

**But don't mention the war.**

Berlin. The scarf capital of the world. So many scarves, so little time. My mum had said that I could choose myself a scarf in Berlin, and that she would give it to me for Christmas. Obviously, while looking for the correct scarf I did manage to squeeze in a spot of sightseeing, and to see the "fabric" of the city.

The district where I was staying, Prenzlauer Berg, itself had a plethora of shops and boutiques selling appropriate scarves. I could have easily spent my whole budget for my 4 day stay on a collection of über-trendy scarves. Die Qual der Wahl. Morose and disappointed in myself, I limp back towards my hostel, miserable me, unable to choose a scarf and equally unable to resist seeing whether Starbucks in Berlin tasted better, worse or the same compared to back home. (I'm not sure which of my weaknesses annoyed me more).

But then came the light. Although really it was quite dark:



Kopfgeldjäger Berlin. It suddenly hit me. I didn't have to buy a scarf, I didn't have to put myself through the trauma of choosing one out of the many that I had seen. I could spend my mother's hard-earned cash in another way. Shabby though Kopfgeldjäger may look in my humble photograph above, it was undoubtedly the coolest hair salon I had ever seen. Besides, it was in Prenzlberg, the district I was slowly falling in love with for all its irregularities, imperfections and general coolness.

You must understand that I do have a passionate hatred for hair salons and hairdressers. These are the things I hate about having my hair cut:

- the smell
- the decor
- the smell

- the hair on the floor
- the smell
- the fact that you go in feeling really ugly
- the gowns they make you put on, which don't even work, because the hair still goes down your back
- the hair that goes down your back and itches for the rest of the month
- the smell
- saying what you would like to have done to your hair – I never know what to say, and usually stumble “shorter... a trim, really”. Well shouldn't that be obvious?
- the awkward, false, superficial conversation you have to make with the hairdresser
- the smell
- having to part with obscene amounts of money for being put through this horrific experience

But Kopfgeldjäger Berlin enticed me. Its glittering flat rate price of 12 euros, the retro-funky interior, and retro-funkier-looking stylists seduced me. I was caught. What other hair salon has a picture of a tramp with a mega afro hanging from the ceiling? The absence of wallpaper and shop sign was charming, the manual till somehow bohemian, the U-Bahn style bench as waiting area looked so inviting. The lettering on the shop front still advertised the butcher which used to stand in Kopfgeldjäger's place. The proud tackiness of the fairy lights draped lazily over the door reminded me of my own student flat. And everyone inside seemed to be having a reet good time. Not like Hairlines Barbers in Stockport, where staff and customers alike can't wait for the latter to pay up and clear off. Kopfgeldjäger, though, was the rich chocolate fudge cake of hairdressers: I just couldn't resist. And it was 8pm at night, yet this wacky haven of hair-cutting delight showed no signs of closing up shop.

Kopfgeldjäger for me epitomised my experiences of Berlin especially Prenzlauer Berg: a trendy but not exclusive hub of a proudly burgeoning East Berlin, playing with new fashions and styles and making them its own. Very original and quirky, in a way that having no wallpaper, peeling plaster, rickety fittings and creaky floorboards somehow comes across as very trendy. But this trendiness was not in the least bit intimidating: I'm always a little frightened by Toni & Guy here in the UK, and feel obliged to cower with humility whenever I walk past this temple of capitalist cool. In Kopfgeldjäger, though, I wasn't ashamed to be looking like a scruffy, tired, footsore tourist, on the contrary I couldn't stop grinning as soon as I walked in. I had that mildly absurd feeling as I sat patiently waiting to have my hair washed that I really had made it. Upon walking out of this place I would be instantly cool, hip, my hair the envy of all around me. For the first time ever I was excited about having my hair cut, so much so that I had to take pictures and videos. Admittedly, the other customers did find me a little odd. Cool à la

Kopfgeldjäger wasn't sickeningly expensive either – at 12 euros, it was an absolute *Schnäppchen*, so I treated myself to a Danish hotdog afterwards.

That said, for all its originality and quiriness, despite its experimental decor and innovative styles, Kopfgeldjäger was unmistakably *German* in the more traditional sense. Yes, there was a faultless queuing system. On entry in the salon, the customer collects a ticket, upon which is clearly imprinted his/her queue number. An appropriately positioned LCD screen displays the customer queue number currently being dealt with. When I was there, the salon was packed full. But all was running so very smoothly. Talk about German efficiency.



