



THE

WAY WE

WORK NOW



Business trips have a whole new meaning these days, as co-working spaces welcome “nomadic workers” to hot-desk in a different city every day of the week. In Berlin, you can do so for free – well, for the price of a blog post or two, as our roving freelancer found out

Words / Nione Meakin → Photography / Christoph Neumann

It's my first day in a new office and I'm pondering the usual questions: should I talk to the cool kids? Is it okay to use any mug from the kitchen? Can I sit at that desk? Then I catch myself – I may as well just go for it. After all, I'm only

going to be here for a few days.

A pessimistic assessment of my employability? Not quite. I'm spending the week at one of the growing number of co-working spaces, where it's standard practice for freelancers like myself to turn up, log on and check out in a day or two (after washing up said mug, of course).

This one is in Berlin – a city that has more than 100 co-working spaces to serve an ever-increasing population of self-employed writers, designers, developers, photographers and bloggers – but I could just as easily have taken my laptop to Budapest, Prague, Madrid, Gran Canaria, Stockholm, LA, Warsaw or any number of places now set up to accommodate itinerant freelancers or their hip, 21st-century counterpart, the “digital nomad”. There are a lot of us about – around nine million in Europe, according to the European Forum of Independent Professionals, and about 53 million in the US.

Marcus Meuer, founder of digital nomad conference DNX, estimates that around 100,000 people now identify as digital nomads – freelancers who don't just lurk in coffee shops but combine travel with work, setting up in a constantly evolving list of exotic locations. As long as the WiFi is up to scratch, a conference call could take place at the top of a mountain; emails can be sent from the beach. Last year the first DNX conferences attracted attendees from 62 countries.

“Numbers are just exploding at the moment and we believe the growth rate for digital nomads over the next five years will be more than 300 per cent per year,” he says from Brazil, where he is spending the autumn.

Last year, when Meuer launched the inaugural DNX conference, he chose to host it in Berlin, a city that has been associated with fluid working since the '90s, when hackerspaces pioneered a community-operated workspace model. It's been one of the most popular destinations for independent workers ever since, and now has one of the highest numbers of co-working spaces of any European city. Its attractiveness is due in part to those famously affordable living costs (although everyone agrees the city is becoming more expensive), but it's also because Berlin is the hub of the German digital and creative industries.

“Berlin is home to pretty much all Germany's new media,” explains



Opening pages ✓
Meet the digital nomads of Berlin's Blogfabrik, including Irrepressible Voices' Isabel Gahren, in green shirt, and Andy Kassier (holding cut-out)
Across the top, from above ✓
PR Fousieh Mobayen; team Blogfabrik: Lia and Claudio Rimmele, editor-in-chief of DailyBreadMag





“Berlin is home to pretty much all Germany’s new media. People want to work differently here, and be their own bosses”



Maria Ebbinghaus, who has been overseeing one of the innovative co-working spaces for the past 14 months. “It’s home to our biggest blogs, our best start-ups and nearly all our major influencers. People want to work differently here, live in innovative ways and be their own bosses.” It was the obvious choice to set up here.

Blogfabrik (“Blog Factory”) is an achingly cool converted warehouse off Oranienstrasse, in Berlin’s artsy Kreuzberg district. Located in a courtyard between a vegan restaurant and a guitar shop, the 500m² space has everything a freelancer could desire: photographic studios, office equipment, airy meeting rooms, open-plan desks. There’s an enviable kitchen built for food bloggers to livestream their lunches, coffee »

“We get all those good things you get from a workplace but without the restrictions a traditional workplace brings”



machines, bountiful supplies of trendy Fritz-Kola and huge windows to gaze out of when inspiration has run dry. But, amazingly, none of the people tapping at their keyboards is paying for these facilities, or at least, not with cash.

Instead Melo, the Munich-based media and logistics company that has developed and funded Blogfabrik, is trialling a different strategy. In a bid to understand and develop content creation it asks freelancers to “pay” for their workspace by providing two pieces of content a month – on any topic they choose – for the space’s online publication, DailyBreadMag.

“The magazine is our common playground,” Ebbinghaus explains. “It’s a showcase for the people who work here and it’s a way of bringing everyone together.” DailyBreadMag is managed and edited by staffers from Kiosk, an affiliated content agency. The agency also offers paid commissions to the building’s talent pool when a client wants the services of, say, an SEO expert or an Instagram star – a major benefit for all involved.

The commitment to the magazine represents a commitment to the community, an integral theme of Blogfabrik. While many co-working spaces are anonymous places





populated by fly-by-night freelancers, most of Blogfabrik's 60-strong group are members, carefully selected for their skills and attitude. They might only be in the offices one day a week or – in the case of travel bloggers – absent for months at a time, but this is not a place for laptop-toting lone wolves.

"We want people who will build our community, not people who just sit at their desks and go home. Yes, people network, but they are also friends. We do things together. All those good things that you get from a workplace – having lunch together, having colleagues, learning things – we do all that, without the restrictions a traditional workplace brings."

