

Up-close

# WALTZING THE RING

Vienna definitely tops the list of must-visit cities for history buffs.

Text **Rathina Sankari** Photographs **Vienna Tourist Board**

A panoramic view of Austria's capital city, Vienna.

**R**eaching Vienna hadn't been easy with the refugee crisis in Europe. When I had approached one of the officials in Augsburg, Germany, to get my European East Pass activated, he immediately said, "Now is not the right time to visit Austria, as trains aren't running on a daily basis." My heart sank, despite the fact that I was on my way to the Oktoberfest. I reached out to the officials at the Munich train station. As I stood in the English-speaking queue, an officer with a demeanour that stated his position moved towards me. I recounted my travel plans and woes of not being able to visit Austria. Without blinking an eyelid, he responded, "I am not sure who gave you this information, but there is indeed no issue in travelling to Innsbruck or Vienna by train. If my twenty-eight year old daughter asked me I would gladly give her permission to travel; it is perfectly safe. Currently, trains are being stopped only between Munich and Salzburg."

Being assured by the gentleman, I travelled to Innsbruck and later to Vienna with no hitches, barring the frequent passport checks. After dropping off my bags at the hotel in Vienna, I stepped out for a bite and returned in the pouring rain to be greeted by an elegant lady waiting for me in the reception. Ilse Heigerth was my guide for the day, and she was to take me around Vienna in the tram along the Ringstrasse (Ring Road). We bundled under her umbrella and sauntered towards the tram station as she recounted the history of Austria.

In the 11th century, the Babenbergs arrived from Southern Germany to Austria and ruled for the next 250 years. By the end of the 13th century, the dynasty died out and the King of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation—Rudolf, a Habsburg—took control. The Habsburg monarchy spread across parts of Slovakia, Bohemia,

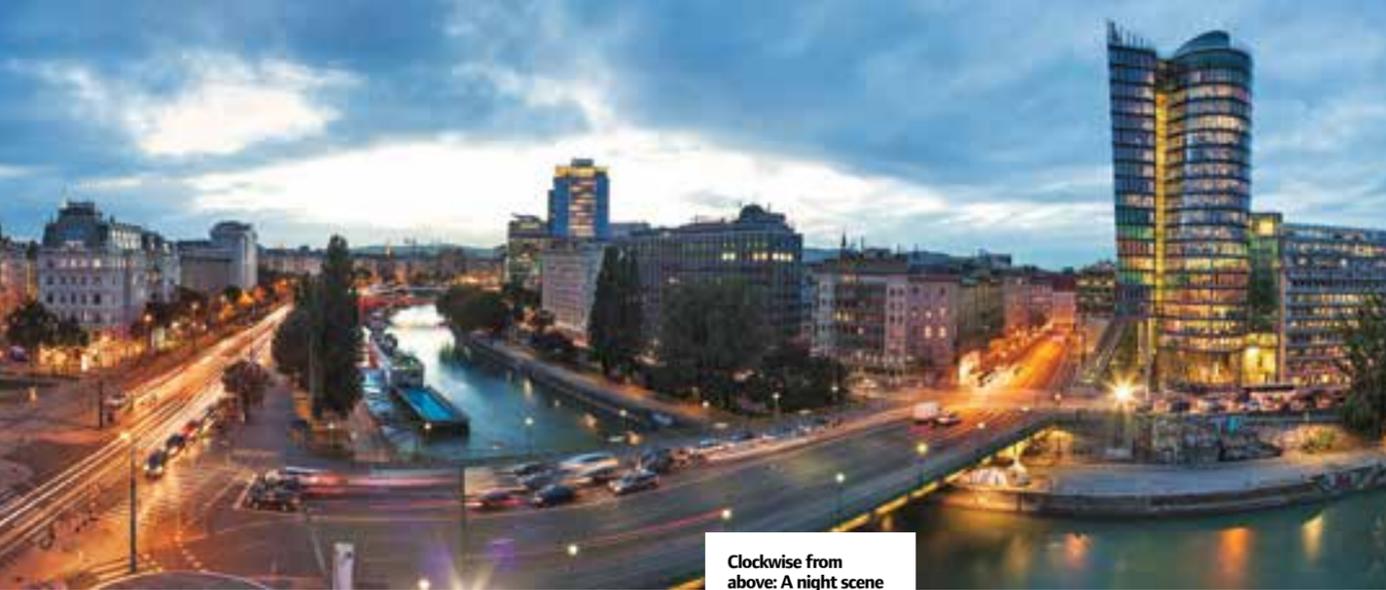
the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Northern Italy, Romania, Poland, Croatia, Slovenia and all of Hungary. They ruled for the next 650 years with Vienna as its capital. In 1852, Francis Joseph I, the Austrian emperor decided to tear down the fortification walls of Vienna which were built to protect the city from the Hungarians and the Turks. Wien then was spread across a small territory with 50,000 inhabitants and comprised only the first district. The city hadn't seen any invasions for some time, and the emperor found the need to build an imperial boulevard, the Ringstrasse, around the quarter with important Catholic representation buildings along it. It took half a century to complete the work. By then, Vienna had just begun growing. Placed like a spiral, the districts of Vienna increased in number to 23, with two to nine bordering the outer districts. Today, despite being a capital city, Vienna has a cosy atmosphere that is lively and infectious. It was rightly named the world's most liveable city by Mercer's Quality of Living Rankings in 2015. "We work a lot, but we also celebrate life," exclaimed Ilse, a true Viennese.

