

The Best of Vienna

Vienna is a city of music, cafes, waltzes, parks, pastries, and wine, a true cosmopolitan center, where cultural identities fuse to produce the intriguing and, often cynical, Viennese.

From the time the Romans selected a Celtic settlement on the Danube River as one of their most important central European forts, “Vindobona,” the city we now know as Vienna, has played a vital role in European history. Austria grew around the city and developed into a mighty empire.

The face of the city has changed time and again because of war, siege, victory, defeat, the death of an empire and the birth of a republic, foreign occupation, and the passage of time. Fortunately, the Viennese character—a strict devotion to the good life—has remained solid.

1 BEST OF VIENNA

- **Listening to Mozart:** It is said that at any time of the day or night in Vienna, someone somewhere is playing the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. You might hear it at an opera house, a church, a festival, an open-air concert, or, more romantically, performed by a Hungarian orchestra in a Belle Epoque cafe. Regardless, “the sound of music” drifting through Vienna is likely to be the creation of this prodigious genius. See section 1, “The Performing Arts,” in chapter 10.
- **Cruising the Danube (Donau):** Johann Strauss used a bit of poetic license when he called the Donau “The Blue Danube”—it’s actually a muddy green. Cruising the river is nevertheless a highlight of any Viennese vacation. **Worm & Koeck Donau Schifffahrt GmbH** (☎ 0732/783607; www.donauschifffahrt.de) offers 1-day trips with cruises priced for most budgets. While on board, you’ll pass some of the most famous sights in eastern Austria, including towns like Krems and Melk. See p. 213.
- **Watching the Lipizzaner Stallions:** Nothing evokes the heyday of imperial Vienna more than the **Spanish Riding School** (☎ 01/533-9032; www.srs.at). Here, the sleek white stallions and their expert riders demonstrate the classic art of dressage in choreographed leaps and bounds. The stallions, a crossbreed of Spanish thoroughbreds and Karst horses, are the finest equestrian performers on earth. Riders wear black bicorn hats with doeskin breeches and brass buttons. The public is admitted to watch; make reservations 6 to 8 weeks in advance. See p. 131.
- **Heurigen Hopping in the Vienna Woods:** *Heurigen* are rustic wine taverns that celebrate the arrival of each year’s new wine (*heurig*) by placing a pine branch over the door. The Viennese rush to the taverns to drink the new local wines and feast on country buffets. Some *heurigen* have garden tables with panoramic views of the Danube Valley; others provide shaded, centuries-old courtyards where revelers enjoy live folk music. Try the red wines

from Vöslau, the sylvaner of Grinzing, or the Riesling of Nussberg. See “The *Heurigen*,” in chapter 10.

- **Feasting on *Tafelspitz*, “The Emperor’s Dish”:** No Austrian dish is more typical than the fabled *tafelspitz* favored by Emperor Franz Joseph. Boiled beef sounds dull, but *tafelspitz* is far from bland. A tender delicacy, the “table end” cut absorbs a variety of flavors, including juniper berries, celery root, and onions. Apple-and-horseradish sauce further enlivens the dish, which is usually served with fried grated potatoes. For Vienna’s best *tafelspitz*, try the **Sacher Hotel Restaurant**, in the Hotel Sacher Wien (☎ 01/514560). See p. 102.
- **Revisiting the Habsburgs:** One of the great dynastic ruling families of Europe, the Habsburgs ruled the Austro-Hungarian Empire from their imperial court in Vienna. You can still witness their grandeur as you stroll through the Inner City. The Hofburg, the family’s winter palace, is a living architectural textbook, dating from 1279. Also be sure to visit Schönbrunn, the sprawling summer palace, which lies on the outskirts of the city and boasts magnificent gardens. See chapter 7.
- **Biking Along the Danube:** A riverside bike trail between Vienna and Naarn links scenic villages, including Melk and Dürnstein. As you pedal along, you’ll pass castles of yesteryear, medieval towns, and latticed vineyards. Route maps are available at the Vienna Tourist Office, and you can rent bikes at the ferry or train stations. See p. 153.
- **Attending an Auction at Dorotheum:** Vienna is a treasure trove of art and antiques, and as many estates break up, much of it goes on sale. The main venue for art and antiques is the state-owned auction house **Dorotheum**, Dorotheergasse 17 (☎ 01/51560-0). Founded in 1707, it remains one of the great European depositories of objets d’art. Items here are likely to be expensive; if you’re looking for something more affordable, try the summer Saturday and Sunday outdoor art and antiques market along the Danube Canal (between Schwedenbrücke and Salztorbrücke). See p. 178.
- **Savoring the Legendary Sachertorte:** **Café Demel** (☎ 01/535-1717), the most famous café in Vienna, has a long-standing feud with the **Sacher Hotel Restaurant**, in the Hotel Sacher Wien (☎ 01/514560), over who has the right to sell the legendary and original Sachertorte, a rich chocolate cake with a layer of apricot jam. In 1965, a court ruled in favor of Hotel Sacher, but Demel still claims that the chef who invented the torte brought “the original recipe” with him when he left the Sacher to work for Demel. See p. 110 and 102.
- **Unwinding in a Viennese Coffeehouse:** The coffeehouse still flourishes here in its most perfect form. You can spend hours reading newspapers (supplied free), writing memoirs, or planning the rest of your stay in Vienna. And, of course, there’s the coffee, prepared 20 to 30 different ways, from *weissen ohne* (with milk) to *mocca gespritzt* (black with a shot of rum or brandy). A glass of ice-cold water always accompanies a cup of coffee in Vienna, as well as the world’s most delectable pastry or slice of cake. See “Coffeehouses & Cafés,” in chapter 6.
- **Strolling the Kärntnerstrasse:** Lying at the heart of Viennese life is the bustling, pedestrian-only Kärntnerstrasse. From morning to night, shoppers parade along the merchandise-laden boulevard; street performers, including musicians and magicians, are always out to amuse. For a break, retreat to one of the café terraces for some of the best people-watching in Vienna. See “Walking Tour 1: Imperial Vienna,” in chapter 8.

