



ONLY IN AUSTRIA



The Habsburg Empire is long gone, but whether it's music, art, architecture, outdoor recreation or indoor pleasures, Austria still rules

BY SUZANNE MORPHET

PHOTOS, SUZANNE MORPHET

MY FIRST NIGHT IN VIENNA I'm dazzled by the lights, sounds and smells. Statues and stately buildings, walkways filled with people going places, the clip-clop of hooves and the sweet scent of horses pulling carriages on cobblestone streets.

The next morning, I take a walking tour of the old town with guide Renate Bauer, who helps me understand what I experienced the night before. The profusion of palaces, museums, monuments, music halls – even horses – are largely the legacy of the Habsburgs, who ruled Austria for almost seven centuries.

"I always say the Habsburgs were not famous for their conquests on the battlefields," Renate chuckles, "but for their victories in the bedrooms!"

She's referring to strategic marriages, like Marie Antoinette's to the future king of France. "She was the daughter of [Austrian Empress] Maria Theresa and Maria Theresa wanted to have an alliance with France."

Roughly the same time the Habsburgs came to prominence, work started on St. Stephen's cathedral, where we begin our tour. Some of its exterior walls are still blackened from 19th and 20th century smog (cleaning is ongoing), but it's a stunner with a soaring spire outside, and dark Gothic arches and stained-glass windows inside.

The Habsburgs, however, preferred to marry at the nearby Church of St. Augustine. White and bright, its nave is strung with enormous gold and crystal chandeliers. We hear angelic voices and looking up, we see the source – the church choir is warming up for the Sunday service!

Further along, we come to the Spanish Riding School, part of the Hofburg Palace, where generations of Habsburgs kept their famous Lipizzaner stallions, which still perform weekly.

A walk through the Volksgarten – the people's garden – leads us to

one of Vienna's most coveted coffee houses – Landtmann's. "We don't do anything without eating or drinking," laughs Renate, over cups of Viennese melange (coffee with milk) and flaky apfelstrudel.

Later, I enjoy Schönbrunn Palace, the summer home of the Habsburgs with its enormous, manicured garden, where I return that evening to hear the palace orchestra play masterpieces by Mozart and Strauss. The three-course 'dinner and concert' ticket makes for a perfect night out.

Another day – you need at least two full days in Vienna – I'll explore the Habsburg's baroque Belvedere palace, now a museum and home to Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* and other priceless paintings.

Leaving Vienna, I take the train with others in my group to St Johann im Pongau, (St. Jo) a popular ski resort near Salzburg. It's not yet winter, but I want to see the Austrian Alps without their snow cover and while belled cows are still enjoying the pasture.

A 2.5 hour hike up Hochgründeck, one of the highest, forested mountain peaks in Europe, yields dreamy 360-degree views and fistfuls of sweet blueberries and tart cranberries. In a rustic mountain inn – Heinrich Kienerhaus – we devour Bratwurst with sauerkraut and fried potatoes, washed down with beer, all served by a handsome young man in lederhosen.

Back in St. Jo, we learn more about Austrian hospitality at Aktivhotel Alpeandorf, a family-owned hotel with spacious rooms, a rooftop sauna, basement spa and a dining room that consistently delivers delicious meals, both à la carte and buffet, with vegan options. Now I know why skiers love this place!

At the nearby Liechtensteinklamm Gorge we learn about the power of water. A rushing rivulet cuts between cliffs and surges over boulders. We walk along a narrow path and beneath overhanging rock before



1 & 2 The author enjoying a picnic and the view.

3 Originally commissioned as an imperial hunting lodge, Schönbrunn Palace is a spectacular imperial residence.

4 Detail of Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*.

5 It's true, "We don't do anything without eating or drinking."

6 Cobblestone streets and horse carriages.

7 A family-friendly trail leads through the Liechtensteinklamm Gorge, which features this beautiful helix-shaped staircase.

coming to a gorgeous steel staircase. Designed in the form of a helix, it looks like a giant snail shell spiralling 30 metres down. Continuing to the end of the 1.5 km path, we're greeted by a waterfall coursing down a mountainside that's dotted with trees in red and orange fall foliage. Stunning!

Hopping on the train again – so comfortable, so convenient – we head further west, to another mountain town, this one near Innsbruck. Situated on a high and wide plateau, Seefeld in Tyrol is framed by the Alps and has been defined by them too. Three times it's hosted Olympic winter sports alongside Innsbruck. But it's also known as central Europe's largest x-country ski area with 260-km of immaculately groomed tracks.

