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Imperial Vienna

The Austrian capital still preserves its splendid past of ostentatious pomp and artistic vanguard.

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Horse-drawn carriages clack against the cobblestones, echoing sharply in the quiet evening. I walk by a restaurant with large glass windowpanes and all-white walls. To one side, some patrons are getting haircuts before sitting down for dinner. It is dark now, past eight o'clock, and the sweet smells of tobacco, pastries and goulash fill the air. These scenes and scents seem to be from two different centuries or even from different countries, but they all happen in Vienna today.

Since the time of Emperor Franz Josef, much of Vienna has retained its traditions and architectural style. When the city's liberals lost political power to the Christian Socialists at the turn of the 19th century, they took refuge in the applied and performing arts, which they treated almost as a religion. The Vienna Secession movement produced the art that we associate the city with today: luminescent Klimts, gaunt Schieles and the rationalist buildings of Otto Wegner.



For the most part, the struggling artists thrived in the iconic Wiener Kaffeehäuser. These cafés were the extensions of family rooms, where patrons could listen to music, study, read, or pen newspaper stories. Time spent in coffee houses was never judged or frowned upon, until Hitler declared it improper for an Aryan male to sit around

all day. Many coffee houses reopened after WWII and soon became shelters for the impoverished and homeless Viennese population. There are very few authentic coffee houses left today, where waiters still grunt or refuse service if they're in a bad mood. But some new or remodeled cafés capture the spirit of the old traditions, while still giving a nod to contemporary design and ideas.

I chose the first of Vienna's 23 districts, the Innere Stadt, as my point of departure for getting acquainted with the city. This round neighborhood with narrow streets is where I learned to appreciate an Austrian taste for infinite layers of cakes and paper-thin, hand-blown crystal. The traditional pastry shops in the First District are reflections of the glittering splendor and diverse cultural influences that have left their mark on the city through the centuries. Their dark, wood-paneled interiors, lined with large mirrors and filled with smoke, are brightened by the colorful confections in large pastry displays. The atmosphere inside is always effervescent, and the voices musical and low. This district is also the best for seeing the breadth of the Habsburg legacy, from the Hofburg Palace on Herrengasse to the former imperial grocer on Graben, as well as churches that celebrate mass with orchestras and choirs. Since Maximilian I became Holy Roman Emperor in the 15th century, the Habsburgs have been great patrons of music, and the tradition of listening to classical works, opera or jazz has not been limited to closed venues but celebrated widely in public spaces.



The cocoon-like feeling of being in the Innere Stadt is immediately lost when you step onto the Ringstrasse, a wide boulevard that encircles the First District, where the old city walls once stood, and where the State Opera House, Parliament, university and most museums are today. The boulevard is the icon of an era known as Ringstrasse Vienna, which was

marked by stylistic homogeneity and solid bourgeois power, much like the Victorian Era in England. The former imperial stables that sit between the Ringstrasse and the Seventh District house the MuseumsQuartier, which is the eighth-largest cultural complex in the world today. After the MQ was inaugurated in 2001, it breathed new life into Vienna and turned the Seventh District, Neubau, into the city's next "hot spot."

The best way to end a day that starts in the 17th century is inside a bar with images projected on the wall, where house DJs play music until the early morning, when it will be time again for a hot cup of coffee. in

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Vienna

Where to stay

Radisson SAS Style Hotel: The small entrance of this boutique hotel hides a smooth interior and attentive service, with a location that can't be beat. The Wi-Fi and free, well-stocked mini-bar are reasons enough to book.

Herrengasse 12
Tel. 43-1-22-780
www.style.vienna.radissonsas.com

Intercontinental Wien: This large hotel across from the Stadtpark may be chaotic at times, but it offers great packages, especially off season.

Johannesgasse 28
Tel. 43-1-711-220
www.vienna.intercontinental.com

Where to eat

Zum Schwarzen Kameel: Established in 1613, this restaurant specializes in open-faced sandwiches and *schnapps*.

Bognergasse 5
Tel. 43-1-533-8125
www.kameel.at

Zum Roten Elefanten: Impeccable service and delicate morsels in a very relaxed interior.

Gumpendorferstrasse 3
Tel. 43-1-69919251625 / 966-8008
www.zumrotenelefanten.at

Zum Kaiserlichen Thron – Zhang & Deng: This family-run Chinese restaurant serves refined Szechwan specialties.

Andreasgasse 7
Tel. 43-1-526-4412
www.zumkaiserlichenthron.at

Demel: A *Sacher-Torte* (the famous chocolate cake) or classic *Apfelstreusel* with a hot chocolate are two "musts" at Vienna's chicest café.

Kohlmarkt 14
Tel. 43-1-5351-7170
www.demel.at

Café Drechsler: Recently renovated by Terence Conran, this café retains some of its original aura with more stylish interiors.

Girardigasse 1
Tel. 43-1-581-2044
www.cafedrechsler.at

Café Hawelka: One of the favorite cafés among Vienna's intellectual crowd.

Dorotheergasse 6
Tel. 43-1-512-8230
www.hawelka.at

What to See

MuseumsQuartier: The 648,000-square-foot MuseumsQuartier houses the contemporary Austrian Museum for Architecture, the Leopold Museum (with its impressive Schiele, Klimt and Kokoschka collections), the museum of modern art known as MUMOK and the Kunsthalle, focusing on installations and video.

MuseumsQuartier, Museumsplatz 1

www.museumsquartier.at

Museum of Applied Arts (MAK): This museum focuses on decorative arts and design and houses a comprehensive Wiener Werkstätte collection.

Stubenring 5
Tel. 43-1-711-360
www.mak.at

Secession: If the Secession movement were a religion, this building would be its temple. It's worth visiting just for the gilded dome and Klimt's mural, *The Beethoven Frieze*.

Friedrichstrasse 12
Tel. 43-1-587-5307
www.secession.at

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