So, what of my haircut experience? Well, now that you ask, it was fit. (Where I come from, 'fit' can mean 'great'). As I've already said, I was grinning, brimming with anticipation from the moment I walked through the door. I spent the 40 minutes or so while I was waiting observing the people around me, and fell into my pseudo-ethnological modus in order to categorise and draw conclusions about these individuals' lives and identities. I was so enthused by my physical surroundings that I endeavoured to savour every single moment of my *Haarschnitterfahrung*, by examining everything and everyone in my immediate environment as closely, imaginatively and critically as I could.

The person who was immediately *auffällig* (doesn't it really annoy you when germanists slot in the odd German word here and there, just to show off that even when talking English, they're simultaneously thinking about what they could be saying in German? Well, in doing exactly the same, I get my bitter sweet revenge) was a lady who entered the salon immediately after me. She was wearing a (fake) fur coat and some lurverly leopardskin leggings, with

shiny stilettos on her feet (perhaps her feet were as sore as mine?). Her generously rouged lips moved ostentatiously as she gossiped away in heavily Berlin-accented German to her friend behind the till (who seemed far less interested in the encounter than she). She was accompanied by her immaculately groomed poodle, and I wondered whether both she and her canine companion would be having their hair cut. I likened her at the time to the nouveau riche Cheshire set: she probably has a bright red mid-range sports car, and is the type to secretly be in competition with the other mums picking up their spoiled children from private school: How many cruises has she been on? Has she ever had liposuction? How much is her husband's Christmas bonus? If she has a daughter, she's probably called Chardonnay, I said to myself. I look back now and I sound very scathing, when I really don't mean to. Where does this specimen of a lady fit into the social picture of the new Germany though? I think she's the consumerist trophy housewife, formerly from the West, who recently moved to a new yuppie apartment in East Berlin. Not quite achieving the image she aspires to, however, this poor love has a confused double identity: chic extravagance or femme fatale? If she were British, she'd probably be called Cherie, having changed her name from Linda.

Sitting opposite me was a rather nervous-looking young man (saying young man makes me sound old, when he is probably the same age as me). Bless him. He's wearing really blue jeans, pulled up to his navel, with some wonderful bright white socks and black school shoes. He prefers to look anxiously past me, and retreats into staring at his most reliable and functional black digital watch, which he wears defensively on his left arm. I think it's the first time he's been here, and that this hair cut is his first step in his 'becoming trendier' phase. I tell myself that he's come to University in Berlin, and is beginning to dress and act just as he wants, liberated from the unwritten rules and implicit expectations of his parental home. Thus he nervously awaits the onslaught of the scissors on his mass of blonde hair, which for so long as stubbornly fallen into that oh-so-safe side parting. He's the type of person that looks so painfully nice, the type of person in front of whom you feel so thoroughly ashamed if you swear or curse. He's probably from Hanover, from an established, no-frivolity middle class family, and if he were British, he'd be called Adrian.

Behind Adrian there was a girl of about 20 drying her hair. In Kopfgeldjäger, you dry your own hair. As such, she was drying her own hair - as we can see in the picture. (By the way, I don't remember anything at all about the man in the foreground with the hat). This girl dried her hair for about 20 minutes. To be fair, her hair looked stunning afterwards, like on Wella adverts. So healthy it shined. She was casually but nicely dressed, her haircut was nothing outrageous but very stylish. The kind of girl you see on the Levis adverts. She dried her hair with loud, voluptuous gestures, but did not seem to be purposely *seeking* attention. She was pleasingly confident in herself, and

had obviously been to Kopfgeldjäger several times already. This time, she had brought her mother, who was still having her hair cut and died while her daughter (whose English name shall be Amanda) was using the hairdryer. The mother was a surly, rather formidable woman of about 60 years of age, dressed in a thick floral dress with thick leather lace up shoes. Her cheeks puffed brashly out of her face, her lips stiff and thick, her eyes were deep set, and her solid frame was endowed with well-built, powerful-looking limbs. Her thick, dark, matted hair of 30 minutes ago used to cover her entire forehead, casting a shadow over her rather severe countenance. Her name would be Norma. She now looked a completely different person: her hair was lighter in colour and in volume, and she looked immediately happier. Her daughter, who had brought her along to Kopfgeldjäger for a birthday present, encouraged and complimented her profusely when she saw the finished product. I felt like I was watching a makeover TV show.

