

TIME OUT! SUNDAY

Your Planning Guide for Entertainment & Travel

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Waltzing through Vienna

Exploring Austria's beloved old city



The Hofburg has many Baroque elements.



One of three pedestrian-only shopping streets in the old city, the Kohlmarkt is just off the Baroque structures of the Hofburg.



St. Stephen's Cathedral in the old city is the seat of the archbishop of Vienna.

Ring around Vienna

By Katherine Rodeghier
Daily Herald Correspondent

VIENNA, Austria — The bright yellow streetcar rolls to a stop, its bell clanging. I join the queue of passengers shuffling aboard, pop in a pair of ear buds and listen to the commentary in English as we pass one historic site after another. Most were built by the Habsburgs, who ruled their vast empire from this city for 640 years.

In 1857, Emperor Franz Joseph ordered the medieval walls encircling his palace and the old city be razed. In their place, a leafy boulevard surrounds grand old buildings and green parks. Strollers and bicyclists along this Ringstrasse move with the traffic, the Ring Tram making 13 stops where passengers can hop off to explore on foot.

I set off to explore inside the Ring: **The Hofburg:** The winter palace of Habsburg emperors and empresses was the epicenter of court life from 1278 to 1918. Now it's a complex of museums: the Imperial Apartments, the Imperial Treasury, the National Library and the Albertina, a museum devoted to graphic arts.

Those lucky enough to get tickets can see the Lippizan horses — those Rockettes of the equine world — perform in the Spanish Riding School, and the Vienna Boys Choir sing in the Gothic chapel, Burgkappelle — that is, if they aren't on tour.

St. Stephen's Cathedral: Legend has it that Beethoven realized he had gone completely deaf when he saw birds flying from the towers of this church, but could not hear the pealing of the bells that startled them. When I enter, a reverent

silence hangs in the air as I join visitors milling around candlelit side chapels.

Symbol of Vienna, this massive church has both Romanesque and Gothic features, its current appearance with elements from the 12th to the 16th century. The steep roof with glazed color tiles was rebuilt after a fire in World War II. The south tower, which the Viennese nicknamed "Steffi," is the tallest structure in the old city at 445 feet. The hardy climb its spiral steps for the best view, but those with less stamina can get a

good view from the lower north tower, which has an elevator.

Gardens: Walking along the Ring, I'm drawn to a statue of Mozart and smile when I realize the flower bed before it has been planted in the shape of a treble clef. Behind the musical genius lies the cool green of the Burggarten with a pond and butterfly conservatory.

Farther along the Ring, massive Baroque buildings form a semicircle around the Heldenplatz and I stand in the spot where crowds cheered Adolf Hitler as he stood on the grand portico and announced the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany. Beyond it stretches the Volksgarten with its rose beds and benches on manicured lawns, perfect perches for people watching.

Shopping streets: I love walking to explore a city, but hate dodging traffic. No problem on three pedestrian-only streets that form three sides of a trapezoid in the old city. Kohlmarkt is lined with the luxury shops of Gucci, Tiffany, Armani and Louis Vuitton. I turn onto Graben — moat in German, a reference to one that surrounded a medieval stronghold — and find more upscale shops and the Plague Column, a statue commissioned in 1679 in the hope that it would end the disease in the city. Its rich Baroque figures, some in gold, depict the Holy Trinity.

At St. Stephen's, I make a right onto Karnner Strasse, the longest and perhaps grandest of the pedestrian streets. On warm days, outdoor cafes set up down its center. A sweets shop



The Burggarten is a quiet green space inside the Hofburg. A glass building houses a butterfly conservatory and restaurant.

A doorman greets guests at the Hotel Sacher, a grand old hotel opposite the Opera House.



sells candied violets, a favorite of Sisi, nickname for the free-spirited Empress Elisabeth. The Swarovski store dazzles with crystal and a champagne bar on the first floor.

Coffeehouses: The Viennese are serious about their coffee, but even more so about their coffeehouses, places where the literati, ministers, artists, students and musicians once gathered. They'd while away their time reading, philosophizing, gossiping and perhaps playing billiards or chess.

The tradition waned in the 1960s and 1970s but has rebounded to the point that the city now has more than 800 coffeehouses, about 150 of them classic coffeehouses where waiters still dress in black, the floors are wooden and the tabletops marble. The Viennese coffeehouse was added to UNESCO'S list of cultural heritages in 2011.

