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STREETS AHEAD

Behind the wheel of the S-Class Coupe



COZY IN VIENNA
The Austrian capital's hidden heart



ORIENT EXPRESS
Canada's new Chinese food



RETHINK THE RANCH

Getaways go zen in B.C.'s cowboy country

Finding *Gemütlichkeit* in Vienna

Among the Austrian capital's coziest venues, we go in search of that intangible sense of well-being that the German language so aptly captures.

WORDS NATASHA MEKHAIL



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What is the feeling of the colour blue? I'm contemplating this question over a frothy café latte in the tiny Blue Bar of Vienna's Hotel Sacher, where the plush velvet booths are deep navy, the walls a silk brocade of peacock, the marble tables veined cobalt and even the 19th-century damsels in the oil paintings clothed in teal and azure.

The hotel's long-time former owner, Anna Sacher, understood atmosphere. Blue is the calm of water, of the sky in sunlight. Perhaps because it is the predominant colour of our world, even its coolest shades produce a warm emotion.

Presiding over her elegant hotel, cigar in hand and a cluster of French bulldogs in tow, Sacher not only had exacting standards (a culture that remains firmly intact at Austria's top hotel nearly 140 years later), she was also able to create spaces that guests could feel instantly at home in. In short, she created *gemütlichkeit*.

In English it takes a whole sentence to describe what in the German language can be summed up in that one succinct word. *Gemütlichkeit* conveys the sense of well-being that comes with an atmosphere of cheerfulness, unhurriedness, comfort and coziness. And while the meaning of the word may be abstract, you know it when you feel it, and places either have it or they don't.

Vienna in wintertime is the ultimate setting in which to chase this feeling. Not only does the city of palaces, classical music and wood-panelled coffee houses provide the coziest of backdrops, but the Viennese have the *gemütlichkeit* attitude to match. ➤

PHOTOS JESSICA SAMPLE (LEFT); DANIEL GEBHART DE KOEKOEK (RIGHT)



PAUSE PLAY

Viennese coffee-shop culture dates back to the 19th century and is even listed by UNESCO as "Intangible Cultural Heritage." Above left: the atmospheric Blue Bar at Hotel Sacher.



“Compared to other German-speaking places, Vienna is slowed down,” my guide, Alexa Brauner, tells me as we stroll the cobblestones on a grey day, wrapped tightly in our coats. “Even the speech here is more relaxed.” One example: the local predilection for using the diminutive suffix “*erl*,” which makes everything it’s tacked onto sound that much more delightful. “So we won’t say we’re going for *kaffee*,” says Brauner. “We’ll say we’re going for *kaffeetscherl*, a little coffee. You can tell right away someone’s from Vienna when you hear that.”

And so, on cue, we head to Café Sperl, the city’s oldest coffee house. There are dozens of cafés in the city, but Sperl is so quintessentially Viennese, it’s often cast to represent the city on film (look for its cameos in *Before Sunrise* and *A Dangerous Method*, among other movies). We arrive to find a long, grand room, all double-high arched windows, heavy draperies, twinkling chandeliers and

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SETTLE IN, GET COMFY

This page, clockwise: Kaffeetscherl time at 135-year-old Café Sperl; Austrian ambiance in Mayer am Pfarrplatz; hearty heuriger fare. Opposite: friendly formality in Café Central; lounging in MuseumsQuartier.

wooden chairs polished to a shine by 135 years of occupants in relaxation mode.

We settle in on a thickly upholstered bench to take in the scene. It’s midday on a weekday and the café is nearly full. From the kitchen, waitresses in starched white shirts endlessly appear with trays of milky coffees and tortes piled high with fresh cream. Elderly men read international newspapers held upright for easy reading on ingenious wooden stands. Two female friends burst into peals of laughter, rousing the sleeping schnauzer under their table. A group of university students rack up on one of the antique billiards tables. It’s a cross-section of the city under one roof.

From the office appears Rainer Staub, whose family has run the coffee house for three generations. He greets us warmly and, when I ask what gives Café Sperl its *gemütlichkeit*, doesn’t miss a beat: “It’s the living room of the Viennese people. You may be on your own, but you are never alone.”

