



The Berlin Pass allows visitors to avoid crowds, see the sights



By Anne Z. Cooke And Steven St. John, Tribune News Service (TNS)
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BERLIN — When the phone rang, it was the call I'd always dreaded. A family emergency canceled my long-planned trip to Berlin, putting my Berlin Pass (paid for in advance on the internet) in jeopardy, along with a nonrefundable airline ticket.

Then came the brainstorm. I decided to offer the Berlin Pass to my cousin from Norway, Steven St. John, on the condition that he'd use



it to see the city, take notes and tell me what he thought. After all, we're different kinds of travelers, with different points of view.

Steven's an economist who squeezes sightseeing in on long weekends. I'm a sidewalk-pounder, a people-watcher, a museum maven never loathe to strike up a conversation with a stranger. I know what I think about city passes. What would Steven think?

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I've bought a half-dozen passes over the last decade, usually in big cities such as London or Rome. When you pay up front, the way you do at an all-inclusive resort, everything after that feels free (even though it isn't).

But city passes aren't about saving money. They're about easy sightseeing. No running out of cash. No standing in line. You go to the gate at a leisurely pace and are waved through past the crowds. It means seeing more, with less energy, including places you might not have even known about.

Then the weeks went by until one day, an oversized envelope arrived filled with pages of notes, too many to quote here. (Story spoiler: my airline ticket was eventually refunded, except for \$100. And a close read of the Berlin Pass website says unused passes can be refunded within 30 days of purchase).

Meanwhile, it was fascinating, getting into someone else's head. Here's a brief look:

STEVEN ST. JOHN ON THE BERLIN PASS:

"Picking up our Berlin passes wasn't hard, but it would have been a lot easier if I'd printed out the reservation form at home and brought it with me. I thought I'd go mobile and just show it to them on my smart phone, but their Wi-Fi connection was so weak I couldn't open the screen. Eventually, after giving them your name and mine, the poor fellow at the desk made a call or two, the passes were issued and we were away.

Each three-day Berlin Pass came with detailed guidebook. It also contained a one-day train ticket (which we used to go to Potsdam) as well as a subway pass. This we used every day but it was unclear how it would be validated as people got on and off the train without ever showing their tickets.

It also included a three-day museum pass timed from the first museum entrance, a two-day pass for a list of other Berlin activities — the aquarium, a riverboat tour and bicycling, none of which we had time to use — and a pass for multiple rides on the Hop-On-Hop-Off tour bus.

Despite being jetlagged that first afternoon, we dropped off our luggage and headed to the Berliner Dom, Berlin's largest and grandest Protestant Cathedral and the Hohenzollern Kaisers' (think kings) family church. But when we realized that showing the Pass would start the time clock, and more in need of a walk than a museum, we skipped the cathedral and walked over to the Brandenburg Gate.

At this point, now long past our bedtime at home, we ran out of energy and stopped to ponder the map. Then what to our wondering eyes should appear but a cluster of tour buses parked no more than 100 feet north of the Brandenburg Gate. We found our bus, showed the Pass and climbed aboard for what felt like — at that moment — a magic carpet ride.