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Debutantes and their escorts twirl in a waltz around the dance floor at the Fete Imperiale ball in Vienna. Katherine Rodeghier



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If you're attending the Fete Imperiale, complete the Cinderella fantasy by arriving in a horse-drawn carriage.

Having a ball in Vienna for a good cause

By KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Special Contributor

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VIENNA — The dancers whirl, debutantes in white gowns and long white gloves, their handsome escorts in black tails and white bow ties.

From my perch in the balcony of the Spanish Riding School in Hofburg palace, I look down to where the storied white Lipizzan stallions perform their choreographed ballet. Tonight the horses are elsewhere, the sawdust arena covered with a red-and-white-checked dance floor where the young people waltz.

The music ends and the conductor calls "*Alles walzer*," inviting everyone to join in. This Cinderella will, and so can you, in June. All you need is a ball gown in your suitcase and a ticket to the dance in your evening bag.

Ball capital of the world

Formal balls surged in popularity in Vienna in 1814-15, when royals and politicians from across Europe came to the capital of the Habsburg monarchy to redefine borders after Napoleon's defeat. The Viennese wanted to impress these VIPs, so they put on lavish balls.

Today Vienna has more than 450 balls each year, most in winter. The Grand Ball opens the season on New Year's Eve, followed by the Opera Ball, the largest and most lavish, in February.

In 2010, a new tradition began: a rare summer ball in late June to benefit the preservation and breeding of the Lipizzans.

Fête Impériale draws up to 3,000 ballgoers to the Hofburg, the former royal palace that's now a complex of museums and public spaces. The Winter Riding School on the grounds transforms into an elegant ballroom. Box seats are set up on the floor and a stage is arranged for the orchestra.

The venue is not without precedent for such events. Empress Maria Theresa held imperial celebrations here in the 18th century.

Music and dance for all ages

In Vienna, balls do not begin with a banquet. People come to dance, not to eat. They arrive at the Fête Impériale, some on foot, some by limousine, some Cinderella-style in the fancy white horse-drawn carriages that circulate around the old section of the city.

At 9 p.m., the procession into the Winter Riding School begins with a marching band. The Vienna Boys Choir takes the floor for a few songs, and stars from the Vienna State Opera perform an aria or two. Then the debutantes dance, their counterclockwise waltz mesmerizing the crowd.

It's almost 10 before the floor opens to all for waltzing, clockwise now, and the room becomes a sea of brightly colored ball gowns.

For all the ritual and formal dress, this ball, like others in Vienna, is not just for a staid, older crowd. Waltz music gives way to pop and Motown as dancers from 20-somethings to retirees cut loose to "Blue Suede Shoes" and "The Twist." They spill over to the adjacent Stallburg, imperial stables dating from the 16th century, where yet another band plays.

When the temperature rises, they move outdoors for fresh air, drinks and snacks.

Dancing till dawn, glass slipper optional

None of these Cinderellas would dream of departing at midnight. That's when the orchestra strikes up Johann Strauss' "Die Fledermaus" and the dance master calls out the complicated steps of a quadrille. The group dance descends into good-humored chaos as the tempo picks up and the dancers, a bit tipsy by now, stumble and miss their cues.

The evening carries on with disco until 4 a.m. Often ballgoers wander to nearby coffeehouses for plates of goulash, or to the plaza outside the Albertina museum to see if the sausage stand is still open. Then it's back to their homes or hotels, the sun peeking over the rooftops and around the church spires of the old city.

With no missing glass slipper to worry me, this Cinderella will be sleeping in.

Katherine Rodeghier is a Chicago-area freelance writer.

When you go

This year's Fête Impériale is June 27. Individual tickets range from about \$70 for students up to age 27, to about \$245 for a VIP ticket. Seats at tables, including VIP tickets, range from about \$380 to \$785.

Dress code: Floor-length evening gowns for women, white tie or dinner jacket for men.

Where to stay: Hotel Sacher, Philharmonikerstrasse 4, is Vienna's grand hotel, in walking distance of the Spanish Riding School. From \$570 per night, sacher.com. A two-night Fête Impériale package for two starts around \$2,800 and includes deluxe double room, buffet breakfast, four-course dinner, VIP Fête Impériale tickets, cocktail reception and spa treatment.

Information: fete-imperiale.at; Austrian Tourist Office, austria.info