

Vienna

LIFE'S A BALL IN AUSTRIA'S MUSICAL MECCA. **KIM TRAILL** WALTZES THE COMPOSER TRAIL, LEAVING STRUDEL CRUMBS IN HER WAKE

If the mention of Vienna conjures images of superb orchestras, fine opera, cherubic choirboys, Strauss waltzes, lavish palaces, opulent concert halls, magnificent churches... and a slice of deliciously chocolatey Sacher torte in a traditional coffee house, then a visit to the former imperial capital of the Habsburgs is unlikely to disappoint. Boasting a rich musical heritage and thriving performance scene, the vibrant city on the Danube offers a smorgasbord of delights for music aficionados, so sumptuous and abundant it's hard to know where to start.

Once home to luminaries including Gluck, Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner, Schoenberg and the Strauss dynasty, the elegant Baroque streetscapes and verdant parks of present-day Vienna are bursting with memorials to its famous former residents. In fact, it's almost impossible to wander more than a few hundred metres without being reminded of this awe-inspiring concentration of musical genius.

Marble plaques everywhere indicate the birth/deathplace or residence of some legendary composer or other. If you've ever wondered where Mozart wrote *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Beethoven the *Ode to Joy* or Schubert his *Unfinished* Symphony, you need go no further. And if you're keen to see where Haydn was a choirboy or where Salieri died, it's all here, too.

Open to visitors is the Mozarthaus, a luxurious apartment near St Stephen's

Cathedral where Wolfgang Amadeus lived from 1784–1787, composing eight piano concertos and *Le nozze di Figaro* along the way. So is the Beethoven Wohnung on Probusgasse, where the composer wrote the famous, despairing Heiligenstadt Testament in 1802: the unsent letter to his brothers confessing the extent of his advancing deafness. This light-filled house with its charming courtyard was just one of more than 50 places the debt-riddled composer lived in Vienna.

Outdoors, tourists flock to be photographed with the gaudily gilded, violin-wielding Waltz King – that's Johann Strauss, not André Rieu! – framed by the marble arch in Stadtpark. A pedastalled Mozart presiding over the blossoming treble clef planted in the Burggarten is another favourite with the clicking hordes. It's a city of statues – the real deal, not the stiff-limbed buskers: Beethoven sits proudly in his own square opposite the Konzerthaus, Brahms across from the Musikverein, Haydn gazes benevolently down on the main shopping strip.

Touts in period costume lurk by most major sights, plying concert tickets to visitors eager to sample some Viennese musical culture. Busloads of tourists pour into the Kurzsalon in Stadtpark, the majestic Hofburg (Imperial Palace) and the Orangerie at Schönbrunn Palace for easily digestible evenings of Mozart arias, Strauss waltzes, polkas and polonaises, performed



TRAVEL INFO**Average Temperatures:**

Winter: -1°C - -5°C Summer: 15°C-25°C

Currency: Euro (AU\$1=€0.74)

Best time to visit: The opulent Vienna Ball season is from Dec–Mar

TOURIST INFORMATION

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The floral treble clef at Burggarten



The original Waltz King: Stadtpark's gilded Strauss

by musicians in 18th-century garb, replete with silk robes and wigs.

For something more substantial, head to one of Vienna's two main concert halls: the iconic Musikverein on Karlsplatz or the art nouveau Konzerthaus, a short walk away between Schwarzenbergplatz and Stadtpark. The Golden Hall of the former is truly stunning, famed for the finest acoustics of any concert hall in the world, in which to hear recitals to tempt even the most discerning of music lovers. The Vienna Philharmonic and Vienna Symphony are regular fixtures at both venues, along with a who's-who of touring world-class orchestras, soloists and conductors: Sir Simon Rattle, Zubin Mehta, Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Gustavo Dudamel pop up frequently.

The Konzerthaus offers a more eclectic program than the Musikverein, encompassing world music and jazz. Both venues have several more intimate halls, often featuring chamber music and contemporary music ensembles. It's worth doing your homework and booking ahead, especially for festivals – which are frequent. Over the summer months, the locals tend to head out of the capital, and the big-name orchestras are generally on holiday or touring. During this time, the Musikverein still operates, although performances are more of the pops, package tour variety.

Of course, the Ball Season in January and February is the highlight of the Viennese social calendar, with every organisation and institution you can possibly imagine hosting its own event. Along with the feted Vienna Philharmonic and Opera Balls, there's the Pharmacists' Ball, the Hunters' Ball, the Doctors' Ball, the Confectionery Bakers' Ball... Over 400 in all, so take your pick! Most offer tickets to the public, but be

warned, patrons spend big and dress to the hilt! Black tie for the Herren, twirling taffeta, glittering sequins, velvet, gold and diamonds for the Damen. Debutantes train for months in advance, learning polkas, polonaises and waltzes for their big moment.

Opera-loving visitors to the Austrian capital are also spoiled for choice. The magnificent Staatsoper offers more than 50

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opera and ballet productions annually, with this season's starry line-up including the likes of Jonas Kaufmann, Plácido Domingo and Anna Netrebko. If you miss out on a seat, try picking up a *stehplatz* (standing) ticket for only five euros, right before the performance. And if that fails, in April, May, June and September a 50-m² screen goes up on the Herbert von Karajan Platz side of the building, where you can watch the performances for free.

For lighter fare – operetta and musicals – the Volksoper is a fun night out. My personal favourite is the Theater an der Wien, just off the colourful open-air Naschmarkt. Brainchild of *The Magic Flute* librettist Emanuel Schikaneder, the theatre was opened in 1801 to great acclaim and has seen many notable premieres, including Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*. Looking upon this confection of red velvet, gilded stucco and pastel murals is like stepping back in time. Most events on the religious calendar are public holidays, commemorated accordingly in Vienna's cathedrals and churches. Several

present full masses, complete with choir, soloists and period-instrument orchestra. Look out for the program at the 14th-century Augustinian Church, sandwiched between the Albertina and the Hofburg. Founded in 1327 by Duke Frederick the Handsome, later to become the Imperial Church and location for many a pompous wedding, the Kirche puts on a different mass every Sunday, with more around Easter, Christmas, Ascension and All Saints. The musicians sit high above and behind the congregation with the organ pipes, so you won't see much, but the acoustics are glorious. You'll possibly notice too, that *lederhosen* and *dirndls* – the traditional cleavage-enhancing dress with apron – are still in fashion for an Austrian Sunday outing.

When your bum is numb from hard church pews, take a stroll through the quaint cobblestone laneways, watching out for passing tourist-laden *fiacres* (horse-drawn carriages). Stop for a strudel with *schlagobers* (whipped cream), and seconds of a tempting torte in Café Central or Demel on the Kohlmarkt. Visit the Haus Der Musik for an entertaining and interactive venture through the history of music. Wander around the grand boulevard Ringstrasse. Admire the architectural monuments – museums, palaces and public buildings, commissioned by Kaiser Franz Josef I during his 68-year reign. Devour a plate-sized schnitzel and wash it down with a local brew. Sample some schnapps. Go for a hike in the Vienna Woods around Kahlenberg, savouring the spectacular views over the city and the Danube, all the way to the Karpathian mountains in Slovakia. Take a boat downriver to Bratislava, or upriver to Melk. Visit a vineyard, quaff some local wine in a *Heurige*. The culture is as rich and decadent as the food in Austria's musical heartland. ●

