

Exploring Vienna on Foot

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Vienna's architecture is a treasure trove that includes elegant buildings erected during virtually every period of the city's history. Medieval streets and squares with grand boulevards, baroque churches and beautiful gardens dot Vienna as fine architectural remnants of seven hundred years of the Habsburg Empire. Although it suffered extensive damage during World War II, Vienna retained many of its important buildings, and reconstruction has been meticulous. All this makes the Austrian capital a natural place for rewarding walking tours like many other European cities. Vienna can be explored best by following a circular route around the Inner City or Old Town (UNESCO World Heritage Site, 2001) along the *Ringstrasse* (Boulevard) built in place of the early medieval fortifications and encircling most of the historic core of the city in the shadow of the very symbol of Austrian culture. The most interesting western part of this beltway has the *Schwarzenbergplatz* with the Opera House, *Hofburg* (Imperial Palace), Schiller monument, the Historical Art Museum and Natural History Museum. As the ring turns by the *Volksgarten*, on the left are the 19th century Parliament buildings, the enormous Neo-gothic *Rathaus* (Town Hall) and the *Rathaus Park*. On the right is the *Burgtheater* or Palace Theatre, one of the finest in the German-speaking world and the Vienna University buildings. With the Ring turning to the *Schottentor*, one sees the twin towers of the Votive Church.

The focal point for most visitors in Vienna is the *Stephansdom* (St. Stephen's Cathedral) with its 120m incredible latticework spire - the best-known symbol of the city square. The Gothic 15th century cathedral incorporates part of an earlier Romanesque Basilica and houses several Baroque chapels and tombs of Austrian emperors. The cathedral treasury is in the neighbouring Archbishops' Palace. The dominating feature of the cathedral is the 136m *Südturm* or 'Steffl' (south tower). Its cramped viewing platform after a climb of 420 steps is worth an elbow or two for a postcard glimpse of Vienna and the surrounding countryside. With construction spanning seventy-five years, it was to be matched by a companion tower on the north side. However, with the imperial purse withering and the Gothic style being out of fashion, the half-completed tower was topped off with a Renaissance cupola. Here, Austria's largest bell, the *Pummerin* ('boomer bell'), installed in 1952 has a glorious tiled roof, showing dazzling chevrons and the Austrian eagle.

After the plague, which decimated Vienna's population in the 17th century, many houses surrounding the cathedral and the cemetery, were cleared away. Today, *Stephansplatz* and the *Graben* (Deep Ditch) running at right angles provide a large, open pedestrian area full of pedestrians and strolling visitors. Look into the many famous shops that line the narrow side streets or relax in one of the cafés for a hearty meal with wine and Viennese strudels. Continue walking through *Donnergasse* to the *Neuer Markt*. In the centre of the square lined with graceful old houses is the renowned *Donnerbrunnen* fountain built in the early 1700s by George Raphael Donner, whose works adorn many Viennese palaces. At No. 2, Haydn lived and composed the melody that became the National Anthem of Imperial Austria. The Church of the Capuchins, which faces the square, houses the Imperial Vaults or crypts with the sarcophaguses of the royal Habsburg family. At *Albertinaplatz* is the *Neue Burg* (New Palace) across the Burg Garden. This is the largest part of the Imperial Palace built in the 19th

century in Neo-Renaissance style. The Albertina Gallery houses a marvellous collection of engravings, including a great number of Dürer drawings. Continue along *Augustinerstrasse* to the Augustiner Church and monastery, a favourite venue for aristocratic weddings. Here, in the *Habsburger Herzgruft* the hearts of all the Habsburgs are kept in silver urns. Pass *Josefsplatz* and reach the *Stallburg*, the stables of the famous Spanish Riding School to witness the training of the prancing Lipizaner stallions in an equine ballet to a program of classical music. This is part of a long-established Viennese institution, reminiscent of the Habsburg era. The breed was imported from Spain (hence 'Spanish') by Maximilian II in 1562 and in 1580 a stud was established at Lipizza (hence 'Lipizzaner'), now in Slovenia. The mature stallions are snow-white (although born dark) and the riders wear traditional garb with leather boots and bicorn hats. The stallions go on holiday (seriously!) to Lainzer Tiergarten, west of Vienna in July-August.

