

A co-owner, Andreas Becker, says their prices are "fair and predictable".

"We believe that the use of resources needed to justify charging €200 to €300 a night is based on a model of hospitality that is not only unacceptable on a social environment level but also an outrageous waste of resources - food, energy, water," he says.

And yet, with all this apparent parsimony, the hotel manages comfort verging on luxury. This simple, rather than minimalist, style is down to interior designer Sandra Ernst, who has crafted each of the 64 rooms into "a space I would like to live in myself".

The double rooms, with high ceilings, are built around one object, often one which Ernst has found in street markets. In our case, it's a small, apple-green-toned print of a sunbathing redhead in green-and-pink swimmers. These colours recur in more muted forms. The back feature wall is green, the armchair has shades of grey and an orange-brown leaf pattern.

The sunning girl reappears as a small, cupboard-top sculpture. Walls are pale grey. There's a wide orange stool at the foot of the king-size, incredibly comfortable bed and a blanket in shades of green, black, cream, beige and grey. Pale fawn floor-to-ceiling curtains cover two high, double-glazed windows.

Everything is of high quality, from the dark-stained floorboards to the flat-screen televisions to the all-white bathrooms with rain showers, large glass shower screens, chrome taps and towel warmers.

Don't expect toiletries, however. These are free but you collect them from reception to avoid waste.

There's ample heating but no airconditioning. The owners believe this is unnecessary in Berlin's climate. High summer, however, may prove problematic. Open windows expose you to Rosenthaler Platz, a noisy conglomeration of five roads, tram tracks, taxi stands, restaurants and a U-Bahn station.

Services at the Circus are extensive: free Wi-Fi in all rooms and public spaces, Skype phones and laptops to rent, German mobile phones to borrow, a library with publications about Berlin, world travel, art, design and culture as well as international newspapers. There are city-related films such as *Goodbye to Berlin*, *Run Lola Run* and *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. And there's advice aplenty from staff about transport, obscure restaurants, markets, art galleries and foodie havens.

We love the conviviality of the bar, restaurant and lounge areas.

The hotel values social interaction and has created an inviting space in Restaurant Fabisch. There's a cosy lounge area with leather sofas, a conservatory that opens on to an inner courtyard, the bar and restaurant. The restaurant uses local, organic suppliers committed to ethical standards of food production. The house speciality is "Granny's cheeks of beef" in red wine sauce, with root vegetables and parsley potatoes. It's gorgeous.

The breakfast buffet features organic products and lovely bread and it's generous, despite the hotel's dislike of "overstocked buffets". The restaurant is named for the Fabisch family, who ran a clothing store in the building until the Nazis forcibly "Aryanised" it and many surrounding Jewish buildings. Some of the Fabisch family died in concentration camps. Don't miss the exhibition downstairs.

The hostel, the owners' original baby, opened in 1997.

Like its more upmarket sibling, it has an excellent reputation. As our friends' much-travelled teenage daughter Georgia says: "It's the best hostel I've ever stayed in."

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