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Discover architecture, art and historic charm in Vienna

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM



PHOTOS BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM



Austria brings to mind visions of Mozart, Alpine villages, imperial palaces, and the opera. The Central European country has all of that and so much more to offer visitors. Its capital city of Vienna – Wien in German – sits almost exactly at the center of Europe. Perched along the Danube River and filled with exquisite architecture, history and expansive green parks, it is the ideal place to begin exploring Austria.

See the City

Vienna is a magical city, with architecture from the imperial time of the Habsburgs and traditional coffeehouses on every corner, both offset by the vibrancy of a modern city. The juxtaposition of old and new is everywhere. When you arrive, stop by the Tourist Information Office at the Main Station or the airport to pick up the Vienna City Card (www.viennacitycard.at), which gives you free travel on public transportation for up to 72 hours as well as discounts at various museums.

One of the best ways to see Vienna is to book a tour with a certified tour guide (www.wien.info). There's more to do than you can experience in a single visit, so this is a great opportunity to see the highlights before exploring on your own. Several tours are offered by the city, and it is also popular to take a horse-drawn carriage ride through the old city center – a UNESCO World Heritage Centre – with the guides offering fun commentary during the ride.

Exploring Classical Vienna

Vienna's Ringstrasse is a boulevard running more than 3 miles through the city's center. A walk or drive around the Ringstrasse gives you a chance to see the Vienna State Opera, the Austrian Parliament Building, the Imperial Palace, the City Hall and more. One of the best ways to get a glimpse of everything along the Ringstrasse is to hop on the Vienna Ring Tram. The yellow tram follows the famed boulevard and takes about 25 minutes. Narration is available in English, and the ride is free with a Vienna City Card.

With the tallest tower reaching nearly 450 feet, one of the most visible landmarks in Vienna is St. Stephen's Cathedral. Built in the 12th century, visitors can tour inside the magnificent Gothic cathedral and even climb the 343 steps to the top of the tower.

Another destination of near-overwhelming size is The Hofburg, the former imperial palace of the Habsburg dynasty and now the residence and offices for Austria's president. You can tour the Imperial Apartments, wander the gardens, and visit the Austrian National Library – Europe's largest Baroque library – in one wing.

Continue your explorations by taking a stroll to Michaelerplatz (St. Michael's Square) in The Hofburg to see the famous white

Lipizzaner stallions of the Spanish Riding School. There are often evening performances, but during most mornings you can watch the horses exercise.

You don't want to miss the MuseumsQuartier, or MQ, near the Imperial Palace. This complex includes the Leopold Museum, Kunsthalbe Wien and the MUMOK – a museum of modern and contemporary art. These museums creatively show the old and new sides of Vienna. For some fuel while you're in MQ, stop by Glacis Beisl and order a traditional schnitzel with beer.

While the Habsburgs called Hofburg home, they spent their summers at Schonbrunn Palace, now easily accessible by tram (www.schoenbrunn.at). This magnificent Baroque estate has more than 1,400 rooms, many of which you can tour. Make sure to allow time to explore the beautiful, groomed gardens outside the palace.

Luxury Shopping

Vienna offers bountiful shopping, especially in the area around Kohlmarkt, which is home to both Viennese luxury brands and international shops. Jewelry shops are especially popular, and you will see all that glitters as you amble along the pedestrian zone. Step into the marble and wood entrance of high-end jewelry store Schullin on Kohlmarkt to take a peek at some luxurious accessories.

The Goldenes Quartier (www.goldenesquartier.com) is Old Vienna's newest luxury shopping area. Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Armani and Prada are just a few of the shops you can find here.

Famed Coffee

Vienna's coffeehouses have been an institution since the 19th century. Once the meeting place for artists, writers and intellectuals, they remain the hot spots in town to relax and sip coffee. While the most famous include Cafe Central and Cafe Sperl, it can often be impossible to get a seat. You might want to try one of the smaller coffeehouses so you can soak up the atmosphere. For a coffee with cream similar to what you have in the U.S., order a grosser brauner. For something typically Viennese, try the melange with foamed milk or an einspanner with whipped cream and sugar icing.

Where to Stay

For a luxury hotel option, try Hotel Altstadt, an easy walk to both MQ and Ringstrasse (www.altstadt.at). This boutique hotel, a member of Small Luxury Hotels, is in the middle of the vibrant arts district and no two rooms are the same. The entire hotel is filled with artwork, but the real treasure is the hotel breakfast – it has a reputation for being the best breakfast in Vienna. There is always something special coming from the kitchen, where the menu rotates daily and features sustainable, regional dishes.



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