



# BERLIN, MARYLAND

All photos courtesy of Worcester County Tourism

BY MARY LOU BAKER

## COOLEST SMALL TOWN IN AMERICA

"I've Been to a Marvelous Party" is an upbeat song by Noel Coward, the British composer and playwright who was born in 1899.

And that's how I felt after two days in Berlin, Maryland not long after it was chosen as "Coolest Small Town in America" by Frommer's *Budget Travel* magazine. My experience began with a lovely lunch on the porch of the Atlantic Hotel, an impeccable restoration of a classic Victorian building dating back to circa 1895. Today it serves as Berlin's centerpiece—its rooms furnished with one of the largest collection of antiques in Maryland and its Drummer's Café, considered among of finest dining destinations on the Eastern Shore.

A refreshment stop at the Café is the perfect way to ease into an exploration of the town, enjoying a meal or light fare while perusing the maps and brochures available in the hotel lobby. We had made arrangements to meet Michael Day, Berlin's dynamic director of economic development on the hotel's porch. As he arrived, Elaine Brady, editor of the local

newspaper, stopped to say a friendly hello—the first of many warm greetings from folks we met along the way.

Earlier in the day I met Lisa Challenger, director of tourism for Worcester County, who spearheaded the campaign that led to Berlin's choice over a dozen finalists from all over the country competing for the "Coolest" designation. Challenger credited the "entire community" for supporting their town by casting their online votes and garnering 28 percent of all votes submitted in *Budget Travel's* contest. "Berlin is all about the people who live and work here—they make everyone feel welcome," Challenger says.

Leading Berlin on a daily basis is its gregarious Mayor "Gee" Williams. He has been compared to William Donald Schaefer when he was Baltimore City's mayor—and a tireless cheerleader. "The thing that makes Berlin stand out is our quality of life," Williams says. "For residents and guests, there is a genuine sense of community as a daily experience. Although our Victorian-era architecture makes a great first impression, our shared classic American values—demonstrated daily in how we live and work together—is what makes Berlin a special place."



So what can a visitor to Berlin expect to find, in addition to a friendly welcome? Depending on your age and interests, there's plenty of cool things to do. After a short stop (or, better still, an overnight at the glorious **Atlantic Hotel** or gourmet cook and master storyteller Mark Kauffman's lovely **Waystead Inn**) head to the **Berlin Visitors' Center** in the Chamber of Commerce Building in a section of Main Street that has undergone some major changes recently.

One of them is the conversion of a former warehouse into spacious headquarters for visitors and residents that includes six small artist studios with a monthly rental fee of \$250. "We are still a work in progress, with a vision of becoming a community center and general meeting place," says Megan Houston, head of Berlin's Main Street Program and manager of the center. She pointed out posters on display by local artist Brian Roberts and said there are plans to show more works by resident artists and photographers at the site.

Just across the street is another new addition called **Uptown Antiques**, a football-field sized display of furniture, jewelry, silverware, artwork, and other reminders of days gone by. The building was once a warehouse for Donaway Furniture (its handsome ironwork sign remains over the entrance) and after a recent makeover, old brick was revealed beneath its weathered façade. The Culver family, who have antique shops on the "other side" of Main Street, needed more space for its ever-growing inventory and moved in. There are lots of "treasures" here: I found a pen-and-ink drawing of my sister's house on Savannah's East Jones Street and a helpful staffer actually wrapped it for mailing when I told her the story.

Other attractions on this side of Main are **The Nest**, where proprietor Dee Gilbert and her dog Petie offer a warm welcome to a shop filled with unusual finds ranging from home goods to handbags that she finds on shopping expeditions to

Manhattan and elsewhere. Gilbert, co-chair of Berlin's Arts and Entertainment Committee, seems to know most of her customers and makes strangers feel right at home.

Strolling further, we paused for afternoon tea and homemade scones at **Main Street Enchanted Tea Room** (the owner made it clear she liked to have prior reservations) and peeked into **A Little Bit Sheepish**, headquarters for knitters looking for a mind-boggling selection of fine wools in every color imaginable. Upstairs, there is a space where folks can gather for classes or socializing while they wield their needles. Owner Brenda Tice says she has customers from other parts of Maryland who come to her shop for the cashmere and merino wool yarns they can't find elsewhere.