Whom did this pair represent in my sociological map of *das neue Deutschland*? The mother certainly looked like she came from the East, if I may be so judgemental to say so. Her daughter had grown up during the Wende, and now confidently, competently embraced the era of consumer-capitalism. Amanda was now encouraging her mother Norma to dabble in world of fashion, beauty and style. But I was pleased that she chose Kopfgeldjäger and not somewhere like Toni & Guy. Kopfgeldjäger was fashionable and modern. But it was also good value, original, different and *independent*. I liked that about Kopfgeldjäger: for all the Osis' complaints about the relentless onslaught of consumer capitalism on their former Socialist state, Kopfgeldjäger proved that East Berlin, and East Germany can create consumer-friendly and very admirable enterprises, by capitalising on its creativity, imagination and innovation, without deceiving and the 'vulnerablising' consumer in order to make disgusting amounts of money.

The stylist cutting Norma's hair is certainly worthy of description. He had a quasi-gothic (in the modern 'goth' sense) appearance, for he was dressed in all black, with hints of black makeup on his face, and jet black hair. His hair was shaved on one side, and long and straight on the other, with a long fringe draped over his left eye, which he kept having to tuck behind his ear. He wore black, pointy, witch-like shoes and a black sleeveless *débardeur* / tank top. On the front of this, in bold white letters, was written "NEIN". On the reverse, it said "Ich bin nicht schwul". If my gaydar serves me correctly, he evidently *was* schwul. Again, how Berlin: the city which proudly promotes itself as Europe's gay capital. But not in a way such that there needs to be rainbow flags in every window. Berlin is a settled, liberal, tolerant city, but it doesn't need to shout about it. It's just accepted. More than accepted, it's celebrated, cherished. If he were English, he'd be called... Rich.

The last people to walk into the salon before my treatment commenced were a young couple. They were clutching a student magazine, so I logically

assumed they were... students. She had frizzy hair and lots of layers of vintage clothes, and was accompanying her boyfriend. He had long hair and a big woolly cardigan. He was the kind of guy that looks soft, gentle and considerate, and she looked like the kind of person that I could have sat and chatted to for hours, despite not knowing her at all. They would be called Lucy and Tom. The pair of them, in their unusual but very trendy attire, radiated warmth and friendliness, yet I can't put my finger on why. Maybe it was because he looked just as apprehensive about having his hair cut as I usually am, so he was accessible, on my level. Or was it because she suddenly guffawed and giggled non-stop for about 10 minutes at a cartoon in the student magazine? (That's the kind of thing I do - laugh for hours at jokes which are apparently, according to my peers, not very funny). Dying to know what was so amusing, I asked if I could flick through the magazine when she had finished with it. I turned impatiently to the back page, with the cartoon. I felt so deflated. I really didn't understand the joke. I gazed with an empty, dejected expression at the crumpled page. She smiled warmly in my direction, and came to sit next to me. "Don't worry," she said, "I'm not sure why I found it so funny, but I did!". I instantly liked her and wanted to be her friend.

Alas our blossoming friendship was cut short tragically. My number flashed up on the LCD screen. It was my turn. As I walked slowly towards the basin where my hair would be washed, I turned to look at Lucy. I was walking away. She was still smiling. I felt like Orpheus looking for the last time at Eurydice on his ascent from Hades.

And so the haircut itself. For the first time since I've been going to the hairdressers without my mother accompanying me, I had my hair washed. And the salon didn't smell. And I didn't have to wear one of the smelly, damp robes: they used a towel instead, and my back wasn't covered in hair. I knew that when the stylist asked what I wanted done:

- a) I wouldn't know what I wanted to have done
- b) I probably wouldn't be able to say it in German anyway

Luckily my new friend Lucy came to my aid as she heard me stutter something about not knowing what I wanted done to my hair. She started making suggestions herself. Both the stylist and Lucy looked curiously at my hair, running the strands inquisitively through their fingers. They concluded: "du hast ganz lustige Haare... geht ja in alle Richtungen". I was touched. I let the ambidextrous nein-ich-bin-nicht-schwul stylist loose on my hair. He cut it at all sorts of angles, quickly but carefully. No awkward conversation. There was far too much hullabaloo being caused by the arrival of a couple wearing black tight leather clothing, the husband was about 50, the wife about 20. So there was no need to ask me what I was doing in Berlin having my hair cut. And when I left, they presented me with a wee bag, which contained a free bottle of Kopfgeldjäger shampoo. Yes, this is the place.

I hope I haven't sounded too superficial and judgemental. I have never been so intrigued in other people as I was in Kopfgeldjäger. And I can't wait to go back. Kopfgeldjäger represents everything I grew to love about Berlin during my stay there. Young, fresh, new, cool, original, clever, unpretentious, open-minded, wacky. But still very German. Germany, particularly the *Neue Bundesländer* and Berlin, is a changing place. And there is no more exciting or fascinating place to be than in Berlin, Germany's new capital.