

Imperial Vienna — Timeless Elegance

A stroll around Vienna can be like a journey back in time to the days of the empire — it comes as no surprise that the historic city center is a UNESCO world cultural heritage site. Vienna boasts 27 palaces and more than 150 other residences - examples of the city's illustrious history await on virtually every street corner and the capital's coffee houses are the perfect places to dream of imperial days of yore. And if you are interested in shopping you can visit one of the former purveyors to the imperial court.

A trip around Vienna's magnificent Ringstrasse boulevard is always a special sightseeing experience whether you are on foot or taking a ride in a traditional fiacre. The magnificent boulevard is lined with parks and breathtaking buildings. If the Viennese say that they are going to the Burg then they mean the Burgtheater and not the adjacent Hofburg. For more than 600 years the complex was the official residence of the Habsburg emperors. Today the impressive buildings contain important museums and important state rooms. But Vienna wouldn't be Vienna if the horse-drawn fiacres didn't park directly in front of the offices of the Austrian President, or the National Library wasn't home to one of the most impressive Baroque rooms anywhere in the world. Visitors to the Burgkapelle can listen to performances by the Vienna Boys' Choir on Sundays, or watch the graceful movements of the Lipizzaner horses in the Spanish Riding School. The Sisi Museum gives an insight into the private life of Austria's most famous monarch, Empress Elisabeth. Just a few tram stops away the Belvedere Palace — the summer residence of Prince Eugene of Savoy — sits on an elevated site. It is home to the world's largest collection of Klimt paintings including his most famous work, The Kiss.

Art lovers are also drawn to Vienna's best-known palace. At Schönbrunn the imperial family had 1,441 rooms to choose from, many of which are open to visitors. The Schlosspark contains a number of architectural masterpieces such as the Palm House and the zoo, which was crowned Europe's best in 2009. It is hardly surprising when you consider that the visitors now stand in the old lion cages while the animals themselves roam in their modern enclosures — the essence of the original Baroque design has been skillfully preserved with characteristic Viennese charm.

The oldest zoo in the world, which has recently opened up a treetop walkway, was built in 1752 by Empress Maria Theresa, the most popular mother of the Austrian nation. She was so devoted to her husband Franz I Stephan of Lorraine that she chose to share her final resting place with him. Their double tomb can be seen at the Habsburg burial crypt in the Kapuzinergruft.

St. Stephen's Cathedral is at the religious and geographical heart of the city and the giant Pummerin bell features on television as it rings in the New Year. There are also celebrations throughout the ball season — the words "Alles Walzer" signal to the assembled guests that it is time to join the dance at the Redoutensaal of the Hofburg or one of the countless palaces. The Viennese also uphold the good old days in their daily lives, enjoying a breakfast fit for an Emperor complete with delicious Kaisersemmel bread rolls, or treating themselves to a Kaiserschmarrn dessert. **More: www.vienna.info**