As we reached the Oper tram stop, we took the traditional tram that rambled along the city centre. The State Opera House stood majestic with a huge screen on one of its outer walls for live public broadcasting of performances. It was the first public building to be opened up for the citizens in 1869. Destroyed badly during World War II, the building was rebuilt and refurbished in its original style. The hall and the stage were modernised and



**Left: The majestic Vienna State Opera. Below: The ubiquitous tram rambles past the Opera house.**





Clockwise from above: A night scene across the Danube Canal; The Hofburg Imperial Palace; University of Vienna.



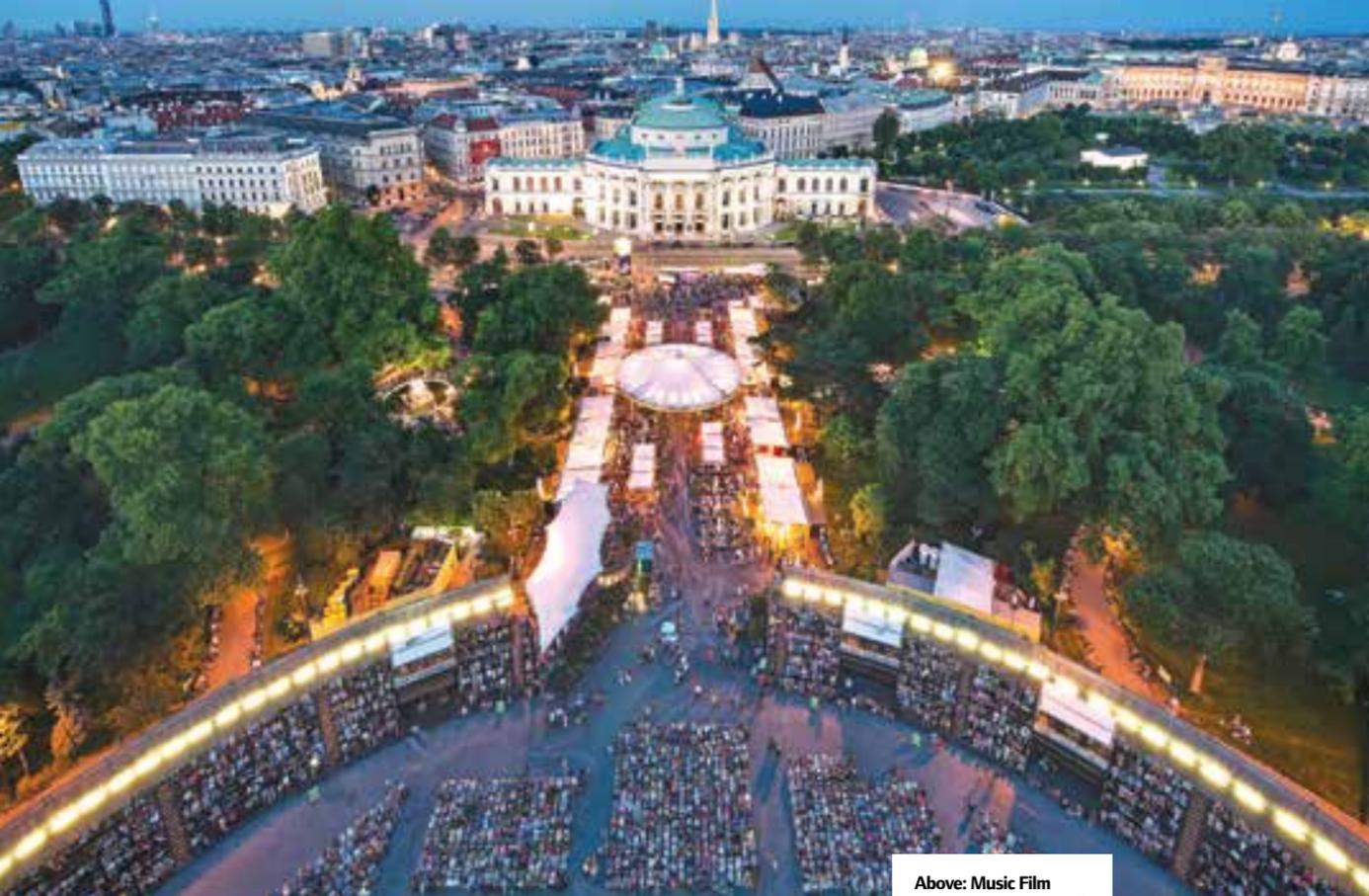
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the Vienna State Opera was reopened in 1955. When in Vienna, one must definitely watch a scintillating performance onstage; it's worth every penny.

