

TAKE BERLIN

Europe's hippest capital is home to some seriously cool shops, and the best way to find them is with a local guide

"**POOR BUT SEXY**" is how the mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, describes what others call Europe's most happening capital. The eastern part of the city, fast gaining a reputation for thriving creativity in the face of high debt and unemployment, is a magnet for hip young designers attracted by low rents and living costs. And their standards are high.

The bohemian spirit is particularly evident around the lively Mitte area, with its boutiques, clubs and cafés. With annual rents at around €2,600 per sq m compared to €8,000 for similar spaces in Paris or €6,400 in Dublin, it's not hard to understand why it's easier to set up shop there. Big international brands with aspirations to coolness are taking note, some – such as American Apparel and Guess – have already moved in.

With an estimated 600-800 designers, some 800 students in nine fashion schools and around 200 studio shops run by young designers, Berlin is generating a strong independent fashion vibe, bolstered by the recently established Berlin Fashion Week, and the Bread and Butter trade fair moving from Barcelona to Berlin in July.

"Berliners are not chic and they're proud of it," says Nora Von Westphalen, editor of *Elle*. "They cultivate a style of their own, a mixture of off-the-peg, classy designer wear and second hand." And for a city where after the war, local women turned old military uniforms into new dresses, there's a history of making do and mend in straitened economic times.

To get an insider view of some of the more interesting avant garde shops and ateliers, I took a tour with Nina Witkiewitz from GoArt! Berlin, a company which specialises in tailor-made tours in various cultural aspects of the city including fashion. As a quick-fix solution for shoppers on short trips, it was impressive.

It started with a brief overview of the city's fashion history. In the 1920s, the industry was bigger than the more recognised Paris, but being mostly run by Jews was later destroyed by the Nazis. With the building of the Berlin wall, what was left of the industry moved to Munich and Dusseldorf. Now it is regaining a foothold in Berlin.

"It's not a real fashion capital yet," says Witkiewitz, "it's not mainstream, but there's a lot of energy on a small scale."

BLUSH, an underwear boutique, has been described as the best lingerie shop in the world. Designer Claudia Kleinert studied in Berlin and worked in New York before opening her award-winning shop back home. The lingerie, exquisitely made in a soft silk/lycra mix in hot colours such as purple and orange, hangs alongside other quality European brands. A recent extension, called Balls, sells men's underwear.

*Rosa Luxemburg Str 22, 10178 Berlin.
www.blush-berlin.com*

APARTMENT looks like an empty shop or gallery and is a destination known only to the fashion cognoscenti. Inside, the walls are white and a bunch of white lilies stands on a silver table. A spiral staircase leads down to a black showroom where edgy items such as Cheap Monday jeans and labels such as Noir and Rick Owens are on display in a vast cavern-like space. Expensive.

*Memhardstr 8, 10178 Berlin.
www.apartmentberlin.de*

CASH is Apartment's sales outlet where you can find last season's offerings at substantial discounts, eg a Bernhard Willhelm fake fur skirt down to €350 from €850. Though it shares the same address, it's actually around the corner in a rather unprepossessing building. Goodies for hip label hunters. Address and website as above.

ADDRESS (sic) is a little shop housing a casual, city collection based on easy-going separates and dresses with layering details. The label was started by Andreea Vrajitoru who studied fashion in Berlin and launched her shop in 2003.

*Rosa Luxemburg Str 28, 10178 Berlin.
www.address.de*

MYKITA An uber-cool, four-year-old award-winning German brand whose innovative, slot-hinged eyewear, in flexible stamped steel without screws or joints, has acquired cult status. The Mykita team is collaborating on a new line with designer Bernhard Willhelm. Fans include Tom Cruise, Bruce Willis and Angelina Jolie.

*Rosa Luxemburg Str 6, 10178 Berlin.
www.mykita.com*

ESTHER PERBANDT is a young designer who set up in business five years ago having studied in Paris and Utrecht. She opened her cool, spacious shop and atelier in December. "My style is garconette, a bit boyish," she says.

