

Travel

Oh, Vienna! A class act... but not too snooty either!



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LEFT: Vienna has a vibrant bar and cafe culture
ABOVE: Cafe at Kunsthistorisches Museum
BELOW: Edvard Restaurant in Vienna



■ Where was your favourite childhood holiday, and why?

■ We were a family of eight, so childhood holidays were always tempered accordingly. That said, I have great memories of staying in Tossie Hayes' caravan site in Owenahincha in West Cork. It had absolutely everything you would want in a sun holiday, except the sun. And that's what I remember — the beach, the chipper, and watching the most amazing electrical storms dance across the Atlantic Ocean as the rain beat down on the roof of the mobile home. And then, on the rare days when we had good weather, getting scalded as sunblock was only invented in Ireland in the '90s.

■ Where was your favourite holiday as an adult, and why?

■ Without a doubt, the Amalfi coast. This had been built up so much by friends that our expectations were ridiculously high. However, from the moment we arrived, to the moment we left, we were in heaven. The views, the trips to Pompeii and Positano, even the overpriced drinks on the plaza in Sorrento. The Amalfi coast is the one place on the planet that I cannot wait to return to.

■ What is your favourite short-break city destination, and why?

■ This has to be London. It is so accessible, and there is so much to do. Having been there over the years to see shows, or to games, or be the silly tourist on the top of the double decker bus, I can never tire of the city. There is something incredibly homely yet cosmopolitan about it. And I love the challenge of working out the Tube.

■ Which city or country have you never visited that you would love to see, and why?

■ Australia. From a distance, it seems like an amazing country. We grew up watching *Home and Away* and this created a romanticised version of Oz.

MOST of the greatest classical musicians made Vienna their home — Mozart, Beethoven, Vivaldi, Schubert, Strauss, Brahms — as did Sigmund Freud who lived at the same address there for 47 years.

It is also the home of the waltz, and for four centuries was the capital of a vast European empire. The city centre is a World Heritage site; Vienna overfloweth with culture.

Now, this could be off-putting — a snooty, high-brow destination is no guarantee for fun — but Austria's capital is in fact down-to-earth, friendly and not nearly as expensive as might be feared.

Hotels there cost less than in Dublin and fine dining will not punish the plastic.

At the Veranda restaurant in five-star Hotel Sans Souci, a three-course menu with sturgeon or venison is €43 and main courses from the à la carte menu are €25.

The wood oven-baked Gragger bread served here is so good I visited the organic bakery to bring some home on the plane.

Traditional and reasonably priced Viennese dishes, like wiener schnitzel and roasts, can be enjoyed in the characterful Wiener Rathauskeller under City Hall.

Vienna's glorious past as an imperial powerhouse accounts for the splendiferous architecture that is the very fabric of the city centre. It's a place to binge on the baroque.

Some preparatory reading would not go amiss, or take a short cut and sign up for a walking tour that brings the city's history to life by tracing its architectural genealogy.

It's easy to overdose on Vienna's museums and art galleries, so best to just pick one and spend half a

From museums and tours to amazing cuisine and connections to films, the Austrian capital has something for everyone, says SEAN SHEEHAN

day there. My favourite, because it has more Bruegel paintings than any other gallery in the world, is the Kunsthistorisches Museum, but other galleries and the natural history and the military historical museums might be keen contenders for your time.

Close to the border of what was Soviet territory, Vienna became a spy's playground when, like Berlin, it was divided into rival sectors by the victors of World War II.

The city's famous cafés provide a relaxing way to recall those dangerous Cold War years. Café Imperial is in a hotel that became the post-war headquarters of the Russians and they would cross the road to Café Schwarzenberg — not too much changed since it opened in 1861 — where, jollified by vodka, they would fire their revolvers at the large wall mirrors.

Café Sacher, famous for its cake, was British ground and Graham Greene stayed in the hotel here, which was where he got the idea for a story about a hustler peddling diluted penicillin in the city. It became *The Third Man* movie with Orson Welles and tours into the sewers that feature so atmospherically in that film are popular.