Not far away was the Imperial Palace, surrounded by the luxury shopping area on its fringes. Purveyors of the royal family settled in this area and were allowed to wear the coat of arms in their outlet. The palace grew in size over the centuries as new wings were constructed in different styles. The newest wing to be added was in 1913; today the palace houses the office of the President of Austria and is also an important Congress centre.

Most of the important edifices in Vienna could be seen between the Opera House and the University. The Museum of Fine Arts and Museum of Natural History were seen at a distance. Remnants of the past stood as evidence of the ramparts that once protected the city. We crossed a huge monument that looked like a Greek temple. But I was in for a surprise when Ilse called it the Parliament. "As democracy originated in Greece, the architect Theophil Hansen decided to give it a classical Greek look," she reasoned. The seat of the mayor or

the Town Hall at Rathausplatz looked like a church. The open space in front of it is used for parades, celebrations during festivals and also for the famous Christmas Markets. But what caught my eye was the spire of St Stephen's Cathedral in the heart of Vienna. An important landmark and a national identity, it was built as a small church in the 12th century, but soon burnt down. The second Roman cathedral built was bigger than the first. Between the 14th and the 15th centuries, it was rebuilt again as there was a need for a diocese. It was the Gothic era when the impression was 'the higher the nearer to God'. The South Tower was built 137 metres high, and by the year 1450, work started in the North Tower. But by then, they fell short of funds and it was the Renaissance era when humanism was most important which led to the stoppage of work in the North Tower. During WWII, the roof of the church was destroyed and was rebuilt with colourful Bohemian tiles. Made of sandstone, the



Above: Music Film Festival near Town Hall at Rathausplatz.  
Below: A traditional Viennese coffee house.



Its flow was regulated in the 16th century with one arm close to the city centre. In the 19th century, the main course was straightened and a new bed built to avoid flooding. Come summer, artificial beaches, pubs, bars and restaurants are set up near the canal. It is the most happening place for youngsters with live music concerts in full swing.

We had reached the Schwedenplatz tram station, an important traffic hub in Vienna. Traversing Vienna in a tram is fun, as you get to hop on and off and explore the city at your own pace. We changed trams and headed towards the southern part of the city centre. During WWII, the

cathedral houses the tombs of many royals, cardinals and archbishops. On New Year's Eve, the bell in the North Tower rings 12 times and the Blue Danube is played on the radio and on television. The Viennese waltz into the new year to the tunes of Johann Strauss' masterpiece. "It is played more than our national anthem," exclaimed Ilse, with pride in her voice.

We passed by the glorified Danube canal, the river which had many tributaries some 2,000 years ago.

Red Army attacked Vienna and gained control of the first district. The aftermath of heavy firing and bombing was that the southern area of the city experienced maximum damage and was destroyed. Later new buildings were erected around Schwedenplatz, and till date, the Viennese continue to change its skyline for a better presence. As I continued to soak in the Viennese surroundings, I noticed the unique architecture of the Austrian Postal Savings Bank. It was a Eugon or Art Nouveau construction, which had flourished between the 19th and the 20th centuries. The artists in this period split from the conservative form and brought modern thoughts and influences into



We had returned to our base at Oper tram station. I was on the lookout for a traditional Viennese coffee house when Ilse suggested the Cafe Griensteidl near the Hofburg Palace. She asked me how long I would be in Vienna, I drew a blank. I was busy digging into the chocolate cake and sipping my cuppa when I heard 'The Blue Danube' in the distant. I looked into Ilse's eyes; wasn't it time to waltz?



Clockwise from left: Museum of Natural History beside the city park Volksgarten; A traditional Viennese Coffee House—Café Griensteidl; Boat ride across the Danube Canal.



their art. Renowned Austrian painter Gustav Klimt, of *The Kiss* fame, belonged to this movement.

Vienna is not just about monuments, it also has a considerable green area. The Stadtpark, with huge English landscape gardens, opened to the public in 1863. The park has statues of music composers Mozart, who moved to Vienna when he was 25, and Beethoven, who lived in the city for 30 years. Wien is indeed unique in her own way, as she brings the past and the present together. It is a marriage of old and new that live in harmony. The 150-year-old boulevard is a necklace that celebrates life and narrates stories of valour, culture and art across centuries.

**Fact File**

**Getting there**

Jet Airways operates regular flights to Amsterdam from Mumbai and New Delhi. From Amsterdam, you can fly our codeshare partner KLM to Vienna.

**Accommodation**

Vienna has all kinds of accommodations, ranging from B&B to luxury hotels.

**For more information**

Log on to [www.wien.info](http://www.wien.info)