- **Playing at the Prater:** Ever since Emperor Joseph II opened the Prater to the public in the 18th century, the Viennese have flocked to the park for summer fun. The Prater has abundant tree-lined paths on which to jog or stroll (the Viennese, in general, are much fonder of strolling). The amusement park boasts a looming Ferris wheel that was immortalized in the Orson Welles film *The Third Man*. Open-air cafes line the park, which also provides an array of sports facilities, including tennis courts and a golf course. See p. 150.
- **Enjoying a Night at the Opera:** Nothing is more Viennese than dressing up and heading to the Staatsoper, one of the world's greatest opera houses, where ascending the grand marble staircase is almost as exhilarating as the show. Built in the 1860s, the Staatsoper suffered severe damage during World War II. It reopened in 1955 with a production of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, marking Austria's independence from occupation. Both Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler directed here, and the world's most renowned opera stars continue to perform, accompanied, of course, by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. See p. 186.
- **Hearing the Vienna Boys' Choir:** In this city steeped in musical traditions and institutions, one group has distinguished itself among all others: the Vienna Boys' Choir, or *Wiener Sängerknaben*. Created by that great patron of the arts, Maximilian I, in 1498, the choir still performs Masses by Mozart and Haydn at the Hofburgkapelle on Sundays and holidays from September through June. See p. 127.
- **Discovering the Majesty of St. Stephen's Cathedral:** Crowned by a 137m (450-ft.) steeple, Dompfarre St. Stephan, Vienna's cathedral, is one of Europe's great Gothic structures. Albert Stifter, the acclaimed Austrian writer, wrote that its "sheer beauty lifts the spirit." The cathedral's vast tiled roof is exactly twice the height of its walls. Intricate altarpieces, stone canopies, and masterful Gothic sculptures are just some of the treasures that lie within. Climb the spiral steps to the South Tower for a panoramic view of the city. See p. 133.

2 BEST HOTEL BETS

For the details on these and other hotels, see chapter 5.

- **Best Historic Hotel:** Built in 1869, the **Hotel Imperial** (€ 800/325-3589 in the U.S., or 01/501100; www.luxurycollection.com/imperial) is the "official guesthouse of Austria." It has presided over much of the city's history, from the heyday of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to defeat in two world wars. All the famous and infamous of the world have checked in. Wagner, for example, worked on key sections of both *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* here in 1875, and

some of the great cultural icons of the 20th century—from Margot Fonteyn to Herbert von Karajan—have been guests. See p. 71.

- **Best Trendy Hotel:** Created by the famous English architect Sir Terence Conran, **Hotel Das Triest** (€ 01/58918; www.dastriest.at) attracts the artistic elite to its stylish precincts near St. Stephan's. Originally a stable, it's come a long way, baby, and now is elegant, luxurious, and stylish. Rooms are decorated with a distinctive flair. See p. 75.

