

Water in Berlin

The moisture down below

The capital's groundwater is rising to dangerous levels

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LAS
VEGAS or
Los
Angeles
would
love to
have
Berlin's
problem:
too much
water. In
the Spree
valley, the
water
table has
risen in
places to
just 2.5
metres
below
ground
level.
With
most
cellars in
Berlin



between two and three metres deep, that means wet basements, water damage and mould. Some

200,000 people, out of Berlin's total of 3.4m, live in the worst-hit areas (see map).

The puzzle is why, since Berlin is booming, the groundwater is rising at all. The last time it was a magnet for people on such a scale was during the interwar years, when the city's population was larger than it is today. Water levels then fell as people, factories, breweries and tanneries all tapped into groundwater supplies. It hit an all-time low in the 1930s when Hitler was pumping water for his megalomaniacal projects.

After 1945, when industry all but halted, the water level began rising. But it fell again after West Berlin recovered in the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) of 1950s, and because the communists kept prices artificially low and East Berliners used water greedily. But then came unification in 1990. The *Ossis* of the former East Berlin began conserving water when it became more expensive. And Berliners in east and west alike started to save more, because they were now good, green Germans. Industry returned, but in the form of lawyers and techies sipping cappuccinos, not widget-makers pumping water. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the groundwater level has risen by over half a metre.

This now threatens much of the Berlin that tourists see. When Potsdamer Platz, formerly in the Wall's death strip, was remade into its present, modern form, garages had to be built behind dams to keep out the water. The State Opera at Unter den Linden, facing the square where the Nazis burned books in 1933, is temporarily closed for renovation for similar reasons. The Bundesrat, the upper house of parliament, has had to pump water out of its basement at huge cost.

Berliners now use only about 200m cubic metres of water, whereas they should be using at least 300m, says Manfred Schafhauser, a geologist who did a study for the local chamber of commerce. But those extra 100m would be bigger than Berlin's two largest lakes combined. And as all Europeans know, it's hard to get Germans to stop saving.

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