Many of the cafés have live music and every weekend at Café Schwarzenberg, for instance, a pianist and violinist drive there from Bratislava to play; unfazed by a request for the theme tune from *The Third Man*, they happily oblige.

Café Sperl was Freud's watering hole, it features in the movie *A Dangerous Method* as well as *Before Sunrise*.

In high season, the more famous cafés can have queues of overseas visitors waiting for a table, but it costs nothing to make a reservation the day before.

Better still, to avoid the crocodile lines of tour groups that become too familiar in high season, visit Vienna in early spring or autumn.

The cafés' authentic décor — wood panelling, coffered ceilings, chandeliers, and parquet floors — is very much part of their appeal but there are also bars, like Loos American Bar or Spelunke, which boast stunning interior design.

Craft beers are all the rage but Viennese wines are well worth sampling. Remarkably, there are vineyards within the city limits and Grüner Veltliner, a white grape, produces a superb white

wine which, at its cleanest, tastes like alcoholic mineral water.

Vienna is lovely as a pedestrian-friendly, visually splendid city-break destination. For special occasions there are classy restaurants like the Grüne Bar, so comfortably luxurious that Habsburg nobility would feel at home here and a small drink made from black trumpet mushrooms may appear on your table at the start of a meal.

Then there's Michelin-starred Edvard where an impeccably prepared four-course tasting menu is €80.

I'm no kvetch, but every Sunday in Vienna is a lockdown, with shops, museums and even supermarkets closed. Jumping on a boat to Bratislava down the Danube on a day return is one escape route, or stay put for a sedate and slow brunch at Grand Brasserie in one of the city's finest hotels.

And, just in case you think Vienna might be too twee or refined for your liking, remember that Freud and Trotsky, as well as Stalin and Hitler, all lived here (and for one year, 1913, all at the same time).

Restaurants: Veranda Restaurant (sanssouci-wien.com); Wiener Rathauskeller (wiener-rathauskeller.at); Grüne Bar (sacher.com); Edvard (kempinski.com); Grand Brasserie (grand-hotelwien.com).

Bakeries and cafés: Gragger & Cie bakery (Spiegelgasse 23); Café Imperial (cafe-imperial.at); Café Schwarzenberg (cafe-schwarzenberg.at); Café Sacher (sacher.com); Café Sperl (cafesperl.at);

Bars: Loos American Bar (loosbar.at); Spelunke (spelunke.at)

Tours: Vienna: An Introduction walking tours (insightcities.com); Civitatis (civitatis.com).

Information: wien.info
Flights: From Dublin Airport.

“At Cafe Schwarzenburg, a pianist and violinist are unfazed by a request for the theme tune from *The Third Man*, and happily oblige.



Jonathan Healy.

Picture: Jim Coughlan

Blairscove House, Bantry, has been named among the Top 25 Small Hotels Ireland and the Top 25 Hotels for Romance Ireland according to Trip Advisor in the 2019 Travellers' Choice Awards.

Established in 2002, Trip Advisors' Travellers' Choice Awards are determined based on millions of reviews and opinions collected in a single year from TripAdvisor travellers worldwide. They reflect “the best of the best” for service, quality, and customer satisfaction.

Ann and Chris Woodward, Owners of Blairscove House, say: “We are absolutely delighted to be featured in the TripAdvisor Travellers' Choice Awards. The satisfaction of our customers is at the heart of what we do here at Blairscove. We would not be where we are without our fantastic team who strive for excellence in their care and attention.”

Blairscove had previously been awarded the TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence in 2018. The house also features in McKenna's Guide '100 Best Places to Stay 2018' and the Michelin Guide 2018. Blairscove House is a member of Ireland's Blue Book, a unique collection of Irish Country House Hotel, Manor Houses, Castles and Restaurants located on the island of Ireland.