In Demel, which has been serving cakes and coffee for more than 200 years, I order a pastry from a glass case near the entrance, find a table in the back and order coffee from a lengthy menu. Among the many choices are a mélange, which comes with steamed milk and foam; einspanner, a large mocha served in a tall glass with whipped cream; and eiskaffee served with vanilla ice cream and whipped cream.

At Café Sacher, the piece de resistance is the original Sacher torte, created in 1832 by pastry apprentice Franz Sacher serving Habsburg Prince Metternich. The chocolate cake with apricot filling and chocolate icing was an instant hit and today thousands of the

tortes are shipped around the world.

In 1876, Franz's son opened the Sacher Hotel with the cake as its hallmark and began catering to Vienna's high society. More recent guests have included Queen Elizabeth, John F. Kennedy, Indira Gandhi and John Lennon who staged a "bed-in" here with Yoko Ono.

Imperial Burial Vault: When members of the royal family died, their hearts were removed and placed in silver urns in the Augustinian Church in the Hofburg. Their bodies, though, were placed in the Imperial Crypt in the Church of the Capuchin Friars in the old town. The reason? Indulgences could be paid and prayers said in two churches, reducing

the royals' time in purgatory.

Inside this relatively plain Capuchin church stand the ornate burial vaults of 150 members of the royal family, including most Habsburg rulers going back to 1633. One of the most elaborate claims the remains of Maria Theresa whose 16 children populated the royal courts of Europe. One of them, Marie Antoinette, didn't fare so well in France.

Mozart's apartment: The musical wunderkind resided in several apartments in Vienna, but only one survives. Mozarthaus Vienna, where he and his family lived from 1784 to 1787 is where he composed several of his works, most famously the opera "Marriage of Figaro."

The former royal buildings in the Heldenplatz, one of the plazas in the Hofburg, are now museums.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHERINE RODEGHIER



Flower beds planted in the shape of a treble clef lead to Mozart's statue in the Burggarten.



Coffee and cake are served on marble tabletops at Demel, a classic Viennese coffeehouse on the pedestrian street, Kohlmarkt.

The actual apartment seems small to me, just four large and two small rooms on one floor. Three other floors in the building contain exhibits of his life in Vienna, his membership in the Freemasons and the gambling that kept him perpetually broke.

Opera House: This first public building constructed after the creation of the Ringstrasse was built in French Renaissance style, but after bombings in World War II, all that remained was the facade. The State Opera House has since been rebuilt and is open for tours as well as performances on the stage where Gustav Mahler once conducted.

I don't have a ticket but catch part of an opera on a massive video screen outdoors with seating on the plaza. It's a lovely way to spend an evening and, best of all, it's free.

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

Going places:
Vienna

Getting there: Austrian Airlines, Austrian.com, began operating from O'Hare International Airport in May and currently has the only nonstop service between Chicago and Vienna. The City Airport Train, cityairporttrain.com, travels from the airport to the city center station (about \$16) from where you can walk or take a cab to your destination.

Ring Tram: Runs from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily in 30-minute circuits; one circuit costs about \$10, hop-on, hop-off rides cost about \$12 per 24-hour period.

Where to stay:

- Hotel Sacher, Philharmonikerstrasse 4, opened in 1876 opposite the Opera House and renovated in 2004, is Vienna's grand old hotel. Famous for the chocolate Sacher torte, its spa offers "Time to Chocolate" body treatments. From \$570 per night, sacher.com.

- Hotel Altstadt Vienna, Kirchengasse 41, a bohemian, artsy property in the Spittelberg artist quarter just outside the Ring. From \$160 per night, including buffet breakfast and afternoon tea buffet, altstadt.at.

Where to eat:

- Anna Sacher, Philharmonikerstrasse 4, +43 1 514 56-840, contemporary Austrian cuisine served in the Hotel Sacher.

- Palmenhaus, Burggarten, +43 1 533 10 33-0, brasserie under the glass dome of the Burggarten.

Save: The Vienna Card buys holders 72 hours of unlimited travel on public transportation as well as discounts at more than 210 establishments, such as museums, cafes, theaters and shops. Costs about \$26 at tourist information offices, some hotels, ticket desks, subway stations and online at wien.info/en/travel-info/vienna-card.

More info: Austrian Tourist Office, (212) 944-6880, Austria.info. The Vienna Tourist Board, Vienna.info, has an office open daily inside the Ring at Albertinaplatz/Mayse-dergasse.