

## Transcript of Podcast 096 : Vienna Calling

*{INTRO: Indistinct voices in German at a Christmas Market}*

*{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}*

*{Intro standard announcement:*

*Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'whys' behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}*

*{Music fades. Podcast begins}*

Hello :)

So, before we start, I just want to clarify something from my last episode, where I briefly talked about drugs. And no, whatever you're thinking isn't the clarification. Rather, I didn't have a chat with V about this, but I ran through one in my head, where I imagined she asked me a simple question: "In my left hand I have a lifetime supply of gender-affirming pills. In my right hand I have a lifetime supply of Adderall. You can only choose one." And in my head I'd give her answer before she'd even finished the sentence. "Don't you want to think about it?" No, absolutely not.

See, one of those two would allow me to live the life that I feel I should have; one where I can be the person I want to be, and have the associated self-confidence clearly on display. I wouldn't be sat with my thoughts and worries about who and what I am, and whether I'd be happier if I changed. Or even if I was right to change. I'd be even more content to present how I wanted and act how my true self wished they could. It would resolve so many issues around self-esteem and make me love myself again, for the first time since, I don't know, primary school maybe.

The other one would allow me to live.

Like, there's a reason my podcast isn't as regular as it should be. There's a reason I have all these ideas when I lie in bed, about things to write and people to speak to, but when I get in front of my computer everything just dissolves into its atomic potential and is lost, and I instead do things I find requiring less short-term effort. "Oh I'll do it later, when my brain lets me" and very often my brain never lets me, I always find something better, easier, more comfortable, quicker, to do. Often the only override is to find something even more draining or unpleasant, and my 'unpleasant' I mean 'my brain does not want', it's not an indication of what the topic actually is. Writing a blog post, cooking a meal, booking a dentist appointment, it doesn't make a difference what it is, my brain refuses them all unless it absolutely has to. And this irks me just as much as it irks everyone else. A great philosopher once wrote: "they told me all of my cages were mental, so I got wasted like all my potential", and honestly, same. And just like no-one can physically break out of a material cage without external help, so people can't mentally break out of a conceptual one without something extra being provided.

Since I currently don't have access to a lifetime supply of Adderall, normal service will continue and my podcast's fortnightly release schedule will remain theoretical. Although just for clarification, and more for V's benefit, I am not a functioning alcoholic and I do not feel my mornings are Mondays stuck in an endless February. It's at least mid-March and anyway Tuesdays are more depressing.

Ha.

Anyway, this podcast episode isn't later than scheduled because of existential angst. In fact you can probably tell already why it's delayed. Ut's clearing up, albeit slower than I'd like, but I seem to have some kind of cold bug. I don't know where it came from, though the lady who served us at the local Wetherspoons sounded like she'd had a bit of a heavy night the previous day and was barely able to speak, so many in fact she'd had some kind of bug and was passing it around only slightly cheaper than the beer. Laura ended up with the flu in a similar period, complete with fever, so whatever we had was completely different but we got it at roughly the same time. Which is weird.

I would say it's prevented me from keeping up with my running training, but actually it's all happened at the

same time as quite a blanket of snow and ice that's covered the hills – enough to even cancel my local bus route for a day or two. It's also been fairly consistently at or just below freezing point for most of the past couple of weeks and with no end to that side of things in sight. So even with full health and quite grippy trail running shoes, I'd be very wary of going out much on the country lanes, especially with these steep slopes. So in fact I've only set foot outside once in the last week and a half, because I needed to visit the supermarket – it was on a somewhat clear day so not dangerous to walk in, but still very cold air on the chest. Jury's still out on whether it did me good or not. Tho it did wonders for Laura.

You'd have thought that would have provided the means for writing blog posts, given I actively can't do anything. And you'd be right, though only grudgingly, and partly only as a means to make this podcast episode. At least with podcasts I don't have to wade through endless photographs, deciding which to use, editing them, then writing alt-text and captions for them all. That's a disincentive, right there. But blog posts about my trip a month and a bit ago to Vienna are now online.

This podcast is merely those posts, but repackaged, and given a bit more of my irreverent style. Not that my blog posts aren't, but you know what I mean.

So, let's get on with it!

*{section separation jingle}*

So, you may remember in the summer of 2023, Jet2 sent me off on a trip to an all-inclusive resort on a blogger promotional trip. Well, in late autumn 2024, they did it again; this time they sent me to Vienna, for a long weekend (3 nights, 4 fairly full days). In principle they wanted me to mainly talk about the Christmas Markets, but we had free reign to explore the city and do other things that we wanted. Which, I mean, not gonna lie, the Christmas Markets were quite central to the whole operation regardless because, you know, food and drink in a pleasant and aesthetic location! Obviously, for trips like these, I'm not going alone – video direction and strategic vision were supplied, of course, by Laura, who would be a travel vlogger in her own right if she weren't so damned busy doing more productive and socially-beneficial things.

We flew out of our nearest airport - Leeds/Bradford; an airport I've rarely used but is effectively Jet2's hub. As it was late Autumn the airport was already decorated in very Christmassy garb, and one of the flights leaving around the same time as ours was off to Lapland. If the screen at the gate didn't confirm, that everyone waiting to board were families wearing reindeer antler headbands probably would have given it away anyway. The only bad thing was the timing of the flight – 7.40am on a dark November morning isn't ideal but it enable us to maximise our time in Vienna. In a sense the same but opposite was true coming back – an early-evening flight meant we were back home by 10pm having again had almost a full day in Vienna; indeed it was on our last day we went to Schönbrunn Palace, but more of that later.