Even before sports tourism took

hold, Seefeld had a long history of hospitality thanks to – you guessed it – the Habsburgs. Back in 1516, while hunting in what was then called Sevelt, Emperor Maximilian I fell in love with the place and endowed a monastery. For the next 200 years, monks entertained and nourished pilgrims, nobles and travellers with products from their labours, including beer.

Today, the former monastery is the five-star hotel and spa Klosterbräu, where travellers can still stop by, as we do, for a refreshing beer in the courtyard.

The entire town is a gem, dominated by the Parish Church of St. Oswald. Inside, we admire colourful frescoes from the 15th century and a high altar of wood and gold in the late Gothic style. The town is filled

8 Fernando Romero's installation at Swarovski's Crystal Worlds is meant to explore our relationship with the sun (via 2,880 custom-made crystals).

9 Swarovski's Crystal Worlds theme park has an element of the surreal... that extends even to the greenery.



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with independent, family-owned shops including the jeweller's where we come to an abrupt stop. With its stencilled window borders, a Juliette balcony and purple petunias spilling from window boxes, the building is the very epitome of pretty.

Another day we drive to Watens, near Innsbruck, to check out Kristallwelten, the tourist attraction-cum-art gallery that opened in 1995 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Swarovski. Built into the side of a hill are 18 underground Chambers of Wonder, each with an exhibit using Swarovski crystals. I was no fan of Swarovski before I visited – after all, its crystals are man-made and relatively inexpensive – but in the hands of artists, they're magical.

The only way to top off this fabulous trip is to dine in a castle – an authentic, historic, Austrian castle. At Schloss Friedberg we do just that. The castle was built on a hilltop outside Innsbruck in 1230 and eventually passed to Count Gaudenz Trapp and his wife Christiane von Trapp (distantly related to the von Trapps of The Sound of Music fame).

They've given it all the modern conveniences (internet, heating, an elevator) while keeping its historic charm. They live on the first floor and rent out rooms above for private parties, overnight stays and weddings.

Over a dinner of venison and wine we toast both our hosts and our good fortune at finding some of the best of Austria. Prost! ■



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PHOTOS: SUZANNE MORPHET

THE ALPIN RESORT SACHER

Austria's grand dame of hospitality introduces a third member of the family



Elisabeth Gürtler never planned to be a hotelier, but when her first husband suddenly died in 1990, Sacher hotels landed in her lap. Now 72 and as glamorous as ever, Gürtler has expanded and re-branded the hotel in Austria's Alps where she spent summers as a child.

The Alpin Resort Sacher in Seefeld, Tyrol, is everything you expect from a Sacher hotel – comfort, luxury, fine food – and things you don't expect, such as an enormous spa and daily guided activities including hiking and cycling.

Guests at Sacher Seefeld, unlike those at Sacher Vienna and Sacher Salzburg, are here for recreation and relaxation, not business or sightseeing.

As you enter the sliding glass doors, music welcomes you and a lederhosen-clad bellboy brings your luggage to your room. The 82 rooms and suites are spacious and bright with high ceilings, exposed wood beams, warm colours and bathrooms equipped with both a shower and tub and separate toilet.

You may find, however, that you spend more time in the spa than in your room. At almost 5,000 square metres and occupying two floors, with indoor and outdoor swimming pools (plus a natural pond), and a diverse range of treatments by professional therapists, this spa will leave you wanting for nothing. The sauna even has its own sauna master to ensure you have the best experience possible.



PHOTOS: COURTESY, ASTORIA, DAVID JOHANSSON

THE LEO GRAND, VIENNA

It's a throwback to the past



One of the first things I notice about my room in the Leo Grand is the colour of the bathrobe. It's aqua, just like the fluffy towels and the painted cabinet of the bathroom vanity.

When every other hotel in the world seems to have sterile white robes, it makes me realize that someone has put a lot of thought into this place. 'Someone' is the hotel's interior designer, Gabriele Lenikus, who not only looked after the little details, but researched the big picture when turning this centuries-old building in Vienna's old town into a boutique hotel that respects its past.

The Leo Grand is named for Leopold I, one of the longest-ruling of the Habsburg emperors, but was originally the residence of one powerful man – Samuel Oppenheimer – Leopold's financier. In Leopold and Samuel's day, people were interested in exploring the world, discovering exotic plants and animals and bringing home what they



could. Hence, along with the bold colours and exquisitely patterned wallpaper and rugs, there are playful furnishings such as the brass monkeys holding up bedside lamps.

After an intense, nine-year restoration, the 76 rooms and suites were opened in April 2022. On the main floor, DOT's offers Asian fusion fare in a courtyard with a tent-like roof that retracts in good weather.

Samuel Oppenheimer wouldn't recognize his old digs, but if he were alive today, he would surely want to move back in.