

BERLIN - July 2016

As guests of our German sister Club, Karlstadt-Arnstein, a group of 20 Rotarians and their partners braved the hoards of holidaymakers at Gatwick on Thursday 21st July to fly to Berlin to see the sights and spend a long weekend of friendship with our hosts.

Karlstadt's MP, Alexander Hoffmann, who is a member of their Club, had arranged guided tours of the Chancellery and the Bundestag for us all. In 1991, after reunification, it was decided to relocate the seat of government in Germany back to Berlin. The reconstructed Bundestag, designed by Norman Foster, was opened in summer 1999, and the new Chancellery in 2001.



The Chancellery is a large and very spacious building, but with a staff of only 550. Under the eagle eyes of a number of humourless security staff, we were shown around the most important parts, including the cabinet room, Angela Merkel's office door, the portrait gallery of all the former Federal Chancellors, and the collection of painting and sculptures specially commissioned for its opening. We were one of only ten groups a month who are allowed to visit, so felt especially privileged.



The Bundestag occupies the original 1890s Reichstag building, which was gutted through fire and war damage, and is extraordinarily impressive. The external walls remain largely intact, but the interior is totally modern, and very light and airy. The debating chamber is especially dramatic,

topped by the famous glass dome with a footway spiralling around inside it. Alexander showed us around the building, including the rooms where the political parties meet, and explained the principles of German parliamentary procedure, which has some similarities to ours, but does not include UK-style PMQs.



On the morning of the first day we had a guided tour of the “Berlin Underworld”, or wartime bunkers, followed by a tour of the city by bus with Beatrice, the guide who gave us so much information that our brains ached. This included Checkpoint Charlie (tacky), Goerings Air Ministry, Brandenburg Gate, the Holocaust Memorial, and the remains of The Wall. The city is enormous, but has a population of only 3.5 million, and apart from around the well known tourist sites, felt remarkably empty.



Our first organised evening together was held at a typical Bavarian restaurant, with vast amounts of different cuts of pork and sauerkraut. Karlstadt's President Doris confused us a little by making her welcome speech, in almost faultless English, a day earlier than expected. Fortunately Jaime had his well-rehearsed response in his pocket, which he delivered in slightly less faultless German.



Dinner on the next evening was much more relaxed, on a barely seaworthy replica pirate boat on the River Spree. As the food and drink was part of the pre-paid package, we did our best to enjoy ourselves, which might explain why the cruise seemed to finish rather early. On each evening, although a few of our sensible colleagues had early nights, the pavements outside our hotel were overflowing with German and British Rotarians enjoying the warm night air together.



And then on Sunday morning it was all over. Some of us caught an early flight home, and a few continued for another couple of days both in Berlin and elsewhere.

We are all very grateful to Karlstadt's Peter Kracht, who coordinated all the arrangements, and to all our German friends who made us so welcome. The lasting result, I am sure, is a much closer relationship between our two Clubs, which will hopefully lead to further and closer cooperation.