The Hofburg Palace complex built between the 15th-19th centuries reflects the power and wealth of the Habsburgs who periodically added new sections to create the current jumble of architectural styles and massive dimensions. Walk the walls of the Hofburg Palace to *Michaelerplatz* for the ornate archway of St. Michael's Gate, topped by a huge dome. Until the end of World War I, the Hofburg was the winter residence of the Habsburg family. Presently, a repository of Austrian culture and heritage it houses several museums, a 14th century Augustinian Church, the National Library and the President's offices - all open for public viewing. Some of the museums include the *Sammlung Alter Musikinstrumente* (Collection of Ancient Musical Instruments), exhibiting instruments of all shapes and sizes; the *Museum für Völkerkunde* (Ethnological Museum), with displays on non-European cultures; and the *Albertina* with an extensive collection of graphic arts. The oldest part of the Hofburg is the 13th century *Schweizerhof* (Swiss Courtyard) named after the Swiss guards who protected its precincts. The *Imperial Chancellery* and *Amalia Wings* give an impression of courtly tradition and imperial lifestyle in the 19th century. The curvaceous *Neue Burg*, from which Hitler addressed a rally during his triumphant 1938 visit to Vienna dates from this time. The twenty-two rooms in the *Kaiserappartements* (Imperial Apartments) are packed with fine furniture, tapestries and bulbous crystal chandeliers. The Hofburg also houses the ornate private apartments and official staterooms of Emperor Franz Joseph I and Empress Elisabeth, popularly known as Sisi. The palace has two famous portraits of Sisi painted by court artist Franz Xaver Winterhalter. The exercise room with Sisi's gymnastic apparatus (rings and wall bars) caused much scandal in the strict court society. See the glittering world of imperial banquets with extensive collections of unusual kitchenware from the famous European manufacturers and documenting the personal taste and habits of its users. The sheer wealth exhibited in the Imperial Treasury collection of crown jewels is staggering: a 2860-carat Colombian emerald, a 416-carat balas ruby and a 492-carat aquamarine. Religious relics include supposed fragments of the cross, a nail and thorn from Christ's crucifixion.

The *Schönbrunn Palace* (1700) as one of the most renowned Baroque structures in Europe began as a hunting lodge during the 16th century. It was transformed into a lavish palace by the Empress Maria Theresa in 1750. Home to the Hapsburg emperors from the 18th century to 1918, the palace was built by the architects Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach and Nicolaus Pacassi. Of the two thousand magnificently decorated rooms worth of imperial splendour, forty can be visited. The Great Gallery reveals the pinnacle of finery with its gilded scrolls, ceiling frescoes, chandeliers and huge crystal mirrors. Numerous sumptuous balls were held here, including one for the delegates at the Congress of Vienna (1814-15). The Mirror Room is where Mozart aged six, played his first royal concert in the presence of Maria Theresa (mother of Marie Antoinette) and the royal family in 1762. As revealed, the young Wolfgang apparently leapt onto the lap of the empress and kissed her later. Maria Theresa held secret consultations in the rather ingenious Round Chinese Room. A hidden doorway led to her adviser's apartments and a fully laden table could be drawn up through

the floor so the dignitaries could dine without being disturbed by servants. Admire the site's opulent elegance in the palace grounds, the classically landscaped gardens and the Neptune Fountain. A maze and the world's oldest zoo – Tiergarten, dating from 1752 are very popular among young people.

If you are an art buff, visit the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* in *Marie Theresienplatz*, housing one of Europe's finest collections in a building which in itself has some delightful features. Three artists created the murals between the arches above the stairs, including a young Klimt (northern wall), who painted before he broke with classical tradition. Opened in 1891 to house the imperial Habsburg vast art collection which found their way back to Vienna from their extensive territories, it was designed by Gottfried von Semper and Karl Hasenauer in the style of the Italian Renaissance to firmly establish the building's link with one of history's great artistic periods. The magnificent central staircase is home to a Theseus group by the Italian neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova (1757-1822), whilst the museum's ceiling painting is by Mihály von Munkácsy. With Reubens being appointed to the service of a Habsburg Governor in Brussels, it is not surprising that the museum in its collections some of his best works in addition to paintings by Vermeer, Rembrandt, Raphael, Van Dyck, Caravaggio and Titian. There are extensive collections of Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, sculptures and decorative arts covering the Austrian high baroque, Renaissance, mannerist and medieval periods. Do not miss Cellini's famous, over-the-top salt cellar.

