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Vienna: coffee and culture

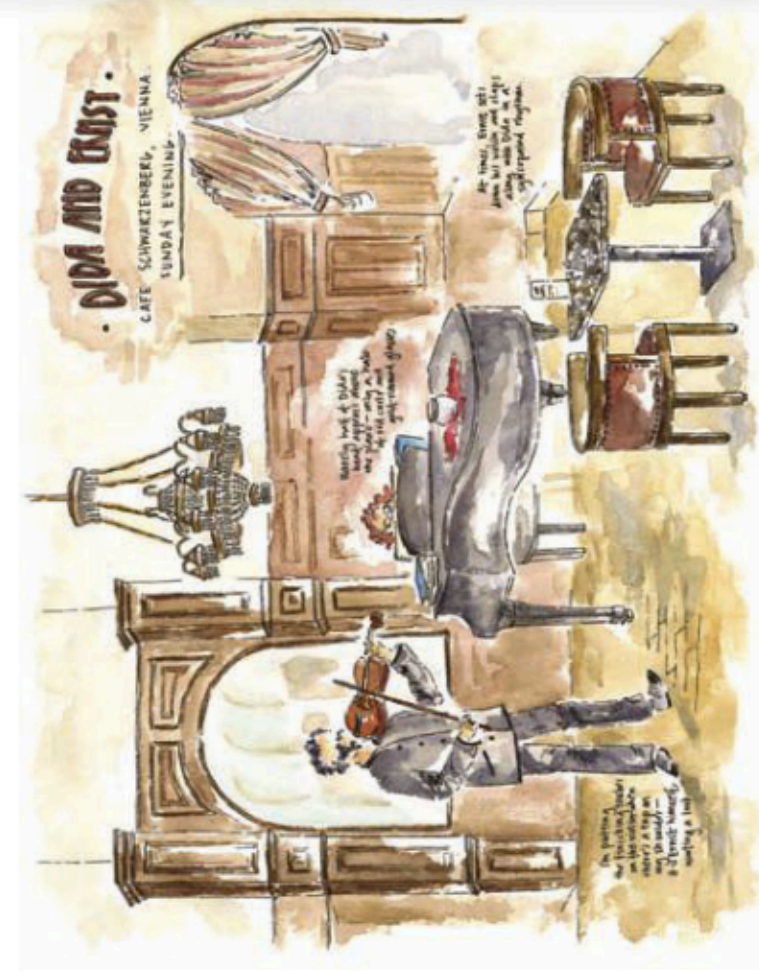


Lingering over a coffee in one of Vienna's exquisite cafés can prove irresistible – particularly in you have a sketchbook in hand...

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AHH, VIENNA





the Habsburgs in the 15th century – and was capital of both the Holy Roman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Historic city centre buildings such as the Hofburg Palace and St. Stephen's Cathedral are well worth a visit, as are markets such as the Naschmarkt, founded in the 18th century. But perhaps Vienna's greatest draw is the river that runs through it – the famously blue Danube, Europe's longest river.

Vienna is one of four Central European capitals on its banks, including Bratislava, Budapest and Belgrade. During the summer months there is no finer way to experience Vienna than from the water. Take a day to sail east and explore the Slovakian capital of Bratislava – just a 90-minute journey by hydrofoil – or venture west to the Wachau Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of Austria's most popular wine growing

regions. The end of June is a particularly firing time for a cruise through the valley, as it coincides with the summer solstice. On 21 June, the Midsummer Night festival finds locals setting paper boats afloat on the river, illuminating the slopes of vineyards with flaming torches and celebrating the shortest night of the year with fireworks, bonfires and parties.

But with showers chilling the air, my Viennese weekend is best spent indoors. The next coffeehouse on my list is the Café Oper Wien, located just down the street in the Vienna State Opera House. Since the late 18th century, when composers such as Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven spent time in the city, Vienna has been a true creative nucleus, giving rise to an array of galleries, classical concerts and an extravagant ball culture. Although most of Vienna's ☺



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troops after the 1683 Siege of Vienna. By the end of the 19th century there were some 600 such establishments in the city. UNESCO even added the Viennese coffeehouse to its list of intangible cultural heritage in 2011, citing it as a place 'where time and space are consumed, but only the coffee is found on the bill'.