*Almstadstr 3, 10119, Berlin.
www.estherperbandt.com*

VON WEDEL & TIEDEKEN are two former assistants of Vivienne Westwood whose elegant sporty styles have quirky touches like a hoodie decorated with a blood cell motif or a lung print T-shirt. Their spacious shop narrows into their studio and sewing machines at the back.

*Almstadstr 7, 10119 Berlin.
www.vonwedel-tiedeken.de*

CLAUDIA SKODA is the grande dame of fashion design in Berlin. Known for body-clinging knitwear, she started her business in New York and

moved back to Berlin in the 1970s and now only sells from this shop, which also has colourful scarves and zany sequin gloves.

*Alte Schönhauser Str 35, 10119 Berlin.
www.claudiaskoda.com*

DEVAKI is a little millinery shop run by hatmaker Devaki Doerfler, who learnt her craft in Dusseldorf and makes mostly cheeky borsalino styles inspired by the 20s and 30s in sisal and felt.

Steinstrasse 4, 10119 Berlin. www.devaki.biz

HERR VON EDEN started life as a vintage shop in Hamburg and established its own range in 1999, a retro classic look based on traditional English style tweeds and menswear with a dandyish twist such as coats in dressing gown shapes, and a colourful range of shirts, waistcoats and ties all handmade in the Czech Republic.

*Alte Schönhauser Str 14, 10019 Berlin.
www.herrvoneden.com*

FIRMA is an award-winning label founded by Daniela Brienback and Carl Tillesen featuring clean lines and subtle styling using menswear fabrics for both menswear and womenswear. A stunning upmarket collection, worth having here.

Mulackstr 1, 10119 Berlin. www.firma.net

STARSTYLING A jazzy, colourful shop in a garden setting founded by a stylist and musician. Funky items such as shopping bags with "R.I.P YSL", mad masks, metallic T-shirts and cute collar and tie combos, which have become hugely popular in Japan, Korea and Hong Kong. Its Spring/Summer collection will be in the Ard Bia Gallery, Spanish Arch, Galway, May 8th-9th.

Mulackstr 4, 10119 Berlin. www.starstyling.net

BLESS Started by two women, one in Paris, the other based in Berlin, it combines art, design and fashion conceptually that, according to one commentator, occasionally makes sense and occasionally doesn't. Some of the product designs, which are numbered, have been snapped up by Colette in Paris and designer Martin Margiela.