One thing to say is that late autumn isn't the best time to see Vienna in its glory. Out of the days we were there, only one of them wasn't solidly grey and overcast; we walked in the cold air, our freezing breath on a window-pane was lying and waiting. Or something. Anyway, it didn't rain on our visit but it's vaguely amusing that the exact time we went coincided with the first warm days the UK had had for a month. Since many of the areas outside the city centre are quite grey in terms of architecture, it means much of the suburbs don't feel very appealing. Which is why I'm not going to talk about them.

Another interesting thing we encountered was that use of contactless payment was a lot less prevalent than in the UK. Several shops and both pubs we went into were cash-only, and we definitely got the impression that using electronic cards was less popular in general than back in the UK. This wasn't ever too much of a problem since it was easier to pay cash for things like the frequent payments at the Christmas Markets, but it still felt unusual and slightly strange to us.

But anyway, Vienna is Calling.

*{section separation jingle}*

So as I say, the reason we were sent to Vienna on this trip was to talk about the Christmas Markets there. But first I guess it helps to define what is meant by 'Christmas Market'. In the simplest form, it's a street market, with stalls selling warm drinks, warm food, and trinkets, that takes place in the month or so leading up to Christmas. However they have a very long tradition in Central Europe, notably in the German-speaking areas;

indeed Vienna was one of the earliest cities to have one and can date the tradition to as long ago as the late 1290s. Even today, it's considered the best markets to visit are in Germany and surrounding cities (like Strasbourg).

Originally designed to provide a way for city-folk to buy and sell wares (mainly meat) to prepare for Christmas, they developed over time into full and all-encompassing marketplaces, including artisanal products. They also became a 'tradition', so even when supermarkets and modern shopping practices made it much easier to do Christmas 'prep', the markets remained and became associated with history and tourism, rather than, well, markets.

Now, one of the issues I've certainly had with British Christmas Markets is that they're ... not very inspiring. They tend to be quite small, lined with the same old tat sold by slightly different people, and a strong focus on mulled red wine. They also tend to look and feel pretty similar - transplant the stalls in Birmingham to Leeds and no-one would really notice the difference. Many people, both within and without the travel blogging scene, rave about European Christmas Markets, and I was keen to see for myself if this would prove true, or if it was just a case of Instagram v Reality.

Opening times and dates tend to vary across the world; most open up in mid-to-late November, and close around Christmas - Manchester's seem to close a couple of days before Christmas, while some stay open until just after New Year's Day. As for opening times; the ones in Vienna we noticed opened late morning - before midday, certainly - and closed sharp by 10:30pm. And by sharp I mean, once the minute hand hits the mark, the much stops, the stalls put their shutters down, and the lights go off, pretty much instantly. Not a place for late night drinking.

As Vienna is one of the most notable and most historic centres for Christmas Markets, there's a lot of them in and around the city centre. I've genuinely no idea how many the Vienna city region has; I've seen some websites mention upwards of 20. In the time we had available to us, we visited six (Stefansplatz, Am Hof, Marie-Theresen-Platz, Spittelberg, Rathaus, and the one a little further out at Schönbrunn Palace) - a couple of ones close by we didn't make it to include the popular and notable one at Belvedere Palace, and a couple around the Universities. They vary in size, popularity, and facilities, from the really narrow Spittelberg, to the huge complex set up outside the Rathaus. They each have their own personality, their own style, their own reason for visiting, and while the chances are you'd by-and-large find the same kinds of food, drink, and trinkets on offer, we thought they felt different enough to make them all worth a trip.

Our first was Stefansplatz. This is in the very centre of the city, outside and alongside the cathedral. You can't miss it; indeed it's the one you'd end up at if you didn't have a map and were blindly wandering around the city. Its nearest U-Bahn station is, unsurprisingly, Stefansplatz - I'll talk a little about the U-Bahn towards the end of the episode.

Despite its location and dominating sense, it's really not that big. It does take up the full width of the pedestrian area around two sides of the cathedral, and this, and that it fades out into the main shopping area of the city, means it gets very crowded, especially when so many people are in the main square looking at the cathedral (and waiting to get inside - those queues are long!). It's pretty much tourist-central; it's also where there are many hawkers, tourist shops, and traditional carriages that you can hitch a ride on and explore the city as if it's 1794.

As for the market itself, well it was the first one we went to, so it was a nice introduction. I will say it was quite hard to find a sensible place to stop and eat - we ended up leaning against the side of one of the stalls. Despite, well more because of, its tourist vibe, it's in a really nice setting, especially at night as the Cathedral gets all lit up.

Our second market visited was a small square called "Am Hof", which does literally mean "At the Square". It also means 'At The Farm', but not in this case. It's not the easiest to find, partly because it's a little out-the-way, and partly because searching 'Am Hof' is a bit like searching London for a place called 'church'. It's on the north side of the city centre, close to Judenplatz, and its nearest U-Bahn is Herrengasse, though to get between the station and the square, the quickest way is down a side-alley (Haarhof). If you don't know it's there, it's not an easy one to come across accidentally.

