

Remember, remember the 9th of November

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It is eighteen years today since the fall of the Berlin Wall. But it seems that memories are fickle. When I was heading there recently a friend, an educated one I might add, said to me, "Berlin, is that the place that had the Wall?" I was incredulous. A walk around Berlin's city centre however leaves you in no doubt about the presence of the Wall that was once the front line between east and west.

Although there isn't much of the Wall left now a few small sections do still stand. What is most surprising is its height, or lack thereof. But somehow the crumbling grey, graffiti clad ruins, which should be about as imposing as a school-ground fence, are intimidating. And the narrow line of cobbles that marks the Wall's entire course through the city feels like the faint scar of a healed wound, permanently etched into the fabric of the city and always there as a visible reminder.

In the city centre is the Berlin Wall's most iconic site, Checkpoint Charlie. A replica American military post has been put up in the middle of a narrow street full of shops. There are even a couple of people dressed up as guards, grimacing menacingly to the delight of tourists who get their photo taken with them. The Mauer Museum tells the story of the 30 year life of the Wall including tales of some of those who died trying to flee the Communist regime in the East.

The first bit of the Wall left standing that I come across is in Potsdamer Platz; a huge shapeless square which is now a temple of modern glass and corporate architecture. There are just half a dozen individual rectangular segments of the Wall here, with descriptive panels between each one. The sections look temporary, like pre-built Lego pieces, which perhaps explains how the East Germans managed to erect the Wall so suddenly and so devastatingly in 1961. Over 200 people died trying to cross and north of Potsdamer Platz, near the Reichstag building, is a row of placards hung on an iron fence to some of those unfortunate would-be escapees. Candles burn for a few. This is after all, recent history.

- *Danny Chapman*