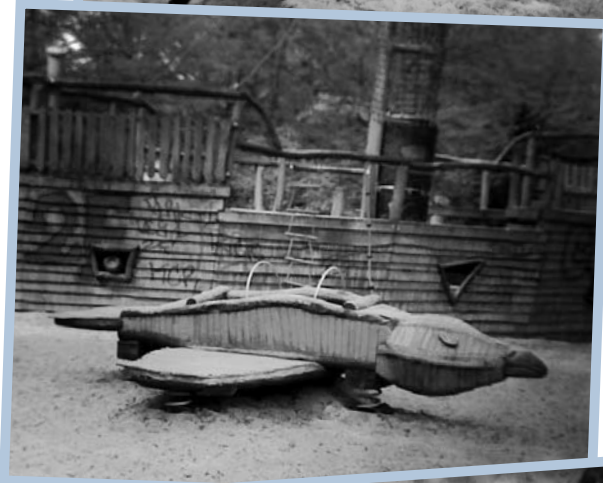


Berlin's a swinging (and sliding) city

London Play's Street Play Co-ordinator **Paul Hocker** took a break from the capital's streets to visit Berlin. With his return flight grounded due to volcanic ash he spent the extra time visiting play spaces around the city. Here he lists 10 reasons why Berlin is a great place to play.



1. Berlin is chock full of play areas. London has some great places to play but Berlin feels like a city that has children's needs in mind. A free map is available showing the city's playgrounds ('Spielplatz') and staffed adventure playgrounds ('Betreuer Spielplatz') indicated by yellow or white smiley faces respectively. The map of the city has an abundance of inviting yellow and white symbols dotted across it.



Even the business and administrative areas have playgrounds close by, indeed the Reichstag, the seat of the German parliament, has a water installation popular with children on its front lawn.

2. Berlin's playgrounds are well maintained. The majority of the structures are bespoke and where parts have worn away careful patchwork has been applied. There is an irresistible sense that these play areas are cared for and valued.



3. The prominent use of sand, stone, wood and water throughout the playgrounds makes the play equipment sensually enticing, an element almost lacking entirely from plastic or metal structures.

4. The structures acknowledge children's ability to judge their own risk capability. The only children climbing up the 20-foot cargo net or climbing up to the top of a wooden tower are the ones that want to do it. The structures are carefully designed to incorporate step off points that allow children to suspend their ascent and find a less challenging route around the structures. Parents watch but do not 'hover'.

5. Most of the playgrounds we visited (20 or so) featured water fountains or other water play features. Parks employees switch on the water supply as summer sun approaches and return as winter approaches to seal them up again.

6. During the wet and cold months playgrounds are still well used with children coming to the playground in waterproof overalls similar to anglers' waders.

7. Play is an active part of the city's life. During the day kindergartens make use of the playgrounds. In the evening young people and adults make use of the table tennis tables, basketball courts and ball game areas that adjoin the play area. The week after I flew home, the vacant Tempelhof Airport was reopened as a play space for the city.

8. On the weekends the playgrounds are popular focal points for families. Bicycles with child trailers attached line the low fences around the play area and the sounds of play ring out. Recent legislation makes it 'fundamentally and socially tolerable' for Berlin's children to make a racket.

9. Playgrounds are situated near public transport and cafes. Independent toy shops and children clothes stores, some exclusively second-hand, can usually be found close-by. In the Kreuzberg district, popular with young families, we found a few café/bars with their own indoor playground.

10. Apart from the playgrounds found within Berlin's many parks, most residential areas have playgrounds situated on a square or similar communal area where traffic is light or non-existent. ●