You might get the impression from that description that Am Hof isn't the largest Market in the city. And you'd be right. Indeed, although I wasn't counting, I did think of all the markets we went to, it probably has the fewest

stalls. Not that that's a bad thing. In fact, its size made it feel quite comfy and friendly. It's a good shape, in that it takes up most of a small city square, but the stalls are quite far apart so it feels like there's a lot more space than there actually is. Relatively speaking it's not all that touristy either.

The square itself is surrounded by a number of quite tall old buildings, imagine kind of 19<sup>th</sup> Century government offices, that type of thing, so it's quite a pretty spot. It's probably the nicest of the markets to just chill in, although we went quite early in the day so I'd imagine it fills up quite quick in the evenings.

Our next market was the one at Marie-Theresen-Platz, named after the Empress of Austria in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century who reigned for 40 years. This is on the edge of the city centre, just off the inner Ring Road. It's close to the Rathaus and several museums. Getting there from the city centre is a nice little walk down Heldenplatz, or take the U-Bahn to Volkstheater. Its location is one of its selling points – this is very much Imperial Vienna. The walk there takes you past the old Hofburg Palace, and the market itself is surrounded on three sides by other imperial and palatial-esque buildings. It's very grandiose. The majority of these buildings now seem to be museums (Natural History, Fine Arts, and Archaeology, amongst others), and they're all still visible even through the stalls, making an impressive backdrop. In addition, in the centre of the square is the 19m tall granite monument to Marie-Theresen herself, though you're not allowed to sit on the steps to eat your currywurst.

The Market covers the whole square, which makes it bigger than you first think when you walk into it – it goes back quite a way. As a whole, I liked this one. It had the nicest array of kitchen-food (jams, pestos, bottles of liqueur) which we sadly couldn't take back because we were only travelling with hand-luggage. It was a very popular market but I didn't feel too crowded inside it – there was a good free-flowing movement to it. It was also an easy market to just lose time in.

A complete contrast in many ways is the market at Spittelberg, although some of it is coils round to the nearby Schrankgasse. This is a short distance southwest of the city centre ring road, not far from Marie-Theresen and just beyond the modern art museum, but it felt a whole world away. It's relatively hard to find, because unlike all the others it's not in an obvious location. The nearest U-Bahn is Volkstheater, from which you need to head west along Burggasse; the market's northern entrance is on the left, just past the Duke pub/sports bar. We, conversely, came at it from the South side, on Stiftgasse, which is a quieter shopping street, and the entrance is next to the S-Bahn stop of the same name.

The market is small. It's on a long narrow pedestrian road, well, more like a back-alley, with a couple of bends in it. If you start on Stiftgasse, the initial walk-through feels very much like just a small normal street market, but turn the corner and it keeps going. The majority of the street is just wide enough to have a stall either side and room to push your way through – it's absolutely not a place to gawp and lurk.

None of this is a bad thing; it was arguably the market with the best genuine atmosphere. I'd say it felt very much like a 'locals' market; it was very chill and we felt almost no sense of tourism. It was a good place to sit and drink while the sun went down and the lights went on on the stalls, as it was a very 'close' and intimate atmosphere. It had the most unique and specialised mugs, and it was also the only market we went to that we noticed a Greek food stall. The only thing to be aware of I'd say is that of all the markets, it was the one that required cash the most – very few stalls took card payments.

Another mood whiplash took us from there to the market at the Rathaus, the town hall. This is on the west side of the city centre, on the Ring Road, outside the Rathaus, funnily enough. You can't miss it. There's several U-Bahn stations convenient, including Rathaus itself (when they finish the work on the U2/U5 lines), otherwise the nearest is Schottentor, a short walk north on the Ring Road. Or just walk from the city centre.

This is the market you always see in the pictures. It's huge. Mahoosive. Like a small city. It takes up the majority of the square outside the Rathaus, which, the internet doesn't tell me how big the square is, but a rough check on Google Maps suggests it's 380m x 150m (less a small bit where the Rathaus itself sits), which makes it 57,000 square metres and thus slightly bigger than the average sports stadium. Contained within are woodland walks, light shows (so many light shows, and everything is lit up in bright colours – greens, blues, reds, from the tree branches to the arches above the paths to the Rathaus itself), a large ice-skating area, and a ferris wheel. I'd say too it's probably the best market for children; there's a lot of displays and dioramas geared towards the wee ones. It's also quite easy to get lost in. Not that either of us got lost. Because we're grown adults with a great sense of direction and location.

The thing is, despite its size, despite its aesthetic, despite its facilities, I wasn't really that impressed with the market as a whole. It's definitely the biggest of the markets we went to, and absolutely the most visually impressive, but most of it was ambiance rather than the market itself. It's weird to say but I felt ultimately there's not a lot 'there', in terms of stalls, or it didn't feel like that anyway. Style over substance, maybe. But definitely go. It's popular for other reasons.

Our final market visited was at Schönbrunn Palace. This is 5km west-south-west of the city centre, and yes, you can walk there, but it's quicker, easier, and more interesting, to take the U-Bahn to the nearby Schönbrunn stop.