- **Best for Business Travelers:** With state-of-the-art business equipment and an incredibly helpful staff, the **Hotel Bristol** (☎ 888/625-5144 in the U.S., or 01/515160; www.westin.com/bristol) is the choice of international business travelers. Some suites are large enough for business meetings, and room service will quickly deliver hors d'oeuvres and champagne (for a price, of course) when you close the deal. Many guests like to treat their clients to dinner at the Bristol's elegant restaurant, Korso bei der Oper. See p. 71.
- **Best for a Romantic Getaway:** The outrageously ostentatious private home of the Coburg dynasty has been turned into **Palais Coburg Hotel Residenz** (☎ 01/518-180; www.palais-coburg.com). Some of the suites here evoke the heyday of the Rothschilds and are as posh as anything in Vienna. You are guaranteed absolute privacy if you desire that. See p. 73.
- **Best for Families:** Only a 4-minute walk from St. Stephan's Cathedral, **Hotel Kärntnerhof** (☎ 01/5121923; www.karntnerhof.com) is a small, kid-friendly hotel in the center of Vienna. It offers a superb location, attentive staff, and good prices. Rooms are spacious enough to accommodate families and come equipped with modern amenities. See p. 80.
- **Best Moderately Priced Hotel:** In the heart of Old Vienna, less than a block from the cathedral, **Hotel Royal** (☎ 01/515680; www.kremslehnerhotels.at) was completely rebuilt in 1982. In this price bracket, not many hotels can compete with the Royal in terms of class. In the lobby, you'll find the piano Wagner used when he was composing *Die Meistersinger Von Nürnberg*. See p. 79.
- **Best Budget Hotel:** Near the Opera in the heart of Vienna, **Hotel-Pension Suzanne** (☎ 01/5132507; www.pension-suzanne.at) offers a warm, inviting interior and affordable bedrooms furnished in a comfortable, traditional style. The Strafinger family welcomes you to their attractive, cozy accommodations, some equipped with kitchenettes. See p. 80.
- **Best Pension (B&B):** Near the busy Mariahilferstrasse, **Pension Altstadt Vienna** (☎ 01/5226666; www.altstadt.at) has an elegant atmosphere exemplified by its colorful, velvet-laden Red Salon lounge. The rooms don't disappoint either: Each is the work of an individual designer and has high ceilings, antiques, and parquet floors. This is hardly a lowly pension, but a fair-priced and prestigious address with its own special charms. See p. 90.
- **Best Service:** The **Hotel de France** (☎ 01/31368; www.hoteldefrance.at), near the Votivkirche, is hardly the best hotel in Vienna, but the attentive and highly professional staff makes a stay here particularly delightful. Room service is efficient, messages are delivered promptly, and the housekeepers turn down your bed at night. See p. 71.
- **Best Location:** Although it's no Bristol or Imperial, the **Hotel Ambassador** (☎ 01/961610; www.ambassador.at) is definitely where you want to be. The hotel lies between the State Opera and St. Stephan's, with the Kärntnerstrasse on the other side. The Ambassador has enjoyed its position here since 1866, and has played host to both Mark Twain and Theodore Roosevelt. See p. 70.
- **Best Health Club:** The **Hilton Vienna** (☎ 800/445-8667 or 01/717000; www.hilton.com) sponsors the Pyrron Health Club (under different management) on its premises. This is, by far, the most professional health club in town, with state-of-the-art equipment and facilities for both men and women. See p. 86.

- **Best Hotel Pool:** Of the three hotels in town that have pools, the biggest and best is in the Euro Freizeit und Fitness spa in the windowless cellar of the **Vienna Marriott** (☎ 888/236-2427 in the U.S., or 01/515180; www.marriott.com). It's about 11x7.2m (36x24 ft.) and ringed with potted plants and tables. The spa has a pair of saunas, an exercise room, and massage facilities. Marriott guests enter free. See p. 74.
- **Best Views:** Overlooking the Danube Canal, the 18-story **Hilton Vienna** (see "Best Health Club," above) offers panoramic views from its top floors. Plush accommodations and elegant public rooms also lure guests. The cityscape views are quite dramatic at both dawn and sunset. See p. 86.

3 BEST DINING BETS

For details on these and other restaurants, see chapter 6.