Just around the corner, the **Worcester County Arts Council** is housed in a wheelchair-accessible building, where it plays an important role in Berlin's cultural life under the dedicated direction of



Anna Mullis. Its jewel-colored rooms are filled with works by area craftsmen and knowledgeable volunteers (many from nearby Ocean Pines) are there to greet you. As you leave, check out the WCAC's "Free Library," shelves of books protected in a small box near the sidewalk that are "yours for the taking, as long as you leave another book behind."

Berlin has a strong cultural component, supporting local artists with its popular "Art Strolls," held every second Friday evening of the month. The town's numerous galleries and some shops offer refreshments and independent crafters (we met a guy who makes guitars out of cigar boxes) show their wares along the way. It's all very festive—and a "freebie feature" that contributes to Berlin's "cool" quotient.

Another "cool" feature considered by Frommer's selection committee was the quality of Berlin restaurants' and cafes' coffee—something this town loves to drink. Sample the special brews at the

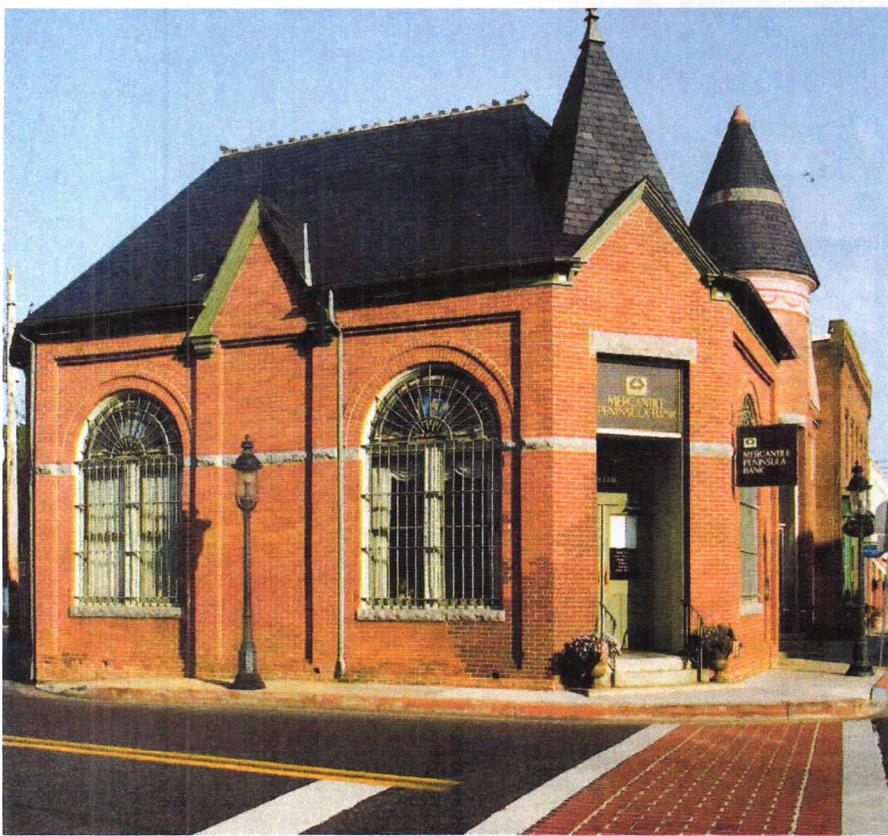
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**Berlin Coffee House** opposite the WCAC building. Here, in a cozy establishment that also sells homemade baked items and ice cream, the mother-son team of Peggy and Jason Hagy roast their beans in-house and love to chat with visitors who mingle with their many local fans in a setting that encourages lingering with a book or a laptop. It's a fine place for "chilling."

After this peaceful stop, get prepared for an explosion of color and artistry right next door at **Jeffrey Auxer Design**. Auxer, 30, is a glassblower whose works remind you of Dale Chihuly, the Seattle-based internationally known master of this demanding craft. Auxer, working in a tiny studio made brilliant by his whimsical

creations that include stunning chandeliers and vessels shaped by gravity, is a rare talent. By appointment, you can take a class with him or custom order ornamental objects for your home or Christmas tree; he even custom-makes bowls to fit into a bathroom vanity. This gallery, for me, was "over-the-top cool."