It's interesting to compare and contrast with the market at the Rathaus, although I will say, caveat, our visit here was at lunchtime while we only saw the Rathaus Market after dark. The market here is a pretty reasonable size, filling up the whole of the front courtyard of the Palace. There's a small ferris wheel and a small ice rink just off the edges. What I will say is of all the markets, this one felt like it had the most space between stalls – it was a very open and airy place, in comparison especially with Spittelberg obviously but also with Marie-Therese; Schönbrunn felt the least cramped and hemmed-in of all the markets we visited. It was also the only market we noticed that had covered stalls set up to stand and eat at, rather than random dodgy tables in the open air.

Additionally, of all the markets we went to, it felt the most 'artisanal', in the sense the craft stalls here were more varied and 'crafty' than the other venues. I saw a stall selling fancy pastry cutters, one of which was in the shape of a foot. I didn't buy it. Because I don't cook pastry.

Now, before we went to Vienna, Laura had this plan that everything we'd eat, apart from breakfast, would be at the markets, because she was already expecting the food to be lush. We didn't stick to that rule in the end, but we certainly had a good selection and range of nibbles and drinks.

These included:

Soup in a bread bowl – the bad travel blogger in me did not make a note of what they were called. Anyway, these are large crusty 'cobs' of bread, hollowed out and filled with a hot stew, including garlic cream, goulash, and pumpkin. Very warming, not as difficult to eat as you'd imagine, and no the bread doesn't disintegrate.

Large pretzels. We had a few of these across our whole time in the city, but ones we specifically saw quite often that felt unusual to me were Laugenbrezel – made of lye bread, and then topped with various spices and flavours. The story goes that a baker in the 1700s had some cleaning solution on his worktop, which he knocked over and covered the pretzel he was working on. For some reason he decided to cook it anyway, and liked the result. I always think people in the past had a much more gung-ho attitude towards food. I appreciate it, but equally ... I wouldn't have done that, you know?

Spätzle. The classic. An Austrian version of mac-and-cheese, with a variety of toppings available, including crispy onion. Available everywhere, and lush.

Waffles on a stick. Sweet street food. Imagine battered waffles, but eaten like ice-lollies rather than with a knife & fork. They are dipped in all manner of sweet flavours; we had caramel and cinnamon.

Currywurst – the archetypal Christmas Market sausage. Served chopped up with curry powder, sauce, and a bread roll (but not \*in\* the bread roll). What's not to dislike about this?

Sausages in a bun. More Bratwürsts than you can wave an innuendo at. The speciality in Vienna is the Bosna, a grilled sausage served with onions, sauce, and curry powder. Yes, the Austrians are fond of curry powder. It's called flavour.

Also available is almost everything you could ever want to do with a potato, including what seem to be potato versions of Spätzle, Potato Cakes (Kartoffelpuffer), and of course a million and one different types of Knödl, or potato dumplings. The one I had was Selchfleischknödl – smoked meat – but at the stall I went to at Schönbrunn, mushrooms or beef were also available.

Roasted Chestnuts (Maroni), of course, were everywhere, as were lots of things made with Gingerbread (Lebkuchen). I've never been fond of either of them to be honest. Don't diss me!

With regard to the drink, and this is the same everywhere, you have to pay not just for the drink but also a

deposit for the mug, which tended to be about half the price of the drink. You could either keep the mug, or hand it back when you'd finished and you get your deposit back. Regardless of whether you pay in cash or on card, the deposit comes back in coins. The mugs themselves can vary, although they usually have a Christmassy theme. The ones at Stefansplatz, for instance, were red and in the style of a Christmas stocking. Conversely, the ones at Spittelberg were more like mugs, and had quotes from, and images of, Immanuel Kant on them. I don't know why.

Glühwein is of course the traditional Christmas Market drink. Available made from either red or white wine, which caused a bit of a cultural-discovery moment between us as I've only ever come across red, but Laura felt white was much more common. Anyway, we had both. For science. And blogging. I preferred the white but then I'm not fond of red wine anyway. Or hot wine in general, I must say.

Similarly, all the stalls offering glühwein also had a variety of hot fruit punches available, made with wine or spirits like rum. We had the apfelpunsch (apple) and it had bits of apple in it, which gives it an interesting texture.

Stronger spirits (Scnapps) are also available. We had a shot of pine liqueur, slightly accidentally, at Marie-Theresen. It was a drink we have now had.

Obviously this being Austria, beer is available should you want it. I'm very much a beer person, but I have to say it does feel weird drinking beer at a Christmas Market when most of the drinks available are time- and location-specific. I can drink Austrian beer in June. It's less likely I'll drink a hot apple punch in June.

We did not try the Kinderpunsch, the non-alcoholic version of glühwein. Because why would we?!

Of course, and as I mentioned when I quickly ran through the markets we visited earlier, there's more to do at the Christmas Markets than eat and drink. Although that's why we were there, clearly. As I say we were only travelling with hand luggage so we weren't in a position to buy a load of pine liqueur (because obviously that'd be something we'd take back with us) or Austrian smoked cheese (much more tempting!). Plus we don't have any reason to buy Christmassy trinkets or the aforementioned pastry cutters. It was very chill to just wander around and see what was on offer though.

