

Stairway to Hell

Berlin's dank bunkers provided shelter during two world wars. Now they offer a fascinating glimpse of civilian life during those terrifying years, says Campbell Jefferys.

(Filed: 08/03/2004)

At Gesundbrunnen, an underground train station in Berlin, there is a green door that thousands of people pass everyday, most unaware of the other world that lies behind it.

Luminous paint, now more than 60 years old, still glows, and in the faint darkness a sign can be made out: Room 14 - 38 persons. In other rooms there are old lavatories, triple-bunk beds, egg-shaped lights with steel frames, and even a labour room for pregnant women. The images of people shuffling in with battered suitcases, pots for helmets, and a small stool to sit on are clear.

The chambers are dank and claustrophobic, with low ceilings and thin air. A hand-powered ventilator from the First World War - used to combat lethal gases - is still in working order. The old word for lavatory, *abort*, is used because *toilette* sounded too French. There are old tubes from the pneumatic dispatch system, remnants from underground breweries, and a railway cart that was used by the *Trummerfrauen* (rubble women) to move debris to rubbish hills after the Second World War. Berlin, once a flat city set along the River Spree, has many hills.

The underground hideaway has been restored by the Berliner Unterwelten Society and every Saturday it conducts tours based around three bunkers that explain a different period of history, from 1914-18 to the Cold War. They show how the bunkers were modified to cope with modern weaponry, and how the underground train system was used as an air ventilator, and later as a means of escape for East Germans.

Because the bunkers were left untouched after the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, you receive an immediate sense of the past. The Berliner Unterwelten Society is preparing the nearby Humbolthain air raid tower, the last of Berlin's three Second World War towers, for public viewing (due to open next month).

The bunker at Gesundbrunnen is one of 100 to survive in Berlin. Many are underground, like the "Level Four" bunker at Alexanderplatz, in the centre of the city. This is also entered via an inconspicuous door in the train station. It has been untouched since the war, and feels as if it has only been given a light clean before opening. The rooms are bare, with rusted hinges and frames leading to a forest of thick steel doors; during air raids, it's probable that even the least claustrophobic person would have become anxious down here.

Hitler had grandiose plans for his bunkers. From 1940 to 1944, there were more than 1,000 in Berlin. Included was an extensive network of tunnels, with one running from the government sector in Mitte to the airport in Templehof. Goering could ride in his car the four or so miles from his Luftwaffe building on Wilhelm Strasse to the airport in secret. Connected to this tunnel was the infamous Fuehrerbunker.

After the fall of the wall in 1989, historians excavated Hitler's bunker, from where he orchestrated "total victory or total annihilation" before his suicide. Between 1961 and 1989, the bunker had remained untouched in no man's land on the border between east and west. When historians went in, they found a time capsule of dinner menus, Nazi paintings, hair brushes, plates, and rooms still intact, including the children's room of the Goebbels family.

The authorities destroyed the bunker because they were worried it would become a Nazi shrine and built inoffensive and plain buildings over it. Nearby, a large Jewish Memorial is under construction.

What makes exploring Berlin's other bunkers so fascinating is that many were used by ordinary citizens, located in suburban areas, surrounded by apartment buildings and offices. Even today, they do not look out of place, simply part of Berlin's cityscape.

Such is the case of the above-ground bunkers on Palais Strasse and Reinhardt Strasse; you have to look hard to find them. Still perfectly preserved, they are used for cultural events. Another suburban bunker, located at Anhalter Bahnhof (open year-round), houses the Gruselkabinett (Horror Cabinet), a exhibition of medieval medical practices, but the underground level has an excellent display of the bunker's history - newspapers from wartime, an outline of the last days of the Fuehrerbunker, and air recordings of Allied planes.

Other underground areas of note include the radiation-proof bunker located under the Story of Berlin museum, an underground hospital in Wannsee, and the ghostly rebuilding of the abandoned Potsdamer Platz underground station.

Several other working underground stations, notably those in Mitte, which were left unused between 1961 and 1989 because the border cut the network in half, are also unnerving. When Berlin fell in 1945, citizens went into the underground network to escape the street fighting. The Russians destroyed the Spree canal walls and flooded the network, killing thousands. Many still believe the underground is haunted. BVG, the Berlin public transport company, runs tours every Friday night in an open-topped train.

Keeping with the underworld theme is the restaurant Nocti Vagus. Located in the Backfabrik (Baking Factory) a short walk from Alexanderplatz, this cavernous locale has fast become one of Berlin's most famous restaurants, if not for its location and food then for its darkness. Guests order in the lobby bar, most selecting the Surprise Menu, and are then led downstairs and into the hands of a blind waiter. The waiter helps you into your seat and you sit in the dark using your hands to explore the table and then your food.

The concept of Nocti Vagus is to allow your other senses to come alive; eating in the dark, you become aware that we eat primarily with our eyes. Without the aid of vision, when a plate arrives, the first sensation is smell.

It is possible that during wartime air raids people ate dinner in exactly the same way. Their meals in the darkness were often interrupted by the wail of sirens, the sounds of bombs, and the screams of frightened civilians as they rushed to the nearest bunker, and often to a bunker that still stands today. No other city in the world reveals 20th-century history quite like Berlin, and all the remnants remain to warn, remind and educate.

Germany basics

Eating--A three-course dinner at the Nocti Vagus, Saarbrucker Str 36-38 (30 7474 9123; www.noctivagus.de) costs around £35.

Further information--Berliner Unterwelten Society (30 4991 0517; www.berliner-unterwelten.de). For the underground train tour (30 2562 6570; www.bvg.de). See also www.berlin.de or contact the tourist office (49 1805 754040).