

Festive Vienna

by Lucy Gordan



Austrian National Tourist Office/G. Popp

Celebrate the holiday season in the
land of Sachertorte and Lipizzaners

Venice, Prague, and Vienna are Europe's most nostalgic and romantic cities – places proud of their glorious pasts, not on today's cutting edge, but perfect for soaking up the refined local atmosphere. Think Vienna and images of the blue Danube, waltzing couples, prancing Lipizzaner horses, Mozart, Vienna's world-famous choirboys, the historic opera house, coffee and Sachertorte, the grandeur of the Habsburg dynasty's palaces and Schatzkammer or treasury, the Wienerwald or Vienna Woods which inspired Beethoven, and Grinzing's inns to taste heurigen or young wines – will all float across your daydream.

Advent – from the end of November to Christmas Eve – is the perfect season for a visit to Vienna. Unlike most German cities with one large Christmas market each, Vienna, a city of *bon vivants*, boasts six major Christkindlmärkte, each in a different neighborhood, but with the common denominator of many small vendors offering Christmas decorations, Glühwein (mulled wine), and Kartoffelpuffer (potatoes roasted with garlic). The aromas of roasting chestnuts, cinnamon, cloves, gingerbread, and fir trees (for sale on many street corners) waft through the tingling frosty air. As they go from Markt to Markt, the well bundled, joyous, and unhurried crowds do not seem the least bothered by the at-times icy gusts of wind.

Elegant, understated strands of sparkling Swarovski crystal lights – like the chandeliers in the city's ballrooms – twinkle above the several downtown pedestrian shopping streets: Kohlmarkt, Graben, and Kärntnerstrasse, branching out from the beloved majestic Gothic cathedral, Stephansdom, affectionately nicknamed "Steffl," the equivalent of "Stevie" in English. For schedules of the free concerts held here and in many other Viennese churches during Advent read the wall posters around town.

The tradition of Christkindlmärkte in Vienna goes back seven centuries. In 1296, Duke Albrecht I granted the Viennese the privilege of organizing a "Dezembermarkt" over fourteen consecutive days at which mostly textiles and groceries were sold. In the sixteenth century, its name changed to "Thomasmarkt" and it took place the week between Christmas and New Years, adding pastries to the



OPPOSITE PAGE: Vienna's Christmas market at the Town Hall Square. ABOVE: Kohlmarkt looking toward the Imperial Palace in Vienna at Christmas time.

merchandise. About two hundred years later – in 1764 to be precise – its name changed again to "Nikolo-und-Weihnachtsmarkt" (St. Nicholas and Christmas market) or "Krippenmarkt" (crèche market) at Freyung, the triangular uphill square lined with fine, recently restored Baroque buildings, now home to fashionable boutiques, cafés (particularly special the Central at Herrengasse/Strauchgasse), and art galleries.

Christmas as celebrated today dates to the "Biedermeier" – when the Viennese aristocracy began imitating the northern-German tradition of setting up elaborate Christmas trees in their feudal homes, but it was not until after the Wiener Kongress or Congress of Vienna in 1814 that gift-giving began. At this time, there was still only one market located on the vast centrally located monumental square "Am Hof." We know from surviving invoices that it was like any ordinary market except that its many small vendors also sold silver-plated nuts, candles, and tinsel.

One of Vienna's six Christmas markets is still at "am Hof" (first district – www.kunsthandwerksmarkt.at); another

still in Freyung (both a short walk up the Graben from Stephansdom or easily accessible on the U2 subway line or trams 1, 2, and D). Today, the many stands at "am Hof" specialize in wooden toys, while those at nearby Freyung (first district – www.altwiener-markt.at) tempt visitors with Austrian cheese, sausages, and homemade sweets, all to be washed down with spicy Glühwein.

Also easily reached by the same transportation is Vienna's largest, most touristy, and usually very crowded Christkindlmarkt in Rathausplatz, the square directly in front of the Rathaus or city hall. Amid the corny souvenirs, like the ubiquitous Santa Claus hats with blonde braids and beer mugs, you can find gingerbread in every possible size, shape, and theme as well as homemade sweets. This child-friendly Christkindlmarkt also offers carol singing, a merry-go-round, pony rides, puppet shows and activities like cooking lessons for children throughout the day.