One thing that we did do was ice-skating. As mentioned above, the market outside the Rathaus had a large skating rink. Well, it'd be more accurate to say it was a skating circuit - covering maybe a third of the entire market, it was a weaving route through the trees rather than a circular or rectangular arena. Laura had been keen that we try it out, and after much indecision (and several glühweins), we did.

Well, one of us did. I've never been ice-skating, for very good reasons, and this was absolutely not the right time to start. So while she channelled her Minnesotan heritage and sauntered around the ice for the best part of an hour, I stayed the other side of the fence and watched people skating past. Some of them were majestic, as if they'd been born on skates. Others staggered along, holding onto the fence for dear life. Listener, you know exactly where I would have been.

It looked fun, though.

*{section separation jingle}*

Of course not everything we ate and drank in Vienna was at the Christmas Markets. That said, much of our refreshment was similarly snack-food based, and there's a substantial overlap - one of the most notable street foods in Vienna is the pretzel. Plain, with cheese, with sausage, with all manner of different flavours, they're all good and available from pretty much anywhere, and a couple of euros gets you something big enough to share and still have some left over for a midnight snack.

One thing specifically noteworthy though is this. Laura used to live in Germany for a short period, and while there she got to love a take-away sandwich chain called Nordsee. Translating as "North Sea", it is as you might imagine a shop that concentrates on fish- and seafood-based sandwiches, including prawns and un-battered fish steaks. Which smell of fish but are absolutely fabulous on a soft bun. It came as a pleasant surprise to her to come across them in Vienna, which isn't noted for its seaside location, and we went to a couple of outlets over our weekend as we passed by and fancied them.

With regard to drinks, we did find an Irish Pub close to the Rathaus, which felt quite lively and cosy inside (and sold a small range of Austrian beers), and a sports bar near the Stiffgasse Market, where we also had a snack of fries, but most of our drinking took place in the markets.

In fact, the most notable drink we had was non-alcoholic and very warming and welcomed. We're both fond of thick, rich, hot chocolate, of the kind made with at least milk, not soggy water, and we looked around for places to have one in Vienna. Most of the places that came up in searches were proper ornate cafés and when we walked past they had huge queues outside (because cold Saturday lunchtimes are always going to prove popular times for cafés). A small artisanal place came up on the search and the reviews said it had the best hot chocolate in the city, so we were expecting this to also be a blowout too. But when we got to Vittorio (close to Michaelerplatz, not far from the Rathaus) it was completely empty. Now it's quite small - most of their custom is for take-away handmade chocolates - but there are a couple of tables inside and they were available on our visit. It's not an extensive menu for hot chocolate (it is very much geared towards eating chocolate) but we did get to see them make it, and it was definitely worth the wait.

The other noteworthy drink I had was in the airport on the way home; I finally got around to trying some Almudler. This is Austria's traditional soft drink - it's kind of like a herbal lemonade. It's been made since 1957. It also contains caffeine, which in principle makes this vibe a bit like Austria's version of Irn-Bru, although a lot more floral, and a bit sarsaparilla-like. I liked it. Others wouldn't.

We did have one meal at the hotel we stayed at. Our hotel was the Courtyard by Marriott Vienna Prater/Messe, which is close to the Krieau stop of the U2 U-Bahn line, and about 4km from the centre of the city by foot, in a modern business area nicely landscaped with water features, so everything looks quite contemporary and slightly funky. This was not our first choice, nor indeed our second. I think it was about sixth. But mainly that was caused by admin issues at both ends. Anyway, it was more a business hotel than a tourist one, not that that was a bad thing though as it meant it had half-decent facilities, including a restaurant and bar, with a small but localised menu.

Anyway, we ate one night there (mainly, it must be said, because it was cold outside and we didn't want to wander to a kebab shop in the opposite direction with the risk of it being closed). Being in Vienna, it made sense to both have the schnitzel - mine the traditional Wiener Schnitzel, made of veal and served with cranberry, some of which ended up on my sweatshirt. Laura had the pork variant. They were huge portions and honestly we were hard-pushed to finish them. We also had wine, and we were informed that most of the wines they offered were Austrian, mostly local to the Vienna area.

*{section separation jingle}*

So, apart from the Christmas Markets, what else did we do in Vienna? I mean, that didn't involve alcohol.

Obviously Vienna is one of the great European imperial cities, and since one of the Markets is directly outside the main imperial palace, it made sense while we were there to pop into Schönbrunn Palace and look around the gardens.

So, Schönbrunn is the old palace of the Imperial Hapsburg family, from the days when Austria was one of the leading monarchical powers of Europe. My first year of 'A'-Level History looked at European history in the 19th Century so I'm very familiar with the likes of Francis, Ferdinand, and Franz-Joseph. And of course Crown Prince Metternich. But those are people for another blog post by another author. Suffice to say it was interesting to finally go inside a place I'd heard mentioned a lot in the past.

There's been a royal building here since the mid-1500s, but the palace itself dates from the 1740s. It's been a museum pretty much since the dissolution of Austria-Hungary and the abolition of its monarchy in 1918, except for a few years in the 1940s when it was requisitioned for, uh, other purposes. The palace itself contains somewhere over 1400 rooms, of which only about 40 are open to the public, and many of these are very small.