Now it's time to stroll down the "main" Main Street along broad sidewalks lined with Victorian light fixtures. The pace is leisurely and you may be surprised that nobody is walking and talking on their cell phones. Instead they are browsing in a parade of shops that include **TaDa**, a reflection of owner Blair Parsons and her mother Patty's good taste in beach-y/



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brighten the show windows of **A Thread of Elegance**, where you can bring in your outdated furniture or throw pillows and have them reupholstered right in the store. Artwork and jewelry by local artists are also on display.

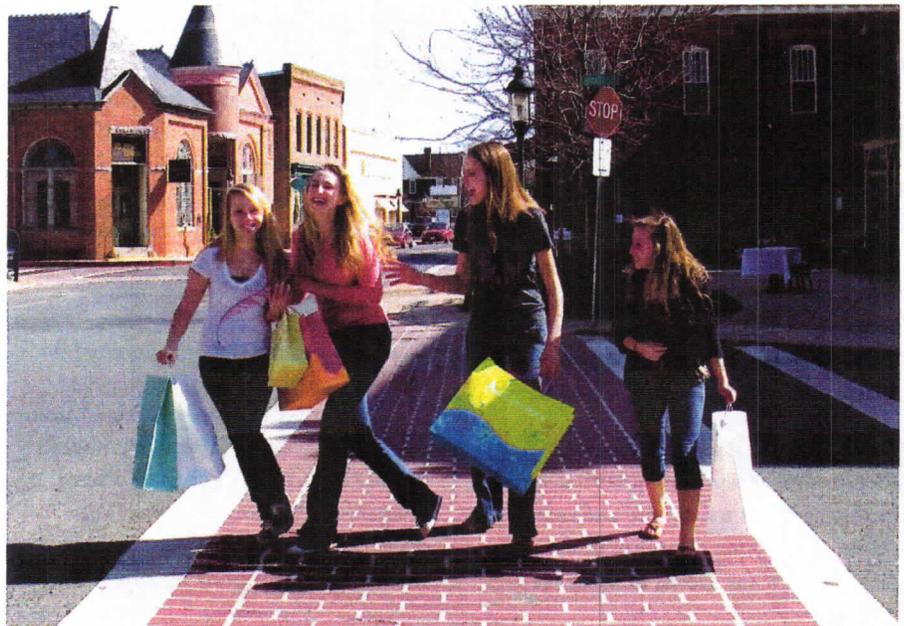
One of my favorite experiences on Main Street was meeting Jesse Turner, longtime owner of the **Berlin Shoe Box & Repair**. Turner once repaired Johnny Cash's favorite boots on an emergency basis, and while he worked on them Cash walked around town in his socks. "People thought they had seen a ghost," says Turner, pointing to a yellowing newspaper article about the 1984 incident that is pinned to the bulletin board in his small establishment.

You'll want to go a block off Main Street to meet world travelers Wes Miles and Leslie Carson (a onetime assistant to ABC's Peter Jennings), whose **Coconut Bay Trading Company** holds endless treasures

preppy accessories and luxury items; town leader Terri Sexton's elegant **Treasure Chest Jewelry**; Debbie Frene's eclectic **Victorian Charm** (her guitar-playing spouse wrote the song called "Cool Berlin" to celebrate the town's newfound notoriety); and the antique shops for which Berlin is famous—from the crowded shelves of **Culvers Antiques of Berlin** and **Town Center Antiques** to the elegance of **Stuart's Antiques** and the incredibly cool **Toy Town Antiques**, where kids of all ages love to look at a mind-boggling collection of miniature cars, trucks, and playthings of yore spread out over 4,300-square feet. Yet another good place for kids is Olga Kozhevnikofa's **World of Toys**, specializing in educational and developmental games.

Sweet tooth talking to you? Main Street has the answer with **Cupcakes in Bloom** and Connie Mayer's **Main Street Sweets**. Ready for wine? Deborah and Mike Everett, owners of the lively **Maryland Wine Bar at Berlin**, open the doors at noon to customers wanting to taste wines from 30 Maryland vineyards as well as France, Chile, Portugal, and Italy. "It's a way to take a wine-trail tour all at one place," says Debbie, who opened the bar in 2012 and within months doubled her space. On Friday nights there's live music and every day there's a party going on.

