



SMALL VICTORIES IN BERLIN  
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“I feel like we just won Berlin,” Johnny stopped as we walked through the car park of a DIY superstore. And I knew exactly what he meant: three weeks earlier I walked through this car park as a Berlin-Reject. Now we had just emerged (victorious) after a Sunday spent in the darkness of a former power conversion station for the DDR rail system, currently known as Berghain. I wanted to write about this for you because Barbara told me that I may have been the first Wiko Fellow to make it in there. I’m sure that’s not true – maybe you wanted to keep your weekend activities quiet over lunch on Monday. But I felt like there had to be something in the Wiko yearbook to encourage more of you to adventure East beyond the opera house and jazz cafes of Charlottenburg.

It really is hard to get in. There have been not one but two feature-length documentaries about how hard it is to get in.\* Reflecting this, the queue is silent, self-conscious and vulnerable: full-grown adults offering themselves up in turn to be judged. Many of them are dressed only in little leather harnesses. Many have spent their savings to fly there from all over the world. The whole scene is absurd. But look at the Google reviews: 3.9 stars from 2407 reviews. That's 1500 5-star reviews from people who got in (Hades: "This is a great nightclub, you must go in, there will be many bold ideas in that space.") and 1000 1-star reviews from people who didn't make it (Celia: "No reason for not being allowed in. We looked too 'nice'. Rudely pointed to walk to exit."). It has to be worth a try. The first time went like this:

*Bouncer:* Why do you want to go in there?

*Me:* For the music.

*Bouncer:* Music is everywhere. [Rudely pointed to walk to exit.]

So, Johnny and I cheated. I discovered that a friend of mine went to school with Erik who works the coat-check. He could put us on the list. And it turned out that Berghain and the hedonistic spirit of Berlin that it keeps alight on a patch of waste ground in Friedrichshain, nestled between tower blocks and DIY superstores, was a prize worth winning. There are many bold ideas in that space. And it's not really about the music.

I don't know if you've ever shared complete darkness with 1000 people doing whatever they like. We were overwhelmed, clinging to one another and out of our depth. We tripped over two men having sex on the floor within 10 metres of the entrance. "Let's find the loo." A tattooed "gnome" in his 50s, wearing a pair of skin-tight leather hot pants, stopped me from going into the cubicle he had just vacated – "stop, let me find you a nicer one". Sometimes you find old-fashioned gallantry in unexpected places. The labyrinth of the former power conversion station eventually led us to dancers packed into a small square of Sunday morning sunshine, "furnished" with concrete blocks and pillars of mysterious function from the past. We took our first proper look at our fellow citizens of this strange world. And this is what we saw: bodies of all shapes and sizes stuffed into fetish gear, some owning it, some not, sitting around in small groups drinking bottles of Rhabarberschorle. In contrast to the super-clubs of London, filled with tourists, gangs of

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\* *Berlin Bouncer* (2019, dir. David Dietl); *Beauty and Decay* (2019, dir. Annekatrin Henel).

Italian teenagers standing filming with their phones on the dance floor, most people were locals, regulars. One creature had the Berghain re-entry stamp tattooed onto her arm: DON'T FORGET TO GO HOME. A stand-out exception to the general grungey dress-code – a dapper gentleman in his 70s trotting along to the music on the top of a pillar, immaculate in his cream double-breasted suit with cravat and two-toned leather shoes – “Ah, there’s ‘Techno Grandad’.” said Johnny, “He’s here every week.” A young man in transition, triumphantly baring his newly developing breasts, 7 feet tall in 4-inch platforms, tottering round with a friend, arm-in-arm like a sweet old couple.

We loved it. For the next seven hours we alternated: losing ourselves completely on the dance floor to beautiful techno inside, and chatting to the locals in the sunshine outside. We managed to relax and go with it. The seemingly arbitrary and draconian door policy starts to make sense. This whole place is only possible because of the man standing at the door. He is filtering out the people who want in for the wrong reasons, who don’t know why they want to go inside, who think Berghain is just about the music. And he protects the community inside of people who truly need this space to be themselves.

It’s hard to imagine that this place could exist anywhere but Berlin. And it is for the people of Berlin. And the entrance is guarded to protect them. Johnny was right – we won Berlin.

This adventure was set against the backdrop of three months spent working at a computer in the leafy suburb of Grunewald, among oligarchs’ mansions and Middle Eastern embassies. “In the middle of nowhere” if it weren’t for the M19 and the “why-can’t-everywhere-be-like-this?” – Berlin city transport system. Instead, I learned to be grateful for the journey home, anti-clockwise on the Ringbahn, plugged into my earphones: the smell of the trees and the quiet of Grunewald at night. Back to the woods. The first day after arriving, we were hiding behind a tree from a wild boar that we had inadvertently startled with its piglets. The bloody thing wouldn’t stop following us. Stuart picked up a big stick to defend us, caveman instincts kicking in – “What *is* this place?” Life in the city surrounded by foxes, owls, nightingales, and one night – a pine marten bounded along Erdener Straße. A seldom-seen, magical creature from my childhood in the Highlands of Scotland, there in the city street.

Arriving at the Wissenschaftskolleg in April is like arriving at someone’s house, ready-to-party too late, when everyone is having a heart-to-heart in the corner or fetching their coats to go home. Most of what was going to happen had happened. An underlying anxiety was creeping in about time running out, problems and commitments piled up at

home. It might have been difficult to join the fray except that I was lucky enough to be part of a group who found the energy in the middle of saying goodbye to welcome a newcomer. On my first night, I was disco dancing after dinner and invited to a karaoke party. I am literally, clinically shy. It's hard to be a shy person at Wiko – sitting next to cliques of new people every day at lunch. A daily trial for someone like me. But I met nothing but kindness and was distracted by so many fascinating discussions; I would walk back to Villa Walther with my heart lightened by my small victory of shyness-overcome.

Many aspects of my three months at Wiko were challenging. I was pathetically love sick for my family, more than I could ever have imagined. My children all grown up, I had thought it was time to do my own thing again. But it turns out that I need them around to “do my own thing”. I was happy to have the chance to pursue a new project in different surroundings, supported by Koos, Dave, Joan, Nancy, Howard and Joan from my working group and the incredible team of biologists at Wiko: Mike, Judy, Tim, Victor and Jason. I didn't make the most of sharing time with you, but I have still taken away so much to think about. Thank you, Koos, for the opportunity you gave me by your invitation. And I have to give special mention to Joan, my heroine, who, over the three months in Berlin, became my friend. I loved our walks and our conversations about life, language, music, nature, family, education, dogs ... and even some science. Your encouragement and wisdom have fortified me for challenges ahead.

All the small victories I managed in my three months at Wiko were possible only thanks to the staff. Professional at all times, but the special quality I think, which is more unusual, is the thoughtfulness with which the Wissenschaftskolleg takes care of its visitors. Thank you.