrow to accommodate eighteenth-century skirts.

Kennedy says that not even the king's wife was allowed inside his male-only sanctuary. His father had forced him to marry, but as soon as he died Frederick sent his wife away, mocking her as "my old cow."

One of Frederick's favourite rooms was the Marble Hall, inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, with an oculus, marble Corinthian columns and gleaming floors of inlaid marble in a palette of bright colours. Frederick gathered his best buddies here for lunches lasting five or six hours.

Voltaire was a regular. They discussed philosophy, music and poetry and told vicious jokes about women and religious figures.

An ardent atheist, Frederick the Great once said “the Bible is all fairy tales” and often mocked Christianity along with all organized religion. He purposely did not build a chapel at Sanssouci, which was considered a scandal at the time.

Kennedy speculates that Frederick’s feelings about females stemmed from his horrible upbringing. His father, King Frederick Wilhelm I, despised him because he hated hunting, was afraid of guns, didn’t like beer and preferred to spend his time playing his flute. His father beat him in public, called him “a woman” and when he and a friend were caught trying to escape to England his father forced him to watch his friend beheaded.

But for all of his perceived childhood weaknesses, Frederick II grew to become Prussia’s greatest king, noted for his military prowess, reforms and creation of a legal code that set his nation on the path toward constitutional monarchy. “He was a public relations genius,” says Kennedy, referring to the fact that Frederick worked hard to craft an image of himself as the father of the great Prussian empire.

Still, he had his quirks. He loved his dogs, which his servants were instructed to address in French using the formal *vous* form. The beloved

pets are buried alongside him under a simple concrete marker on the palace terrace.

This is the final resting place Frederick the Great requested, but not the one he first received. His nephew, who succeeded him after he died childless, ignored his wishes and had him buried in the Potsdam garrison church next to his father. Frederick must have been rolling over in his grave to be entombed in a religious structure with the man who made his childhood a living hell, says Kennedy. During World War II, the Nazis feared the body of Germany's revered leader would be stolen or destroyed in bombings, so they hid it in an underground bunker and later a salt mine. In 1991, after German reunification, Frederick the Great was moved at last to Sanssouci and buried according to his wishes.

I stand over the grave marker and wonder about the potatoes left by admirers on the tombstone. Many Germans believe, wrongly, that Frederick the Great brought the potato to Germany, says Kennedy. He did try to get local farmers to grow them but failed. Many years passed before the humble spud became a local ingredient in German cuisine.

Leaving "Old Fritz" to his eternal rest, I bike back toward my hotel, stopping first for dinner in the Dutch Quarter. Frederick's father encouraged immigrants from the Netherlands to settle on Potsdam's watery ground because they were skilled at building on marshland. Now 135 tomato-red buildings rise in neat blocks of houses, shops, restaurants

and pubs in one of Potsdam's prime shopping and entertainment districts. Outside there's always a bike rack, as in Holland, for those who prefer to pedal rather than walk or ride.

Katherine Rodeghier has visited more than 80 countries as a travel journalist and is a long-standing member of the Society of American Travel Writers. She is based in Chicago. Follow on her Twitter @KRodeghier.

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