Another unique Main Street establishment is **Sisters**, the "dream shop" of siblings Donna Compher and Michael Phillips. Not only do they stock Pandora and Sea Glass jewelry, garden and outdoor accessories, and children's clothing, these smart marketers provide for guys who might like one of the 30 craft beers served at the bar area (seating 22) at the back of the spacious shop. Now that's a cool idea. And check out the colorful fabrics that



from “everywhere.” Gregorian chant plays in the background in this blend of Zen and chaos, where beautiful temptations (from jewelry and paintings to Tibetan artifacts and Russian icons) await. The name of Heather Layton’s shop next door, **Bungalow Love**, defines the difference between the two friendly neighbors.

A block away is one of Berlin’s most popular destinations—**Baked Dessert Café and Gallery**. Robin Tomaselli is the exuberant owner, the creator of the town’s official dessert (a peach dumpling, a tribute to the Harrison family’s once-famous peach orchards), and co-chair of Berlin’s Arts and Entertainment Committee. Tomasselli, a personality-plus type of gal, knows most of her customers by name. Her shop is a favorite of locals and a source of delight for visitors who can buy sweets, boutique wines, and works by local artists all in the same place.

Berlin’s restaurant scene has exploded recently, adding **Si’Culi** (Italian), **Blacksmith** (“hand-forged food”), **Tex-Mex & Beyond**, **Main Street Deli**, and **Burley Inn Tavern** to such old favorites as **Rayne’s Reef** (homemade milkshakes) and **Drummers Café**. You should stop by **The Globe**, a former movie theatre just off Main Street that has an eclectic menu, live music, and an upstairs art gallery. Under the creative management of Jen Dawicki it

has become a social hub for all ages. When we visited, the bar and downstairs dining room were packed while upstairs children drew on a wall mural headlined “Berlin: Coolest Small Town in America.”

**The Calvin B. Taylor House Museum** has seen a surge in visitors, according to museum curator Susan Taylor, who has written a book on Berlin’s history. The white clapboard house (circa 1830), is named after one of Berlin’s most notable citizens and the founder of its still-thriving bank, is a good place to learn about Berlin’s beginnings as a 300-acre spread named Burleigh (eventually pronounced “Berlin”). Climb the stairs to see photos and souvenirs from the glory days of Man O’ War, the famous race horse whose grandson was Seabiscuit.

Among the “coolest” things we saw in Berlin was at **Salt Water Media, LLC**, a unique independent book publishing company owned by Stephanie Folwer, a graduate of Washington College and winner of the prestigious Sophie Kerr Award in 2001. We saw pages of a paperbound book streaming from a high tech Espresso Book Machine (one of only 40 in the United States) operated by Patty Gregorio. The cover and layout of a book by local author Andrew Heller had been done in-house for a run (printed and bound) of 60 copies—coming “hot” off

## NOTABLE BERLIN EVENTS

From May through December, the town of Berlin is the scene for a series of festivals—some serious, some humorous, and all of them a cause to celebrate small town life. Here’s a run-down:

Jazz and Blues Concert; May Day Play Day; “Say I Do in Berlin” Wedding Expo; Memorial Day Parade; High Heel Race; Concerts on the Lawn/ Taylor House Museum; Bathtub Races; Berlin Peach Festival; Little Mr. and Miss Peach Pageant; Shakespeare on Main Street; Paint Berlin Plein Air; Fiddlers Convention; Fall Cruisers; Oktoberfest; Tree Lighting and Holiday Arts Night; Victorian Christmas Celebration; Christmas Parade; New Year’s Eve Celebration. “Art Strolls” are held every second Friday of the month and in-season Farmer’s Market Fridays are 10 a.m.–3 p.m. For dates and times, visit [Berlinchamber.org](http://Berlinchamber.org) or [Visitworcester.org](http://Visitworcester.org).

the press just in time for its debut at that evening’s “Art Stroll.” Salt Media also does e-books in-house for distribution by Apple, Amazon, and Barnes and Noble.

Everywhere we went, it seemed people of all ages were enjoying themselves, and each other. Driving out of town we waved to some new “friends”: Bryan Brushmiller, owner of the wildly popular **Burley Oak Brewery**, riding his bike to pick cucumbers for pickling; and Marci and Dave Rovanssek (he an engineer in Salisbury and she an Ocean City bartender), 15-year residents of Berlin who we met on the porch of the Atlantic Hotel.

“Berlin is a case study on how a small town can reinvent itself,” says Bill Badger, Worcester County’s director of economic development. “There are no vacant storefronts on Main Street, and there are plenty of happy people discovering what makes Berlin such a great place to be.”

Just call my visit here a “Marvelous (Surprise) Party.” ♦