On the corner of the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* is *Café Demel* serving pastries and *Sachertorte* (the cake for which Vienna is famous) on beautiful china as is being done since the last two hundred years. Most traditional shops are on *Maria Hilferstrasse*, the busiest street in Vienna. The *Naschmarkt* selling produce, meat and poultry and the *Flohmarkt* offer opportunities to pick up bargains for myriad imperial kitsch: porcelain figures of Franz Joseph, medallions of Empress Maria Theresa, drawings of the Hofburg and faded portraits of Sisi. Stroll along elegant *Herrengasse* admiring the richly decorated houses that line it. On the left, is the *Landhaus*, the administrative building of the province of Lower Austria. It is here that the revolution of 1848 started and seventy years later in 1918, the Republic of Austria was proclaimed upon the abdication of the Emperor. Just a little further on the right, stop for coffee at *Café Central* a favourite meeting place of Viennese intellectuals. Sit here and read the newspapers that are still rolled around large sticks as practised for one hundred and fifty years. Pass through the galleries of the *Ferstel* Palace to triangular *Freyung* Square to admire the magnificent 17th century altars of the *Schottenkirche* (Scottish Church). Wander along *Tiefen Graben* which was once the bed of a stream at the north end of the Roman settlement of Vindobona. Mozart and Beethoven lived for a period of time this street. An elegant, richly decorated metal bridge – *Jugendstil* was built in 1903 in the Neo-romantic Art Nouveau style. At its end, turn right and go up a few steps to a simple Gothic church *Maria am Gestade* with two beautiful altars and a remarkable 14th century painting of the Annunciation, best seen in the rays of the setting sun through the stained glass windows. Close by, on the way to the *Hohermarkt* situated on the site of the Forum of Roman Vindob is the Baroque Town Hall building. Some of the Roman remains may be seen behind house No. 3. Bethrothal Fountain is located in the centre of the square. The only Synagogue to survive the Nazi years is located nearby on a narrow street *Seitenstettengasse*. Take *Judengasse* from the north-east side of the square and walk towards St. Rupert's Church, the oldest in Vienna. Continue along the narrow street to the wider *Rotenturmstrasse*, turn right and you are back to the *Stephansdom*. The walk spans over 2 kms (1.5 miles), avoiding the side streets.

Without a reference to Mozart, a visit to Vienna seems incomplete. Take a Mozart walking tour with a costumed guide from the *Staatsoper* (State Opera House) who accompanies you to a restaurant for a typical Viennese meal consisting of clear soup, *Wiener Schnitzel* served with parsley potatoes and mixed salad, *Sachertorte* with whipped crème and a glass of wine. Later, he escorts you to the popular Vienna Mozart Orchestra which plays many of Mozart's

everlasting melodies for approximately two hours. After the concert you will be presented with a complimentary tape of the Mozart Orchestra as a memento.

As an ideal supplement to the walking tour, rest your tired feet with a leisurely boat trip on the Danube. From the 150m terrace of the Danube Tower, admire the marvellous architectural panorama of the UN city buildings and the peculiar multi-coloured buildings of the internationally known artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser. These are of great interest to modern architects. See the Danube Canal and the *Schleusenhaus* (old lock station), built in 1904 by architect Otto Wagner. Located here is the Ringturm (ring tower), Vienna's first twenty-three floor skyscraper. Pass the Waste Incineration Plant also designed by Hundertwasser and spot the Viennese mountains of *Kahlenberg* (483m) and *Leopoldsdorf* (423m). Cruise by the historic *Nussdorf* Lock, the 202m Millennium Tower (Vienna's tallest), Modern Hydro Electric Power Plant Freudenu and the planetarium in Urania. Located in the giant wooded park and fairground known as the Prater, the Giant Ferris Wheel is one of Austria's best-known and best-loved landmarks. Constructed on the 50th jubilee of Franz Joseph I, the wheel featured in films (*The Third Man*, *The Living Daylights* and *Before Sunrise*) and was completed in 1897 when similar ones stood in London and Paris. However, it is the only surviving one of its era. After dark, the illuminated wheel acts as a giant clock flashing the number of times on the hour.

FACT FILE

Vienna has an extensive transportation network. It is the main centre for international flights in Austria with Austrian Airlines as the national carrier. It enjoys excellent rail connections with Europe and the rest of Austria. Buses, trams and five subway lines (U-Bahn) connect most parts of the city. Major car rental companies are represented in Vienna. Contact the Vienna Tourist Board - www.wien.info,