It's an unusual model, but one that has echoes in other businesses, such as Basecamp, Buffer and Upworthy, which already work with an entirely freelance workforce or, as they call them, a "distributed team". It's clearly working judging by Blogfabrik's waiting list, which currently runs to >>

Left ✓
Melisa and Danny, of German-Turkish culture mag *renk.*, join Anni and Jule of singles' blog *Im Gegenteil* in the kitchen
Above & below ✓
Blogfabrik's CEO, Holger Bingmann; and writer Nione joins the gang, including photographer Christoph Neumann



Other cool workspaces



THE BOAT

You can't get much further from the office than Coboat, a catamaran trip with 12 strangers in the middle of the Med. Freelancers eat, sail and explore together: the biggest challenge is convincing clients you're actually working. coboat.org



THE CLIMBING GYM

If you already have a standing desk or yoga-stretch religiously, then rock-climbing gym-cum-working space Brooklyn Boulders is for you. "A lot of places try to do work-play but they don't deliver," says co-founder Lance Pinn. "We deliver." brooklynboulders.com



THE PHONE BOX

Co-working might only stretch to two people – at best – but Pod Works' 23 red phone boxes have printer, scanner and even a hot-drinks machine. Members get round-the-clock access for £19.99 (NOK205) a month. barworks.nyc





more than 100 names since those already in the building are in no hurry to move on.

“It’s great being part of a network and the system of paying with your work is unique,” says David Torcasso, a 33-year-old freelance journalist who is sharing a desk with 26-year-old conceptual artist Andy Kassier. “Of course you can freelance in cafés or your home but that can get lonely, and renting space is complicated. Blogfabrik makes it easier for me to do my work.”

Kassier readily identifies as a digital nomad. He has lived in several cities in the past few years but is in Berlin most often. “For me, Blogfabrik is like working in a huge company because all the structure is there – but I’m free. I have the security of the space, colleagues I can drink coffee with or go and have some lunch with – but no boss.”

Many members love the opportunities the offices present for collaboration with those from other backgrounds. Editor, writer and publisher Felicia Mutterer, 37, moved into Blogfabrik five months ago and now runs her magazine *Straight* from the building.

“We’re print and here people are more digital, which has helped us to make the next step with *Straight*. We need content and ideas for the online side and it’s helpful to sit here with people who are experts in these areas and can help us with photos, SEO workshops and so on. It was possible to run a small magazine like ours before Blogfabrik but this really helps. I think the idea is very smart.” »

Right & below
Eileen Huhn and Pierre Horn of studio Schall & Schnabel; art critic Matthias Planitzer and writer David Torcasso





“Of course you can freelance in cafés or your home but this makes it easier. The parties are very good, too...”



Isabel Gahren is co-founder of Irrepressible Voices, an online platform that highlights issues of human rights and democracy. She has tried other Berlin co-working spaces – “But this one is the best. We all build up something through the magazine and that feels different. Other spaces are quite anonymous. You might see some regulars but it’s not the same. The parties are very good, too.”

After my initial worries I’m surprised by how quickly I too relax into the Blogfabrik life. I don’t see much evidence of the socialising everyone enthuses about – during my short visit the atmosphere is quiet and industrious – but people are certainly friendly. Even the cool fashion bloggers turn out to be busy rather than frosty. The environment is so professional that I actually find myself working longer than I might in a café, with all its noisy distractions, or at home, where the looming list of

household chores provides constant opportunity for procrastination.

I’m envious of the writers here, who can turn to their neighbour for help with Photoshop or with their websites, instead of battling it out in silent despair.

Is it exciting enough for a committed digital nomad? I’m not sure; it still feels very much like an office. But for freelancers like me who fancy shaking up their home-café-home routine in a stylish European city, it’s pretty perfect. “I hope we can bring the Blogfabrik model to other cities in the next few years,” says Ebbinghaus.” That’s the dream. It’s a challenge to coordinate all these free minds – that’s the biggest challenge in fact – but I really think this could be the future of work.” blogfabrik.de



Norwegian flies to Berlin from 10 destinations. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at norwegian.com

Left
Felicia Mutterer,
founder of
Straight mag

While you’re in... Berlin



SLEEP

Stick with the friendly, co-working vibes at the Michelberger, which combines boutique-style rooms with lively, hostel-esque communal areas – the bar is an attraction in its own right. Get to know your new housemates on one of the free, guided city tours that run daily.

michelbergerhotel.com



EAT

In cosmopolitan Kreuzberg you’re as likely to eat a doner kebab as a schnitzel, so why not some tapas? Bar Raval belongs to half-Spanish actor Daniel Brühl (*Rush*, *Good Bye Lenin!*), and offers small plates with a German twist. Great views of Görlitzer Park too. barraval.de



DO

New(ish) arts hub Aufbau Haus has injected life into the once-drab Moritzplatz area. Centred around art-supplies superstore Modulor, this former piano factory also houses a bookstore, gallery, theatre and nightclub to enjoy Berlin at its most creative.

aufbauhaus.de