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The FIFA World Cup may be South Africa's best publicity campaign yet. As travellers around the world look for fun things to do this year, so the Republic of Mzansi creeps higher up the rankings of cool places to go in 2010.

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The party goes on

Cool Spot: Berlin

Nov 15, 2009 12:23 AM | By Adrian Bridge

Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Adrian Bridge finds a city as vibrant as ever. Berlin is a city that is constantly reinventing itself - and especially so over the past 20 years, during which its eastern and western sides have sought to reconnect after the long period of division.

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“ Avoid the tour tat at Checkpoint Charlie. Real crossing stamps didn't look like that ”

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It is fascinating to tune in to a place that is undergoing change on such a dramatic scale, and that is steeped in

such history.

Although Berliners themselves admit that much of the city isn't pretty, it has a dynamic cultural identity. There are green spaces, flowing rivers and canals; it has artistic vibrancy and youthful vitality. Berlin offers excellent food at reasonable prices, bars that don't know the meaning of the words "last orders" and cafés where breakfast can be served until late into the afternoon. As people here demonstrated so admirably when the wall came down 20 years ago, Berlin is also a city that knows how to party.

• TRAVEL WITH ...

Lufthansa flies daily between Johannesburg and Frankfurt with quick connections to Berlin. Fares start at R4 800, excluding taxes (R8100 inclusive) for a minimum stay of six days. To book, go to www.lufthansa.com.

• STAY AT ...

The Grand Hyatt (www.berlin.grand.hyatt.com) on the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz in the glitzy new Potsdamer Platz, a great place to get a sense of this fast-moving city. Sixty years ago, this spot was Berlin's answer to Piccadilly Circus; 20 years ago it was a forbidding (and forbidden) piece of no-man's land. Now it is a buzzing commercial centre with restaurants, bars and cinemas. The Grand Hyatt is funky, sophisticated and arty. It has a bar with more than 200 kinds of whisky and a swimming pool with views on to Berlin Philharmonic and the Tiergarten. Rooms from à220.

Too modern? Traditionalists should head for the Adlon (www.hotel-adlon.de; doubles from à220, excluding breakfast), a stone's throw from the Brandenburg Gate. Too expensive? The Circus Hotel (www.circus-berlin.de) in Berlin Mitte has doubles from à68 a night and a programme of Berlin Wall-related tours.

• SPEND THE MORNING...

Exploring what remains of the legacy of the wall. Pick up a Berlin Wall History Trail Map from the tourist office and then make your choice: a tour on foot (taking in the Reichstag, Brandenburg Gate, Holocaust Memorial and Potsdamer Platz); by bike (going further afield to the Bernauer Strasse stretch of the wall and the newly repainted East Side Gallery - see www.berlinonbike.de); or by bus (take the 100 from Bahnhof Zoo).

Fancy something more adventurous? Sign up for the Wall Ride tour as part of a Trabi safari (www.trabi-safari.de). It doesn't get more authentically East German than that.

• HAVE LUNCH...

In the Käfer restaurant in the Reichstag (www.feinkost-kaefer.de). The food (German with a modern twist) is on the pricey side, but you go there for the views of the city - and to avoid the queues to get into Norman Foster's brilliant glass dome on the roof of the country's parliament. Borchart, a popular spot with the political classes, does a mean wiener schnitzel and is classy and fun, but it has become a bit of a tourist thoroughfare. If you're on a tight budget, try a Berlin classic: curry wurst (sausage covered with a spicy sauce), available at kiosks throughout the city.

• SPEND THE AFTERNOON...

Soaking up the culture. Absolute must-sees include the Pergamon Altar, a stupendous collection of marble halls and figures from ancient Greece, in the museum of the same name; the Babylonian Ishtar Gate (also in the Pergamon) and the bust of Nefertiti (installed last month in the newly renovated Neues Museum).

Berlin has a vibrant contemporary art scene and, as befits the city in which graffiti became celebrated both for itself and as a political statement, a rich tradition of street art. Go Art! (www.goart-berlin.de) offers guided tours of almost any aspect of the city's art life that you might wish to explore.

- **DINE OUT AT ...**

The Michelin-starred Lorenz Adlon (see hotel details above) if you have something to celebrate. There are exquisite lighter takes on French classics, fine champagnes and wines (yes, Germany produces some, too) and great views of the Brandenburg Gate (ask for a table that has one) - all under the beady eye of Kaiser Wilhelm II (he loved the original hotel and there is a bust of him in the restaurant).

Other top-end (but not quite as expensive) spots include the modern European Gendarmerie (www.gendarmerie-berlin.com) and the Grill Royale (www.grillroyal.de) for good steaks and a younger vibe. More simply, the Engelbecken (www.engelbecken.de), specialising in Bavarian and Austrian cuisine, is a firm favourite with the local Charlottenburg set (booking essential).

- **STAY OUT LATE AT ...**

The cabaret. This is Berlin after all, darling. The following venues specialise in cabaret and musicals: Bar jeder Vernunft (www.bar-jeder-vernunft.de); Friedrichstadtpalast (www.friedrichstadtpalast.de); Chamäleon Variété (www.chamaeleonberlin.de); and the Admiralspalast (www.admiralspalast.de). Occasionally, there are reprises of the Isherwood-inspired Cabaret itself. After the show, of course, it's time to go clubbing.

- **AT ALL COSTS AVOID ...**

Some of the tourist tat at Checkpoint Charlie. The real border crossing stamps did not look like that.

- **FURTHER INFORMATION ...**

Berlin Tourism (www.visitberlin.de); German National Tourist Office (www.germany-tourism.co.uk)

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