Now, here's a touch of advice. There are several tours available of the palace, that cover increasing number of rooms for an increasing price. You can do ones with a proper tour guide, or take a cheaper self-guided ticket and maybe take advantage of the audio-guide on offer to get the most of the explanations. Three self-guided tours are available, and the website gives an indication of how long they're expected to take. We did the cheapest one, that looks purely at the State Apartments, and is estimated to take 25 minutes. It did take us longer, but that's because Laura takes lots of photos.

But, that ticket only gets you in to about 9 of the designated rooms, and that includes the stairwell. Of the actual rooms, you only get to see one that's of any significant size, and that's the Great Gallery. In fairness it's over 40m long and 10m wide, so it's definitely well-named, but it is the one and only highlight of that particular ticket. The other rooms you can see are the surrounding chambers which are also impressive, don't get me wrong, but they're all quite similar, and some of them you can only see from the doorway anyway.

The Imperial Tour (designed to take 40 mins) takes you into a shade over half the public rooms in the palace, including the imperial bedrooms, while the Grand Tour (designed to take 55 mins) allows you access to all 40, including those utilised by Empress Maria-Theresa, who reigned for 40 years in the second half of the 18th century. All the rooms visited on these tours are pretty impressive and definitely revealing about how much money the imperial family had (so much gold leaf! so much bespoke art! so much velvet!), but I guess you have to ask yourself if the increasing cost of the ticket is worth seeing a series of small and similar but very overpowering rooms, especially given you don't see much on the State Apartments Tour but the Imperial Tour is only estimated as twice as long. My advice is to decide how much you want to see, how much you think is worth seeing, and buy your ticket accordingly.

Alternatively, the website offers virtual tours that provide pictures and a lot of backstory to what you're seeing. It's not the same as being there, but it gives a good overview as to what you might have missed.

The tickets themselves are easy to come by. We bought ours from a self-serve machine in the ticket office located at the front gate to the palace grounds (not inside the palace itself). They're technically time-specific but the ones we bought had an entry time set one minute after we bought them, which clearly wasn't going to happen. I guess it's a guideline rather than a rule. You're not allowed big bags/backpacks on the tours, but there's a decent-sized cloakroom inside the palace by the café and before the tour entrance.

Schönbrunn is also known for its gardens. They're a shade over a square kilometre in area (about the size of the old city of Jerusalem, or a slightly large golf course), and mostly lie behind the palace. It's mostly wide gravelled pathways separating dense copses of trees, but the area also includes several ornate fountains decorated with Greek water nymphs, an orangery, a dovecote that looks like a huge wire-framed globe, an open-plan lawned garden area in front of the rear of the palace, and a Gloriette. A Gloriette is probably better seen than described, but in short it's kind of an open-plan pavilion constructed on an embankment, making it an obvious and central feature, a place to both look at and look out from.

It'd be a good place for a Parkrun and, while there isn't one, there are suggested running routes that are signposted throughout.

Another thing we did with an Imperial bent was take a trip to see an opera. Now, I've never been to the opera. In my head it was always one of those things 'beyond my pay grade'; it's got a bit of a 'reputation' in the UK of being somewhat 'high-brow' that perhaps it doesn't really deserve - more the evening out of choice of high society in ballgowns and evening suits, rather than barefoot backpackers in daisy skirts and purple hair. However, we're in Vienna and we're not paying for it, so it made sense to at least have a look into it. After all, if you're going to watch opera at all, where better to so than somewhere like Vienna or Milan. With the greatest of respect, it doesn't have quite the same kudos to be sat watching a performance of Carmen or Rigoletto in Bradford or Minneapolis.

Finding an opera was easy. The Vienna State Opera, or Wiener Staatsoper, came up immediately in our search - the biggest and best opera venue in the city, and it had regular performances pretty much every day. We noticed it was also an easy place to reach - several trams stop outside or nearby and the nearest U-Bahn stop is Karlsplatz has an entrance that brings you out pretty much directly outside the Opera House itself. It's also not a terribly long walk from the centre of the city, down the shopping street Kärntnerstraße from the cathedral.

The opera on offer during our visit was "Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria". Yeh, we'd never heard of it either. It's quite an early opera, being written around 1640 by an Italian called Claudio Monteverdi. The title translates as "The return of Ulysses to his homeland", and it's basically the story of what happens when Ulysses (also known as Odysseus), well, comes back home after his ridiculous journey across the Aegean Sea where he gets played by the Greek Gods. So, the Odyssey, and not even the exciting bit of the Odyssey.



This leads me to an important recommendation. If you have more flexibility with your dates, and you want to go to an opera, make sure you choose an opera you're either familiar with or a story you think you'll enjoy. We had very little choice, and consequently ended up with one which ... we stayed until the end. It was very clear a lot of the audience left at the interval. That's not a slight on the performers; it was very well designed, very well acted, very very well sung – these are, after all, amongst the best talent in the operaverse – it was just generally felt to not be that good or interesting an opera, in terms of storyline or writing. But then you go to the opera for the experience, right?

