

Creative Ways People Went Over the Berlin Wall

Mentalfloss.com

January 2014

In 1961 the Soviets built what would eventually become known as the Berlin Wall. The goal was to prevent the further exodus of civilians from East to West Germany. Although the Soviets fortified the barrier with everything from watchtowers to guard dogs to beds of nails, some people managed to slip over the border in some pretty amazing ways.

- 1. ON A TIGHTROPE:** East German acrobat Horst Klein made one of the most daring escapes over the wall in early 1963. Thanks to his acrobatic skill, Klein was able to turn an unused high-tension cable that stretched over the wall into his route. He moved hand-over-hand while dangling from the cable 60 feet over the head of patrolling guards, then when his arms became fatigued, he swung his whole body up over the cable and inched his way along. Klein's dismount wasn't particularly graceful – he fell off of the cable – but he landed in West Berlin.
- 2. DOWN A ZIP LINE:** In 1983, friends Michael Becker and Holger Bethke took Klein's idea one step further by letting gravity do the heavy lifting for them. The pair climbed to the attic of a five-story building on the eastern side of the wall and fired an arrow tied to a thin fishing line over a building in West Berlin. An accomplice grabbed the arrow and reeled in the line, which was connected to a slightly heavier fishing line, then to a quarter-inch steel cable. Once the steel cable was attached to a chimney on the western side of the wall, Becker and Bethke zipped across the quarter-inch cable using wooden pulleys.
- 3. WITH A PASSPORT FROM HEF:** A 1986 Los Angeles Times piece by Gordon E. Rowley described Meixner's driving escape, but it also detailed a decidedly low-tech method of crossing the border. According to Rowley, some border crossers simply approached the guards and flashed their membership cards for Munich's Playboy Club. The cards so closely resembled diplomatic passports that the guards often waved them through.
- 4. ON A SPEEDING TRAIN:** These clever escapes all worked, but in the wall's early days, brute force was an option, too. In December 1961, a 27-year-old train engine driver named Harry Deterling piloted what he dubbed "the last train to freedom" across the border. Instead of slowing down his passenger train as it approached the fortifications, Deterling throttled it up to full speed and ripped through the wall. The train skidded to a stop in West Berlin's Spandau borough, allowing Deterling, seven members of his family, and 16 other people aboard the train to remain in the West. The train's engineer and six other passengers chose to return to East Germany.
- 5. IN A HOT AIR BALLOON:** The escape orchestrated by Hans Strelczyk and Gunter Wetzel in 1979 sounds like it came straight out of a comic book. Strelczyk, a mechanic, and Wetzel, a mason, used their mechanical know-how to build a hot air balloon engine out of old propane cylinders. Their wives then pieced together a makeshift balloon from scraps of canvas and old bed sheets, and on September 16, 1979, the two couples, along with their four children, floated up to 8,000 feet and drifted over the wall to freedom.



Overseeing of the Berlin Wall's construction