Prostian memory

I deign to test Staub’s theory that evening when I arrive – with some trepidation – alone at Mayer am Pfarrplatz, in the city’s northern Döbling district. This is the edge of Vienna’s wine-producing region. The fertile slopes of the Nussberg mountain provide the bright whites and mellow reds served at local *heurigen* – new-wine taverns like this one where grapes collected in the August harvest are released as wines in November and enjoyed throughout the year.

Ducking through the low arch of the front gate, I discover a collection of whitewashed outbuildings surrounding a central courtyard, a hint at Mayer am Pfarrplatz’s 300-year history as an inn – one that counts Beethoven among its past guests. Decorated with pine boughs and fairy lights for Christmas, though it’s still autumn (I’ve been told the Viennese Christmas starts in September and lasts until February), the place exudes a palpable

sense of *gemütlichkeit*. Fire baskets bathe the courtyard in orange light and keep people warm as they line up at a wooden shack selling mugs of steaming *glühwein* and roasted chestnuts.

Inside the central hall, the heuriger’s original oak wine press dominates the low room. Large groups have crowded around communal tables and the air is filled with joyful voices and clinking glasses. I make myself comfortable at a table opposite an accordionist who stops to take a glug of wine before launching enthusiastically into the next oompah.

On the menu: hearty plates of goose, pork and venison accompanied by fat-roasted potatoes and winter greens. But rather than ordering à la carte, I opt for the more interactive deli-style buffet, where diners select their own house-cured meats, cheeses, salads and rustic breads – the slightly greasy nature of the fare and hands-on approach is the reason why heuriger wine is often served in clear mugs, rather than stemmed glasses.

Restaurant manager Christian Kaufmann assists with the wine selection so I can try a little of each, including a lively dry *Sekt*, or Austrian sparkling; a *Gemischter Satz*, a.k.a. a mixture of grape varieties planted and pressed together in the same vineyard; and *Sturm* (“Storm”), a cloudy, slightly sparkling wine served at the fermentation stage. Amid this sampling and the now raucous clamour of voices, I’ve almost forgotten my earlier shyness at dining solo. As I rise on wobbly legs to meet my cab, the accordionist gives a knowing wink. ➤

PHOTOS PHILIPP HORAK/ANZENBERGER (CAFÉ SPERL); MAYER AM PFARRPLATZ; JESSICA SAMPLE (CAFÉ CENTRAL); HERTHA HURINAUS (MUSEUMSQUARTIER)





SCENE SETTING

Clockwise from top: The grand gallery at the Kunsthistorisches Museum; the 28-sq-m Loos American Bar; the Vienna State Opera; original artworks by Vienna native Klimt can be found throughout the city's museums.



In the night gallery

A large part of Vienna's charm lies in its art and architecture. The city's works of beauty have been thoughtfully cultivated and shared since the time of the ruling House of Habsburg.

Vienna is the former home of great artists like Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt. The latter's *Kiss*, which we're so used to seeing as prints and on greeting cards, hangs at the Belvedere, alive with his brushstrokes and gold-leaf appliqué. In the same gallery: Schiele's touching portrait of his wife Edith, painted the year that she died from Spanish flu. His own death followed hers three days later – he was just 28.

The downtown MuseumsQuartier, meanwhile, is a pedestrian district containing more than a dozen galleries in the span of a city block. I venture just outside the complex on a chilly evening to the Kunsthistorisches Museum. It's 6 p.m. and museum guests are filing out. But for those of us who've reserved our personal take on *Night at the Museum*, the experience is just beginning. Emperor Franz Joseph opened this museum in 1891 as a place to display the Habsburg's extensive collection of antiquities and European masterworks. In doing so, he created a building as formidable as the objects it would house.

Before I've even ascended the marble steps toward the restaurant, I'm arrested by Antonio Canova's massive sculpture *Theseus Slaying the Centaur*. Above the staircase, I spot paintings by Klimt. These priceless treasures are just part of the furnishings. My table is waiting and the waiter is quick to proffer a welcoming flute of Pommery. All museum viewing should be like this: a reserved table from which to visit the exhibits at leisure, guided tours with art historians and a stellar menu (oysters, gravlax, roast beef, king prawns). Best of all, no crowds. I sip the champagne and marvel at the marble columns and cherub-strewn dome lit by the pink glow of the setting sun.

