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Not Much Room at the Inn On New Year's Eve

Berlin's backpacker hostels are filling up with guests from all over the world whatever the season

By ANTIJE WEWER

"Sorry, we are completely booked for New Years Eve," explains Andreas Becker, Manager of the Backpacker Hostel Circus. It's a sentence he repeats a hundred times a day - in fact, almost every time the telephone rings. For many backpackers, Berlin ranks alongside Amsterdam and Barcelona as one of the places to ring in the New Millennium.

The Circus's ninety beds have been booked solid for months. Prices start at 25 marks for a berth in a six-bed dormitory. For the Millennium night, Becker has added another ten marks. "Not because I want to cash in," he insists. "But because I have to pay my staff extra on that night." Travellers are at least getting something for their money: all the Millennium party information they could ever wish for and help in ordering those elusive tickets or taxis.

"Many booked their places when they were here in the summer," says Becker. "Regulars, you could say. We have given priority to travellers from overseas." Germans who normally prefer to stay in hotels, but are looking for a cheap place to kip for the Millennium, have little chance of being taken in at Circus. "Backpackers are our bread and butter the entire year round, and they're the people we want here for the Millennium.

It's the same story almost everywhere. The only place where beds are still available is the Mitte-Hostel in Chausseestraße, and that only because owners Olaf Juhl and

Ante Zelck decided to keep half their 100 Beds a free until the day itself, when they will be allocated on a "first come first serve" basis.

The new Berlin's cosmopolitan lifestyle is rubbing off on the entire city. That has enormous benefits for rucksack tourists travelling on a shoestring. Berlin has been overwhelmed by hostel mania. Until recently the city only had the ubiquitous youth hostels with their nighttime curfews and breakfast from seven till nine, with groups of screaming school kids and annoying membership cards. Independent hostels have been operating in

Australia und America since the 1980's: there cheap quarters with their youthful owners and cheerful almost anarchistic atmosphere are all the rage.

Five such hostels have opened in Berlin in the past three years, all of them in the hip eastern boroughs of Prenzlauer Berg, Mitte and Friedrichshain. And business is booming, especially in the summer months

when they are often fully booked. "We have a good understanding amongst ourselves. If we are full, then we pass the guests on to another hostel" says Ante Zelck.

The rooms in the Mitte-Hostel don't have numbers. They're distinguished by names such as "Paradise", "Skyline" or "Four Elements". They were fitted out by backpackers in exchange for free board and lodging. The turquoise colored Honeymoon-Suite with its violet drapes and the enormous heart on the door was one of the first to be booked for the Millennium by a newly wed Canadian pair for their honeymoon.

Circus hostel owner Andreas Becker is especially happy with how the season has gone: So far this year he has had eight thousand guests. After years of globe-trotting himself, Becker decided to open the Circus hostel just off Friedrichstraße in 1997. Since March, it's been

in new quarters on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, with a picture-book view of the Volksbühne, cheerful, Ikea-design rooms and in-house bar. "Those long Berlin winters can be deadly for many hostels, a real

vacuum. But since we've been listed in the "Let's go guide 2000" with one of their "Thumbs-up Symbols" for service and atmosphere, we've been booked out even in the winter," says Becker.

Two thirds of all backpackers visiting Berlin are from the United States, Canada and Australia. "Americans - especially New Yorkers - are happy to get a taste of the East. For them, Berlin was quite simply the city to visit in 1999. Berlin's image has changed. It is no longer the Holocaust City, but rather a city of innovation. The progressive architecture, the new arts scene and, above all, Berlin's reputation as one of Europe's clubbing capitals all attract backpackers to the city."

Circus, Rosa-Luxemburg-Straße 39-41, Mitte. ☎ 28 39 14 33

Clubhouse Hostel, Johannisstr. 2, Mitte. ☎ 28 09 79 79

Mitte-Hostel, Chausseestr. 102, Mitte. ☎ 262 51 40

Odyssee, Grünberger Straße 23, Friedrichshain. ☎ 29 00 00 81

Let them Sleep, Lettestraße 7, Prenzlauer Berg. ☎ 44 73 36 23

Die Fabrik, Schlesische Straße 18, Kreuzberg. ☎ 611 71 16



Where's the party? Travellers planning a night on the town at their hostel in Mitte

FOTO: LABES

Backpacker on the Net:
<http://www.backpacker.de>