Anyway. Buying the tickets was very simple - we went through the Vienna State Opera's official website which offers seats until they sell out. I'm sure resellers exist though if you're looking really last-minute and want something comfortable. It's a very easy site to navigate. We just looked at the list of upcoming performances, chose our date, and it gave us clear details for that performance. It showed all available seating and pricing tiers, stretching from around €20 for restricted views all the way up to over €200 for the best seats in the house. One of the really nice things about the website is that when you choose a seat, you get to see a picture taken from it so you can get an idea of what your view will really be.

You buy the tickets through their portal and you get the choice to either pick them up from the venue, or to have e-tickets delivered by e-mail. We chose the latter, which we had to print out and take with us, but they come with QR codes so once you're there it's an easy scan-in.

As befits a city with the cultural legacy of Vienna, it's housed in a marvellous building on the south-west side of the city centre. It's one of those structures that if you look at it, it's clearly an imperial-era building (Wikipedia tells me it was constructed in 1869), and when you find out it's the opera house you go 'yeh, that tracks'. It looks like an opera house. Is it as impressive as the Opera in Paris? Maybe.

Once inside the building, you really get an impression of its opulence. It's several floors tall, and each is dominated by huge and ornate ceilings, many painted with decorations and scenes from mythology, including representations and personifications of the arts themselves, like poetry and dance. Which is pretty much what you'd expect. The most ornate room is off one of the lower floors – once used as the Emperor's private salon, it's now a very nice place to have a glass of wine or two in the interval.

The staircases themselves are also very richly decorated, and are surrounded by huge archways of marble that define the corridors and balconies leading to the side rooms, toilets, refreshment areas, and of course the concert hall itself. It's one of those places where you can just stand by one of the balcony rails and look out over the whole vista and never once get bored by the view.

Compared to the outer reaches, the performance area itself isn't quite as vibrant (being a much newer construction – post WW2), although it certainly isn't lacking. It's kind of like an eye shape, cut off at one end where the stage is. Along the two curved sides are four tiers of seating, much of it tiered like a stadium, although much plusher, and some of it in separated boxes. On the bottom level there's also a further section of seating; between it and the stage is the orchestra pit meaning it's quite nice to see the musicians playing as the actors sing.

That said, the seats themselves are very comfortable; they didn't feel too restrictive in terms of width, better than aircraft seating for sure, though they're not armchairs. There was also a decent amount of legroom – as someone on the taller side, I didn't feel uncomfortable at any point.

Between each row of seats is a barrier that rises a small way above the back of the seat in front. On this barrier is an electronic touchscreen that translates, in real time, what the singer's singing. Available languages included Italian, German, English, and, I think I'm remembering correctly, Japanese. This makes it really useful to follow what's going on, since many operas won't be performed in the language of the majority of the audience. For the seats in the front row, this screen is on the flat table-like section in front of the end of the balcony.

What I will say is that one slight downside with the cheaper seating is there are restricted views. As I say, you do know what you're getting as you see a picture of the view from your seat, but just be aware that sometimes the restriction is quite large. From the seat I had, there was about a third of the stage I simply couldn't see as it was hidden behind the curve of the balcony to my left. The actors do try to utilise the full stage (and it's quite a big stage, both left to right and front to back) but they obviously can't stay visible for everyone all of the time.

We chose to go to an evening performance, although matinees can exist. The start time was 7pm, and the doors to the opera opened I think about 6pm. Once the performance starts, you can't enter until the intermission, so don't be late or they won't let you in.

Our opera was scheduled to finish at 10.30pm; I think it was slightly earlier than that that we left, but that was before all the curtain calls had finished. In the middle there's an intermission of about half an hour (ours was about 9pm to 9.30pm), where you can go to the toilet, go to the bar and get drinks and snacks, or just wander about the building admiring the architecture and the art. Each floor seems to have its own facilities - there's at least two bars in the venue where wine and canapés are available, and you can pre-order both if you want to, so they're waiting for you on arrival and saving you having to queue. Most people seemed to go to the flush old imperial salon though, and with good reason.

Each floor seems to also have a cloakroom. You can't go into the auditorium with coats and bags, but depositing them in the cloakroom is free - they just give you a ticket which you have to hand back on collection. You're also not allowed to take photos or videos during the performance itself, although it's fine before the start, in the intermission, and during the curtain call.

You may be surprised to know the dress code listed at the Vienna State Opera is much more relaxed than you might imagine. They specifically advise against flip-flops, crop-tops-as-outerwear, minishorts, and hats (the latter for obvious practical reasons rather than culturally-respectful ones), but otherwise, they're likely to accept most things, but just don't push it. Obviously though it's the opera in Vienna so the majority of people do make some kind of effort. Suits and long black dresses were pretty common.

Even I was wearing closed shoes. Granted they were cheap things from my local Tesco, but they looked the part.

So, you may well ask, would I go to the opera again? And yes, I would. It was much easier to follow than I'd feared, and much more accessible. I will reiterate though the following points; if it's your first time, go to a decent venue in terms of ambiance and aesthetic (make the visit itself as much of an event and performance as the opera, as well as making sure it's set up to make it as easy as possible to follow), and in any case make sure it's a story you'll enjoy, know, or are interested in - even if you do end up reading the translation more than watching the performance, if it's a story you know, or which is easy to follow, that makes a lot of difference, otherwise it can be as pretty and spectacular as anything, but you'll still get bored, and that's a shame.

Many operas are all about the battle of life and death. A place worth visiting in Vienna that encompasses that is one of Europe's largest and most impressive cemeteries.