Soulful spaces

Adolf Loos was one of the first Modernist architects in Vienna. In the early 1900s, after sojourns in New York and Chicago, he brought a new philosophy to his contrastingly opulent native city, namely "ornamentation is a crime." With Loos' world view in mind, I set out for a pre-opera cocktail at a venue that serves as both a living example of the architect's social commentary and an unlikely masterpiece: Loos American Bar. It's less than

28 square metres (300 square feet), and my first reaction upon entering the room is to blurt out, "Is this *it*?" The bartender nods with a slightly exasperated expression.

I order the specialty (Loos Champagne Cocktail) and sit back on the barstool to take it all in – it doesn't take long. The dark wood panelling, green-leather banquettes and wall panels of backlit onyx lend a comfortable sophistication, while the cigar-smoke-filled air and clatter of cocktail shakers give it life. With five customers, the bar feels full. With 10, it's positively hopping. This is the essence of *gemütlichkeit*.

I leave after my cocktail, but not before another set of novices come through the door. "Is this it?" one exclaims. I cast a sidelong glance at the bartender in time to see his jaw subtly tense.

The Vienna State Opera is conveniently only a few blocks from Loos Bar and mere steps from Hotel Sacher – even the city planning has *gemütlichkeit*! – and so I arrive at my seat with a little time to spare. Music is as much a part of life here as the blue Danube. Mozart, Beethoven, Gluck and Lehár all made Vienna their home; Vivaldi lived in a house that once stood where the Sacher is today. Inside, the theatre is grand, but not cavernous; tall, to accommodate the many levels of private boxes, but not wide. It's soothing to be in such a storied hall of music. And as the curtain goes up on *La Traviata*, it's the scarlet I see most. It's in the curtains, the wall coverings and the plush velvet seats. And I can't help but wonder, *What is the feeling of red?*



PHOTOS THOMAS LINKE/LAIF (KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM), KLIMT; FATH PINAR/ANZENBERGER (OPÉRA); SANDRA RACCANELLO/SIME (CHRISTMAS MARKET)

Holiday Havens

At Christmastime, Vienna's *gemütlichkeit* is off the charts. Take it in at these festive markets (considered the city's most intimate) from mid-November through December 24.



1 OLD VIENNESE MARKET ON FREYUNG

The Viennese have been holding Christmas markets here since 1772. In the small, beautifully lit square, shop for one-of-a-kind ornaments and handmade gifts to the soundtrack of live carollers.



2 CHRISTMAS MARKET IN THE EHRENHOF

The regal Schönbrunn Palace sets the backdrop for this Christmas market that takes visitors back to a time before plastic, when holiday ornaments were made of materials like blown glass, wood and wax.



3 CHRISTMAS MARKET ON KARLSPLATZ

This market features an extensive children's program (think puppetry, crafts, games and visits from St. Nick) designed to keep kids busy while parents shop and relax over mulled wine and a sausage bun.

ADDRESSES

Vienna

Heritage Brands with *Gemütlichkeit*

Altmann & Kühne

Dating back to 1928, the Viennese confiserie is famous for its tiny handmade chocolates packaged in miniature boxes and doll-size chests of drawers. ALTMANN-KUEHNE.AT



J. & L. Lobmeyr

This manufacturer of timeless glassware was founded in 1823, when it began producing chandeliers, which later included the first electric version, in collaboration with Thomas Edison. LOBMEYR.AT

Demel

The 200-year-old bakery in the Kohlmarkt was the official confectioner to Austria's royal court, and it still sells the beautiful candied violets that were a favourite of Empress Sisi. DEMEL.AT



Mühlbauer

This millinery began making its high-quality hats in 1903. Today, followers of its contemporary offerings (including ball caps, visors and fascinators) include Brad Pitt and Madonna. MUEHLBAUER.AT

Original Sacher Torte

Many have imitated but none have quite duplicated the decadent chocolate cake made according to Franz Sacher's 1832 recipe. For the full experience, taste it at the source: Hotel Sacher. SACHER.COM