- **Best Spot for a Romantic Dinner:** The **Sacher Hotel Restaurant**, in the Hotel Sacher Wien (☎ 01/514560), is a showcase for imperial Vienna. Franz Joseph's favorite dish was *tafelspitz*, a delectable boiled beef dinner that's still served here, along with various Viennese and international dishes. And, the fabled Sachertorte was invented here. See p. 102.
- **Best Spot for a Celebration:** When you want to take your significant other or a group of friends to a special place, **Altwienerhof** (☎ 01/8926000), serving Austrian and French cuisine, is a discriminating choice. A private home in the 1870s, it's now one of the city's premier restaurants. Of course, if it's a real celebration, you'll order champagne, but if not, you can choose something from its wine cellar, one of Vienna's largest. See p. 123.
- **Best Cafe Dining:** Installed in the old glassed-in palm garden of Kaiser Franz Josef's palace, **Palmenhaus** (☎ 01/5331033) has been restored to its original splendor. The hottest cafe restaurant in Vienna, it features well-honed Austrian cuisine. See p. 112.
- **Best Decor:** At **Steirereck** (☎ 01/7133168), which means "corner of Styria," the decor is pristine and pure, with original beams and archways transplanted from an old Styrian castle. Murals also add to the elegant ambience, but the food is what brings most guests here. See p. 115.
- **Best Wine List:** There are far more elegant restaurants in Vienna and far better places serving haute cuisine, but the wine list at **Weibels Wirtshaus** (☎ 01/5123986) is definitely for the connoisseur. Discerning Austrians flock here for the simple but tasty food and a wine list that includes some 250 varieties. All the vintages are Austrian. See p. 104.
- **Most Stylish Restaurant:** Bankers, diplomats, and Helmut Lang-clad hipsters agree on only one thing: **Mörwald im Ambassador** (☎ 01/961610) is the most fashionable joint in town. Noted for its first-rate Viennese cuisine, it virtually celebrates food itself. All the specialties are perfectly prepared and imaginative. Look your best if you show up at this stylish enclave of fine dining. See p. 102.
- **Best for Kids:** **Gulaschmuseum** (☎ 01/5121017) will make a goulash lover out of the most stubborn of kids. Inspired by Hungary, the kitchen prepares some 15 varieties of this world-famous dish. See p. 109.

- **Best Viennese Cuisine:** There is no more traditional place to dine in all of Vienna than the **Wiener Rathauskeller** (☎ 01/405-1210), a cellar-level restaurant in Vienna's Town Hall. Partake of authentic cuisine in atmospheric rooms, and dine in a style similar to that which Mozart enjoyed. Live musicians entertain as you sample your Wiener schnitzel. See p. 104.
- **Best Hungarian Cuisine:** If you can't visit neighboring Budapest, you can get a taste of Hungarian fare at **Kardos** (☎ 01/5126949). Try all the Gypsy *schmaltz* favorites, including Lake Balaton-style fish soup. See p. 112.
- **Best Seafood:** The freshest seafood in Vienna—flown in from the North Sea or the Bosphorus—is available in the center of town at the **Kervansaray und Hummer Bar** (☎ 01/5128843). Here, you'll find Vienna's finest lobster catch. See p. 101.
- **Best Desserts:** Sweet tooths flock to the legendary **Café Demel** (☎ 01/5351717), which took the Hotel Sacher to court over the recipe for the original Sachertorte. Demel also boasts Vienna's finest array of pastries and delectable desserts like *gugelhupfs* (cream-filled horns). See p. 110.
- **Best Afternoon Tea:** Situated across from the Hofburg, the grand **Café Central** (☎ 01/5333764) is an ideal location for a spot of tea. The decor evokes the rich trappings of late imperial Vienna. You'll find a wide selection of tea (and coffee), as well as a rich variety of pastries and desserts. See p. 110.
- **Best Brunch:** In a style that would have impressed Maria Theresa herself, **Café Imperial**, in the Hotel Imperial (☎ 01/50110389), prepares an outstanding breakfast buffet on Sundays beginning at 7am. See p. 111.
- **Best Music Feast:** To a true Viennese, a meal is not a meal without music. At **Wiener Rathauskeller**, in City Hall (☎ 01/405-1210), you'll enjoy all the schnitzel and sauerkraut you can eat while listening to musicians ramble through the world of operetta, waltz, and *schrammel*. See p. 104.
- **Best Picnic Fare:** Head for the **Naschmarkt**, the open-air food market that's a 5-minute stroll from the Karlsplatz. Here you can gather all the ingredients for a spectacular picnic and then enjoy it at the Stadtpark, the Volksgarten, or even in the Vienna Woods. See p. 120.