

Kickin' it in East Berlin



by Amy Stafford
alias Auto Bon Bon
for Off the Cuff,
www.fashionwiredaily.com
© 2004

East Berlin is notorious for a long history of illegal bars, underground clubs and secret dens of drinking and debauchery. In the last few years many of these hidden watering holes have dried up – succumbing to the pressures of propriety, liability and the police. Still, you can find a few diehard stragglers and the occasional new outcropping of ad hoc hidden treasures that, before getting shut down, enjoy a fleeting sense of rebellious do it yourself-ness in secret basements or obscure back houses, hidden from view and police detection.

Last night, after an evening of mixed success at a disorganized but fortunately free dance performance in Mitte, my pal Brian suggested we go get a drink at a place around the corner. Always up for discovering new places I was eager to give it a shot and asked him what kind of hole in the wall he was taking me to. Particularly in the east, most bars bear a very close resemblance to a hole in the wall – generally marked by an unassuming entrance and filled with cigarette burnt flea market furniture and dingy lighting – so my question was not a big stretch in its descriptive associations. To my surprise, he led me to a unnamed place only a block from my apartment that I had never known existed, one of the last remaining old school illegal bars in Mitte. We walked through a generally invisible poster papered doorway into a dark muddy courtyard littered with old upturned shopping carts and scraps from major appliances. Towards the back a little light glowed out from behind a rusty steel door accessible only by a crudely made stairway of old planks nailed together to reach the height of the door. Inside the space we found more random scraps of metal, the requisite flea ridden furniture and graffiti and murals decorating the walls. The bar, located in the deepest corner of the place was constructed of a giant wooden alligator sculpture, a little too rounded to safely hold your drinks. But with beer costing €2 and not much else on offer, the investment loss is pretty limited should your bottle slip off and hit the floor.

Filled with your typical grungy East Berlin students and local street punks smoking rolled cigarettes, the air was thick with down low atmosphere. Congregating around the Kicker table (Foozball) we took turns with the other guests flipping the little men in an enthusiastic effort to make a score. It was a very old table – probably also picked up at the same flea market where the couches had been found and after a few rounds I began to believe that either the floor was uneven, or 2 of the legs had been shaved down to give my opponent the advantage. Most of the plastic figures had taken on mummy like appearances, having been wrapped in different shades and sorts of tape, binding them in place on their steel poles. In addition to cheap beer and crudely decorated walls, the Kicker table is a requisite feature of the illegal bars in the East – providing a place for social interaction with strangers, entertainment and fierce competition. If this table could talk, I am sure that through the taped up men a litany of stories would emerge, recounting drunken battles till dawn, pitting pierced punks against more modest examples of Berlin's secret subcultures. The adventures Brian and I enjoyed there under the negligibly rigged coffee can lamp, flipping the mummy men through their paces, was but a tame stepchild to the debauchery this place has seen.

How long will this hidden watering hole survive amid the gentrification and renovation happening all around it? As long as the police, who have a station just 5 doors away on the same street, turn a blind eye to the grungy comings and goings of the local color. As long as the building remains unclaimed by its original, pre-Wall property owner and as long as there are students and punks with just enough spare change to scrape together for a few beers and an all night game of Kicker.