



outdoors
Cheap Skate

Ice on the Alte Donau is a rare occurrence, bringing
equally rare smiles to Vienna winters

by Michael Bernstein

In all my 15 years of living in Vienna, this winter has been the coldest, by far. Such a ceaseless deep freeze weakens the soul, despite the *Gemütlichkeit* of a warm coffeehouse or the elegant finery and extravagance of our *Faschingszeit* balls. Under the oppressive, overcast winter skies, it's hard to take comfort in the gradual lengthening of daylight hours. A Wiener is hard-pressed to find any uplifting outdoor activity within the city limits.

But the rare convergence of prolonged subfreezing temperatures and lack of snowfall in January created the ideal conditions for at least one outdoor pleasure: ice skating on the Alte Donau – the urban oxbow lake arcing through Floridsdorf and Donaustadt. Though the authorities don't condone recreational skating there, hundreds of people were out on a late-January weekend, safely supported by thick, solid ice across the 170 hectare surface.

The Wiener Eistraum – the artificial ice rink on Rathausplatz – boasts 8,000 square meters of Zamboni-smooth surface, as well as gastronomical comforts, nighttime lighting, skate rentals and restrooms. However, its pleasures pale in

comparison to the natural beauty, vastness and sheer thrill (not to mention free access) of skating on the Alte Donau.

WINTER GAMES

On the south side of the Kagraner Bridge by the pedal boat docks – now frozen solidly in place – I slipped on my own skates (no rentals here) and started off tentatively, but gradually grew confident that I could not break through into the frigid, 2.5-m deep waters. Peppered by puffs of snow, crosshatched by shallow cracks and blemished by a few blisters, the surface was otherwise perfectly smooth.

As I skated southward across the wide-open expanse, the scene took on the rustic beauty of a Pieter Bruegel the Elder winter-scape, as skaters (and pedestrians) slid along, alone or in pairs: pushing prams, swatting hockey pucks to and fro – simply revelling in the freedom to turn in any direction, unlike the confined circles mandated at a rink.

I stopped and watched several pickup hockey games – ranging from two-on-two, father-child battles to six-per-side “teams.” I wistfully recalled my childhood, playing

with my dad on a frozen New England pond. In the shadow of an incongruous, large blue Nivea “balloon,” one coed game near Gänsehäufel's western beach saw hot-dogging stick handlers (probably Canadian expats) playing alongside rank amateurs in friendly competition. Though they could score at will, the experts would selflessly pass the puck to a cherry-picking kid parked in front of a pair of boots so she could have the glory of knocking it into their improvised goal.

After a 3 km lap around the Gänsehäufel island, I returned to my starting point at the docks, happy to see my sack with my street shoes, untouched, exactly where I left it (only in Vienna!).

I observed an underdressed boy – possibly a Mid-Eastern refugee – being coaxed onto the ice by his companion. Tentatively placing his foot on the unfamiliar surface, he tested the strange slipperiness below his soles. His initial fear turned to hesitant curiosity and eventually the biggest smile of the day. Come to think of it, *everyone* was beaming from ear to ear – something as rare to behold in Vienna as perfect skating conditions on the Alte Donau. ❧