



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER
Debutantes and their escorts twirl in a waltz around the dance floor inside the Spanish Riding School during the Fete Imperiale ball in Vienna, Austria.

Playing Cinderella in Vienna

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

VIENNA, Austria — 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 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 ballgown in your suitcase and a ticket to the dance for your evening bag.

Ball capital of the world

Formal balls surged in popularity in Vienna in 1814-1815 when royals and politicians from across Europe came to the capital of the Hapsburg monarchy to redefine borders following Napoleon's defeat. The Viennese wanted to impress these VIPs, so lavish balls were held, heavily influenced by the pomp and splendor of the royal court.

Today more than 450 balls are held each year in Vienna, most of them in winter. The Grand Ball opens the season on New Year's Eve followed by the Opera Ball, the largest and most lavish of them all, in February. In 2010, a new ball tradition began, a rare summer ball held in late June to benefit the preservation and breeding of the Lipizzans.

Fete Imperiale draws up to 3,000 ball goers 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 resembling the inside of a white wedding cake. Box seats are set up on the floor, a stage is arranged for the orchestra, balcony pillars are wrapped in decorations and polished chandeliers cast a warm glow over all. 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. Ball goers have already dined before they begin arriving for the Fete Imperiale, some on foot, some by limousine, some Cinderella style in the fancy white horse-drawn carriages that circulate around the

Summer ball captures fairy-tale romance of imperial Austria
travel

Fete Imperiale 2014

When: Friday, June 27

Getting there: Austrian Airlines flies nonstop to Vienna from Chicago.

Prices: 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. Boxes range from about \$6,270 for eight seats to \$9,730 for 12 seats.

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 walking distance to the Spanish Riding School. From \$570 per night, sacher.com. A two-night Fete Imperiale package for two starts around \$2,800 and includes deluxe double room, buffet breakfast, four-course dinner, VIP Fete Imperiale tickets, cocktail reception and a spa treatment.

Information: fete-imperiale.at. Austrian Tourist Office, (212) 944-6880, Austria.info.

old section of the city. In high spirits, VIP ticket holders gather under St. Michael's cupola outside the Imperial Apartments to mingle and sip pink sparkling wine.

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 ballgowns festooned with ruffles, ribbons and bows; the women in elaborate hairdos, the men in tuxes, their shirts a crisp white, shoes gleaming under



The Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria, is transformed from an arena for performing Lipizzan horses to an elegant ballroom.



Horse-drawn carriages transport ball goers to the Hofburg Palace for the Fete Imperiale in Vienna, Austria.

high polish.

But 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 twenty-somethings to pensioners cut loose to “Blue Suede Shoes” and “The Twist.” They spill from the floor of the Winter Riding School to the

adjacent Stallburg, imperial stables dating from the 16th century where yet another band plays to a crowded dance floor. When the temperature rises, they move outdoors to the Summer Riding School for fresh air, drinks and light snacks.

Dancing 'til dawn

None of these Cinderellas would

dream of departing the ball at midnight when another festive tradition begins.

The orchestra strikes up Johann Strauss' “Die Fledermaus” and the dance master calls out the complicated steps of a quadrille.

The jaunty group dance begins in an orderly manner, but descends into good-humored chaos as the tempo picks up and dancers, a bit tipsy by this time of the night, stumble and miss their cues.

The evening carries on with disco until the last dance at 4 a.m. Often ball goers 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.

• *Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by the Austrian Tourist Office and the Hotel Sacher.*