

RICH MAN'S WALL Twenty years after the reunification of Germany, some Germans are rebuilding a slice of the Berlin Wall, in Potsdam. Day-by-day they meticulously assemble dirt, bushes and anything else they can find. Nostalgia? Not a chance. They want privacy. "Two decades ago we worked hard to break down the wall separating the capitalists from the East German proletariat," one local resident told a German magazine. "We're putting up a new barrier to workers away from the capitalists." Actually, it's not that simple. The wall-builders live in a luxurious suburb of Potsdam, the former garrison town a few miles from Berlin. A refuge for actors and directors before World War II, the area was reduced to a wasteland at the height of the Cold War.

But in August 1961, East German border guards began hanging barbed wire around by the lake near the residences, gradually replacing the wire with walls, and adding watchtowers, floodlights and roving guards with Kalashnikovs. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, former residents took back ownership of their properties, some of them now estimated to be worth upwards of €5 million. But they were still stuck in what amounted to a no man's land. The lake and open fields remained public property. "When we took back our places we were told that we would have exclusive access to the lake," says well-known conductor Christian Thielmann. While the government of Angela Merkel has no objection to the giving lake and property back to the residents, other locals oppose the idea. According to activist Walter Raffaul, the site should remain open to the public as memorial. That view is shared by local government officials and other Potsdam, who object to arbitrary division based on

politics, class and economic advantage.

The Bundesrat, Germany's upper house of parliament, will lay down the final verdict in coming months. Meantime, a lawyer for the wealthy landowners had a clear picture of the situation. "The politicians in Potsdam," he said, "are still Communists in the heart."

BLOGGER BITES BACK Russian authorities are increasingly being called to task by bloggers. Take the story of Artem Tiunov, wrongly arrested for theft and brutally interrogated for 14 hours by police in the city of Novosibirsk. According to "The Guardian" newspaper: "They [the police] hoped he would provide them with an open-and-shut case since every police department has to present a certain number of these in a given period or be subjected to severe questioning over their low clear-up rate. This pressure has become a major source of the abuse and corrup-

tion." But the 25-year-old Tiunov took his account to Livejournal.com, a blogging platform that has an estimated 1.5 million readers. Two days after a post titled "Wrong place at the wrong time" showed he was elsewhere when the crime was committed, Tiunov was released. The post had attracted more than 200,000 comments, putting the police on the defensive. "The chief wasn't scared or worried," Tiunov said of his interaction with authorities after his Web account of events. That, for Tiunov, represented a moral victory. "That the Web can help make police more careful with prisoners is an accomplishment by itself," he said. "Those who feel wrongfully accused should do as I did, so that things really change." According to "The Guardian," Tiunov represents a new generation of dissidents: young, intelligent, iPhone and technology-savvy. They know how to make the Web work for them. Rather than take to the streets in protest,

they let off virtual steam. So far, Russia, unlike China, hasn't taken the time to censor Web. While official pressure often intimidates traditional media, Web parodies of President Dmitri Medvedev (<http://twitter.com/kermlinrussia>, a spoof of Medvedev's Twitter account) and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (on Runet) abound. A new democratic trend? More likely

official inertia, "The Guardian" concluded.

CHEATING CABBIES Prague is among the most popular travel destinations in Europe. It is also known for its unscrupulous taxi drivers. Visitors have told nightmare stories of inflated fares, roundabout routes, and driver unwillingness to take them where they want to go. One driver



Corbis / D. Bartruff

was actually accused of electrifying his back seat cushions to respond to customers who criticized him. The entry on cabs on the MyCzechRepublic site reads: "Although the situation is getting better, many Prague taxi drivers are still as rude and dishonest as ever and will try to take advantage of you if you are a foreigner." In an effort to help control rampant cheating, a local Web company called "Et Netera" came up with what it calls a "virtual meter," a mobile phone application that uses a satellite guidance system to measure distances and calculate the lowest appropriate fare. "Everyone should now be able to check whether a cab driver is trying to cheat him," said an Et Netera manager. Et Netera came up with the app after a number of foreign partners visiting Prague were cheated. The system can be downloaded free and also allows users to report dishonest drivers.

Meanwhile, for those not yet in the world of apps, MyCzechRepublic issued fairly straightforward ground rules:

Don't get into a taxi parked in front of the train station or at a tourist site. If you need to catch a taxi on the street, make sure it is a real, registered taxi with a yellow roof lamp. Try to find out beforehand how much your ride should cost. If you're stopping a taxi on the street, ask the driver the approximate fare before getting in and even pay in advance if the amount sounds reasonable. Once in a cab, make sure that the rate on the taximeter corresponds to the price list posted in the car. You might even consider public transportation, which is extremely efficient in Prague. Oh, and you might tell that to the Prague's mayor, who a few years ago also found himself on the wrong side of an out-sides cab bill. What was he doing at the time? Checking out cab fares, of course.

YEAR OF THE HUG

Yeh Jo-ling had a fairly mundane life working in a ceramics factory in Taiwan – until she enlisted in the Free Hugs campaign. Her aim was to spread global love by hugging 10,000 strangers over a period of three months. She kicked off her campaign at the Taipei Railway Station in September. With her friends holding signs and inviting passers-by, Yeh hugged about 700 strangers on her first day.

It all began in July, when the 23-year-old Yeh attended a Free Hugs rally that drew more than 7,000 people. "I was so impressed by the warmth of the event that I decided to quit my job and spread the love," a smiling Yeh told reporters while waiting to hug passersby in train station.



Epa / Corbis / G. Nathanael

Some accepted, others turned away. Those hugged her got a card with her picture and a message that read: "Thanks for letting me come into your life and thank you for entering the mine."

An Australian man who goes by the assumed name Juan Mann started the Free Hugs Campaign in 2004. Since then, the movement has gradually acquired a global New Age following. There's been hugging going on in Sydney, Santiago, Rome, and London. Why the huge following? One hug releases tremendous energy, say hugging practitioners. "To me, it all started spontaneously," says Mann. "I

Volunteers during a Free Hug Campaign at Elliotts Beach in Chennai, India.

was depressed and alone and at a party when a stranger at the party just came up and hugged me. I felt like a king! It was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Mann's movement now has YouTube videos and a website (freehugscampaign.org) that's had some 60 million visitors so far. Mann even appeared on the king of all talk shows, The Oprah Winfrey Show in the United States.

But last year, Mann announced on Facebook page that he'd be "retiring" from Free Hugs, inviting a successor. He didn't explain why. The successful applicant will take over the responsibilities of maintaining the Free Hugs website and forum. So far, thousands have applied but no one has yet been chosen.