I'm surprised to learn that not only are you allowed to spend hours sipping a single cappuccino or 'Wiener melange' – the city's speciality drink of espresso with foamy steamed milk – but that the practice is actively encouraged. I decide to put tradition to the test, and to document my quest, I bring along my watercolors and a fresh sketchbook.

Settled around 500BC, Vienna has served as the headquarters of several key dynasties over the millennia – most notably

Writers in black jackets and bow ties busle past hoarding espressos on round silver trays. Newspapers hang by long wooden holders on a rack by the door. And before me stretches a row of tables, marble tops gleaming beneath the glow of crystal chandeliers. Coffee steam and hushed conversations dance in the air.

Opened in 1861, Café Schwarzenberg was the first coffeehouse to be built along Vienna's Ringstrasse – the elegant boulevard encircling the city's Innere Stadt district, or Old Town. But the Austrian capital's renowned coffeehouse culture dates back far further than that: a popular legend claims that the inaugural café was started with beans left behind by retreating Turkish



450 annual balls take place during the carnival season in January and February, a few key events keep the city waltzing through the summer. The Life Ball – Europe’s biggest charity event for those with HIV and AIDS – is held on 31 May, while the Fête Impériale, or the Summer Ball of the Spanish Riding School, takes place on 27 June, its 3,000 guests dancing in the open-aired courtyard of the Stallburg.

But it’s music I’m after on this trip. The Vienna State Opera is renowned for the breadth of its repertoire – in May and June alone the company will perform nearly 20 works, including *Tosca*, *La Traviata*, *La Clamenza di Tito* and Mozart’s much-loved opera, *The Magic Flute*. I haven’t booked in advance but I’m in luck: there’s one ticket left for that night’s performance

of *Carmen*. Bizet’s plaintive strains rise to fill every corner of the opera house’s domed auditorium and six horseshoe-shaped tiers. Caught up in the story being enacted on stage, I am transported by the music, by this beautiful theatre and by Vienna itself, which is winning me over one delicious Wiener melange at a time.

Through the rest of the weekend, each coffeehouse reveals another dimension to the city. In Café Sacher, inside the five-star Hotel Sacher, I taste the eponymous dessert that has kept sweet-toothed patrons coming since 1832 – sachertorte, a decadent chocolate sponge cake layered with apricot jam and chocolate icing. At Café Demel I watch pastry chefs mould marzipan creations, and at the Café Leopold Hawelka, learn of the Austrian writers and ©



artists who frequented it in the 1960s and '70s, often joined by such esteemed guests as Andy Warhol and Arthur Miller.

Walking towards the Café Imperial one afternoon, I stumble upon rows of yellow tents set up on the Karlsplatz, one of the city's largest squares. As the scent of freshly grilled sausages and French fries wafts from the stalls, street musicians taking part in the annual Vienna Buskers Festival fill the busy square with an eclectic mix of music. There are break-dancers and beat-boxers, violinists and tambourine shakers in the shadow of the magnificent baroque Karlskirche, and a man playing a didgeridoo while tapping out metallic melodies on a hang, an instrument resembling an inverted steel drum.

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Back at the Café Schwarzenberg that night, I find more live music, courtesy of a mustachioed violinist and an accompanist

whose halo of red hair barely peeks out above the top of the baby grand piano. I sketch quietly while the tables around me are engaged in their private conversations.

It's only when a woman requests Strauss's *The Blue Danube* and she and a friend stand up to waltz that the room is brought to attention. Our feet tap in time; we hum the famous melody as one; and together we sway in our seats, swept up in a singular vision of the city – a place rich in history and tradition, but as alive and present today as two musicians enchanting a coffeehouse on a Sunday evening. ☺