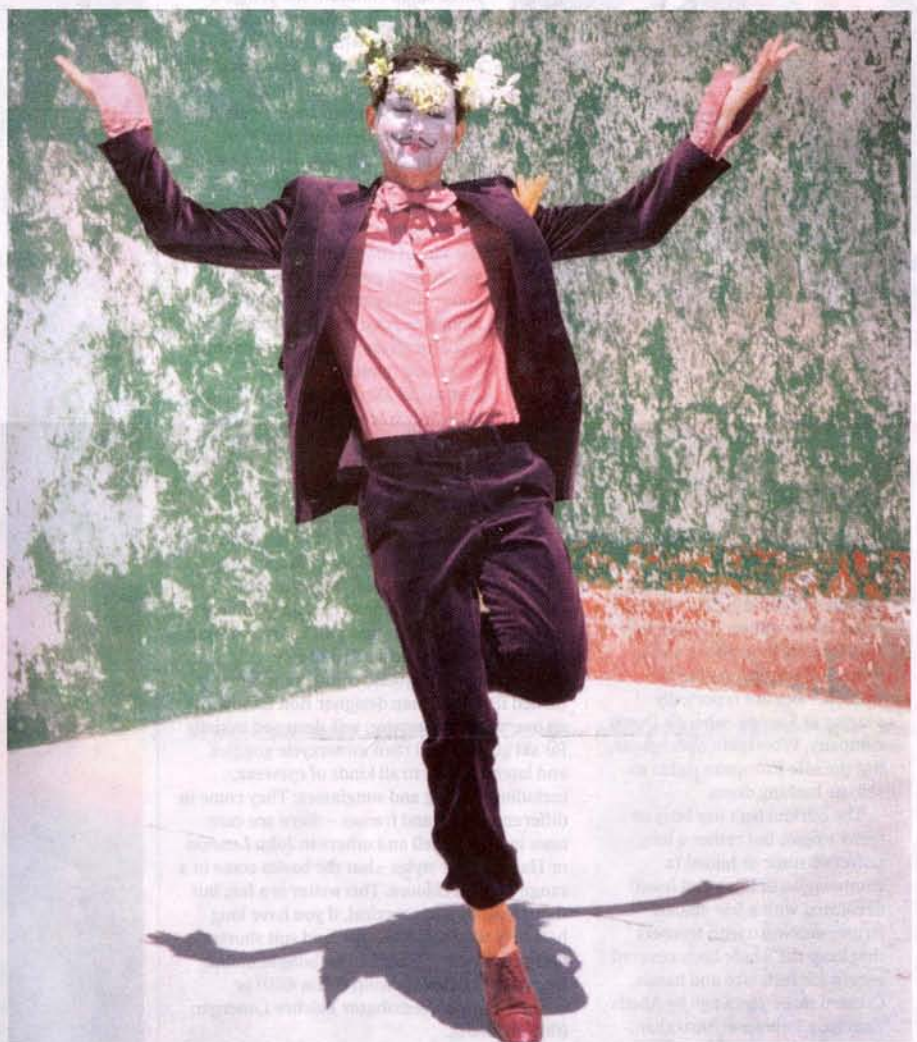
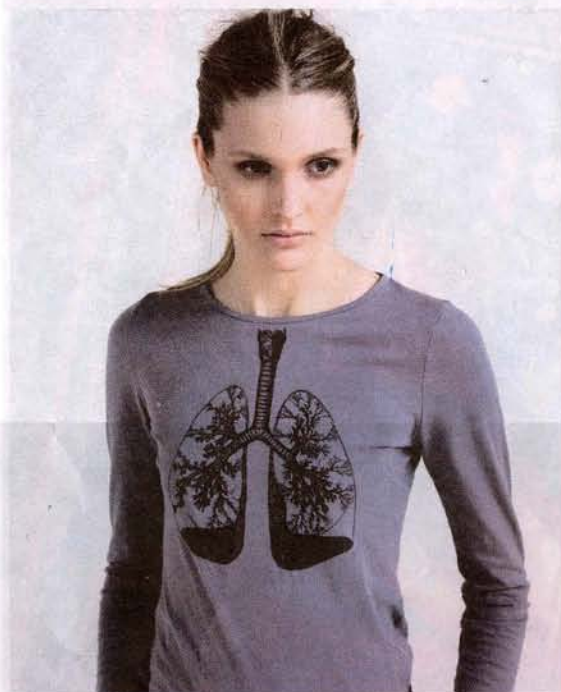
Mulackstr 38, 10119 Berlin. www.bless-service.de

BLANK HOME is evidence of the owners' love of travel with tribal rugs and fabrics, and terry towels and bathrobes stacked in a huge armoire. Quirky but quality items such as a duvet cover decorated with lifesize images of a sleeping couple along with yellow sleeping bags and handmade accessories display its innovative edge.

*Mulackstr 34, 10179 Berlin.
www.blankhome.com*

For further information on GoArt!, check out www.goart-berlin.de

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The hidden gems (clockwise from top) hatmaker Devaki Doerfler; Herr Von Eden's dandy look; Mykita 'eyewear', whose fans include Bruce Willis and Angelina Jolie; Bless combines art and design; von Wedel & Tiedeken's lung print T-shirt; Blank Home does quirky items such as this duvet cover and pillows