Over in the far south-east of the city, not far from the airport actually, is Wiener Zentralfriedhof, or Vienna Central Cemetery. Quite why it's called Central when it was specifically designated at the time (the 1860s) to be outwith the then boundaries of the city, is more a question of translation than designation - a better meaning of 'central' here is 'main' - in terms of importance, not location. Just so's we're clear.

And it's definitely important - covering some 600 acres (making it slightly bigger than Monaco (!), or 70% the size of New York's Central Park), and housing over 330,000 graves (which is over 8 times more than the population of Monaco). This means that it feels more like a nature reserve than a graveyard in parts, and parts of it are covered in trees, shrubs, and the occasional pond, making it a wildlife haven.

But people come here primarily for grave-spotting; indeed its original location far outside the city made it initially so ignored by the locals (or at least, the ones who were alive) that the local authority actively encouraged tourism by re-interring famous people from their original last resting places to this new graveyard. And this has continued to the present day as subsequent notable people are buried here first. This includes people from Austrian Presidents (even those who weren't war criminals, like Kurt Waldheim) to footballers (Karl Decker, arguably the greatest Austrian footballer, at his peak in the late 1940s), and from businessmen and financiers (a couple of the Rothschild dynasty) to all-round polymaths (Hedy Lamarr, actor, producer, influencer, inventor).

There's also of course a lot of musicians (some of whom even wrote operas!), including at least four Strausses, as well as Brahms and Beethoven. But not Mozart, as he's surprisingly elsewhere. In his place though, and the most popular of all the graves I saw on my visit, is Johann Hölzel. This name may not be familiar to you, but he was a pop star of the 1980s and 90s, releasing several songs (including "Rock Me Amadeus" and "Vienna

Calling”) under the pseudonym of Falco.

There are other sections too, including Protestant and Jewish areas, and a whole series of graves and memorials to those who were killed by the government during the second world war.

Entry to the cemetery is free, and getting there is easy, if a little long. The S7 train that goes to the airport passes by the western entrance, at the appropriately-named Zentralfriedhof Station, whilst passing the main entrance is the 71 tram. This tram’s been operating that route since 1907, but there seems to be no truck to the rumour that ‘taking the 71 tram’ is a specifically Viennese euphemism for death. Which is a shame as it’s quite a cool one.

*{section separation jingle}*

Speaking of trams, I ought to say something about how easy it is to get around Vienna. It’s quite a walkable city, and for the most part the pavements are quite wide and easy to navigate. Many of the central streets are also pedestrianised; the only danger is the sheer numbers of people on them, especially Stefanplatz and the area around the cathedral. For more distant journeys, say to Schönbrunn or the Airport, there’s a decent array of public transit.

Apart from for journeys to/from the airport, it’s quite simple to buy tickets. Each of the U-Bahn stations has touchscreen terminals where you can select one of several languages, and the tickets are a standard price regardless of journey length (€2.40 at the time of my visit). Tickets are valid for 80 minutes. Note that there are no ticket barriers on entry/exit to the stations, and we also never encountered anyone conducting a ticket check, but that’s not an excuse to not buy a ticket because you never know, and you don’t want a large fine (currently upwards of €100, which is quite a few beers, even in Vienna). You also need to validate the ticket before you use it – this involves finding a small blue box hidden somewhere nearby (in U-Bahn stations it’s usually close to the entrance to the platforms) and sliding your ticket in until you hear it being stamped. This is to prevent ticket re-use; when you buy the ticket from the machines they’re not timestamped, so you can buy many in advance and just stamp them when you need them. Period-validity tickets (24 and 48 hour) are also available. For some reason we didn’t do this. Probably because we knew we’d be walking a lot.

For the airport route, it’s not that it’s not simple to buy the ticket – the same principles apply – more that it’s not always clear exactly what the right ticket is. There’s a dedicated fast-rail service (CAT) from the airport to Wien Mitte station that runs every half hour and takes 16 minutes. It costs nearly €15. Alternatively there’s the local S7 rail service that runs every half hour, takes a shade under 25 minutes, stops at more places en route providing better alternative onward connection options, and costs €4.40. One of those options is only marginally worse than the other.

The problem is, especially at the airport, the way the signposts and information boards are displayed make it far easier to be directed onto the CAT than the S7. The CAT has separate ticket machines that are clearly labelled, whilst the S7 (and associated suburban rail option) are at machines that are only identifiable because there’s a long queue of locals using them. Conversely, on the way back to the airport from the city centre, finding the option for the airport ticket involves going through a couple of sub-menus that don’t make it obvious. I’d tell you what option to choose, except we were rushed for time at that point given the timetable, and found it somewhat by accident, so I don’t remember.

*{end pod jingle}*

Well that’s about all for this pod. Join me again next time for another adventure **Beyond The Brochure**. Until then, remember, when the image has gone, only you and I, it means, well, actually, it means something to me. And if you’re feeling off-colour, keep on getting better.

*{Outro voiceover:*

*Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, tell your friends that I rocked your socks. If you wear socks when listening to my pod; that’s your call not mine. And don’t forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.*

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*Show-notes are available on my website: [barefoot-backpacker.com](http://barefoot-backpacker.com).*

*Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}*