theguardian

CityBudget

Construction site chic

Berlin's latest hotel claims to be deliberately imperfect - a nod to the creativity and rough edges Germany's hippest city

Had his friend not asked him to organise the catering for the World Sheepdog Championships some years ago, Tom Michelberger admits he might not now be standing in the lobby of his 119-room hotel which opened this week.

"For the Championships we sold sausages to 30,000 people," said the 31-year-old, sporting baggy jeans and Converse trainers. "We worked passionately for weeks and made very little money. But I learnt about the joys of working with like-minded people and loving what you do."

The former rafting guide and producer of video games, with no previous hotel experience, has applied a similar concept to the Michelberger, assembling a team of graphic artists, set designers, architects, furniture designer Werner Aisslinger, as well as his Dad and uncle. In a matter of months they have converted an early-20th-century factory building into a vibrant, large-scale boutique hotel.

The result is a welcoming establishment opposite the railway station in Friedrichshain. The location couldn't be better - a direct train ride from Berlin's Central Station, easily reachable from Schönefeld airport, and situated in an area that has a high concentration of popular nightclubs - such as the Watergate, the Panorama Bar and Maria am Ostbahnhof. It is also just round the corner from the East Side Gallery - the longest surviving stretch of Berlin Wall, and the floating swimming pool on the river Spree, the Badeschiff.

The Michelberger fits in well, managing to be hip and affordable. It's also far from perfect, but "that's the point," according to Till Grosch, 29, one of the interior designers. "We didn't want it to be perfect like other hotels but to have an improvised and temporary feel to it, just like Berlin.

"The city is a magnet for so many people, largely because it gives them the freedom to do what they want, and the ability to find a niche without being confined by commercial concerns."

The improvised feeling starts on the hotel steps, where a neon sign flashes "construction site", and continues in the lobby where four cuckoo clocks hang on a stained concrete wall.

The duplex rooms start at a modest €59, while family rooms (which sleep up to five) are €80. Even better value are the eight-bed rooms for €119 - but for that price you must negotiate the precarious wooden stairs to beds that hover above the floor with goal nets around them to stop you falling out. Mirrors are suspended on ropes and exposed electric cables snake playfully across the walls. It's so new, sawdust still hangs in the air and gets into our nostrils. The banister was put up just before we arrived.

Tom's girlfriend, actor and set designer Anja Knauer, sourced many of the knick-knacks that personalise the rooms. She raided flea markets for everything from Polaroid shots, sugar bowls and the books in pallet-style shelves. The entire team contributed ideas to the chintzy wallpaper of cats, pretzels, sunglasses and old Mercedes.

The relaxed air is reinforced in slogans such as "Let the sunshine in" and the unusual room notice: "Normal check out time is 12. For a late check out due too (sic) a long night's work or party, ask the receptionist nicely".

The night we stayed was something of a dress rehearsal for the official opening next month. Rooms were rented to friends for a token €1 and chaos reigned. Children ran screeching along corridors and Tom's uncle Rudi blasted on his trumpet in room 113, while 300 revellers bopped away in the ceramic-tiled courtyard until 6am, recalling how the Michelberger started life as a basement nightclub.

The €8 breakfast next morning was a typically robust Berlin affair - tasty breads, cheese, meats, fruit and coffee, to a Volksmusik soundtrack.

In coming weeks the hotel plans to open a 24-hour bistro serving goulasch soup and German "tapas" - cheese, sausage and the like - and to put a sauna in the basement.

The Michelberger doesn't fit the strict definition of a co-operative. The parties involved took sizeable bank loans to redesign the hotel plus a 25-year building lease. But it's an inspiring example of an entrepreneur who has drawn on the talent and enthusiasm of people around him to realise a dream.

"We're not driven by money," said Tom, rubbing his five o'clock shadow. "This is about making a lot out of the little we have, as well as celebrating the roughness of this city."

● *Doubles from €55 (0049 3029 778590, michelbergerhotel.com). Fly to Berlin from various UK airports with ryanair.com, easyjet.com and airberlin.com.*

Kate Connolly

EAST SIDE GALLERY PHOTOGRAPH: FABRIZIO BENSCH/REUTERS/CORBIS

Work in progress . . . Michelberger Hotel

Beds hover above the floor and cables snake playfully across the walls

Only in Berlin
More unusual hotels

Propeller Island City Lodge

Propeller Island (pictured below), a pseudonym for the creations of artist Lars Stroschen, modestly claims to be a "magnet for philosophers and seekers of perspective and vision" - something you won't hear at Travelodge. A startling mix of quirky, sometimes unsettling design, you can kip in coffins, stay in a room smothered in green leather or use a basin and loo built "inside grandma's wardrobe." The "chicken curry" room has its bed below floor level behind a garage door, another contains performance cages on stilts - don't ask - and one bathroom is a giant plastic bag. Perfect preparation for breakfast among giant plants with a soundtrack of loud chewing.

Doubles from €94, room only; 0049 3089 19016, propeller-island.de

Q! Hotel

Bathed in mellow light and riddled with startling design, Q (pictured below) resembles a beautiful spaceship. Rooms have funky bright red pod chairs next to angular L-shaped sofas, beds sit on platforms containing built-in baths and zen recliners rest on the spa's internal beach - oh alright, patch of sand. Naturally Q's packages are a little different with guided tours taking in a 1920s ballroom and obscure graffiti, and a private night in the spa with erotic movies. How very German.

Doubles from €115, room only; +3081 00660, loock-hotels.com/hotelq.

Arte Luise Kunsthotel

A massive pair of sculptured horse nostrils in the lobby hints at what awaits inside. Dubbed a gallery where you can spend the night, the early 19th century palace near the Reichstag has 35 individual art rooms. Expect a vibrant 3D red horse emerging from a Mediterranean landscape, gold sprayed walls splattered with banana images and a room of oversized "Alice in Wonderland" furniture. There's a philosophy staircase decorated with thoughtful soundbites, a pooch influenced room with dog bowl installation and 1920s Berlin room with an erotic mannequin on the dado rail.

Doubles from €79, room only; +3028 4480, luise-berlin.com.

Ian Belcher

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Achtung, baby . . . The East Side Gallery, the longest surviving stretch of the Berlin Wall