Behind the Volkstheater or People's theater, within walking distance from the Rathaus, but also on the U3, tram 49, and



Kohlmarkt in Vienna at Christmas time. The Vienna Christkindlmärkte offer a wide selection of holiday craft items for visitors.

bus 48a routes, Spittelberg's Advent market is located along the narrow streets of Vienna's 7th district: Spittelberggasse, Schrankgasse, and Gutenberggasse, a quaint gas-lit neighborhood, a bit like a Viennese version of Montmartre or Trastevere (www.spittelberg.at). The merchandise is too worldwide ethnic and new age, but do not miss the stand in front of the bar called Lux with hot apple cider.

If you want to be within walking distance of all these markets and most of the city's major sights, book a room at the bijou hotel Rathaus Wein & Design, opened in May 2004. Formerly an elegant private house in the charming nineteenth-century neighborhood of Josefstadt, each of its thirty-three elegant ultra-modern minimalistically furnished rooms is named after a different Austrian wine. Its wine bar features a different Austrian wine maker each month with nightly tastings.

Manfred Katzlinger, an expert in hotel and restaurant architecture, also designed the interior of the Plachutta restaurant, world-famous for its tafelspitz beef or boiled beef platter accompanied by its own broth, roast potatoes, creamed spinach, apple sauce, and horseradish, definitely a must during a visit to Vienna.

Although non-smoking areas do not exist at Viennese restaurants, also recommended is the tafelspitz, the mainstay specialty

of Viennese cuisine, at Fromme Helene and Alte Backstube, a restaurant since 1697 and also a museum of bakery history. Both are just a stone's throw from hotel Rathaus Wein & Design.

For another "historic" evening of traditional Viennese cuisine, head to Griechenbeisl. Famous for its connection to the doomed Augustin love story recounted in the Viennese melody "Oh lieber Augustin, alles ist hin," there has been a restaurant, named for its early Greek merchant patrons, on this site since 1447. Among its illustrious guests over the centuries were Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Wagner, Mark Twain, Einstein, and Gina Lollobrigida.

Although the Christkindlmärkte are open all day, late afternoon or evening is when the locals go. The Christkindlmärkte at the Imperial residences, the Belvedere (home to Klimt's ubiquitously reproduced painting, "The Kiss") and Schönbrunn Palaces, although farther afield, are well worth the short tram or subway trips (trams D, 0, and 71 or U4 subway, respectively) even if I would personally hail a fiaker or horse-drawn car-

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When in Vienna...

Rathaus Wein & Design:

Lange Gasse 13; Telephone: 011-43-1-4001122; E-mail: office@hotel-rathaus-wien.at, www.hotel-rathaus-wien.at.

Plachutta restaurant:

Wollzeile 38; Telephone: 011-43-1-51215770; Website: www.plachutta.at; reservations necessary.

Fromme Helene:

Josefstädter Strasse 15; Telephone: 011-43-1-4069144; Website: www.frommehelene.at.

Alte Backstube:

Lange Gasse 34; Telephone: 011-43-1-4061101; Website: www.backstube.at.

Griechenbeisl;

Fleischmarkt 1; Telephone: 011-43-1-5331977; Website: www.griechenbeisl.at; reservations necessary.

Gerhard Urbanke:

Liechtensteinstrasse 66; Telephone: 1.011-43-664-1729074; E-mail: urbanke@zinnfiguren-aus-wien.at.

Vienna card:

Telephone: 011-43-1-7984400, ext. 148.

The Third Man Museum:

Pressgasse 25/B; Telephone: 011-43-1-5864872; Website: www.drittemannmuseum.com.

Gerhard Strassgswandter:

Cell phone: 011-43-676-4757818; E-mail: gstrassg@yahoo.com.

Vienna Tourist Board:

Website: www.wien.info; E-mail: wiv@wien.info.

Kalender Calendar

**November/
December 2006/
January 2007**

Please contact events directly to confirm dates, times, locations, and admission fees.

November

Akron, OH

November 24 - December 31:
3rd Annual Holidayfest Christkindl Market.
Visit www.holidayfest.org.

Bethlehem, PA

Weekends beginning November 24 - 26
through **December 14 - 17:** Christkindlmarkt
Bethlehem.

Call 610-332-1300 or visit
www.Christkindlmarkt.org.

Denver, CO

November 24 - December 22: 7th Annual Den-
ver Christkindl Market. Cherry Creek Shop-
ping Mall. Email foreim@msn.com or visit
www.denverchristkindlmarkt.com.

December

Frederick, MD

December 1: Der Stammtisch monthly social
gathering at Brewer's Alley, 124 N. Market
Street. Call 301-631-0127 and ask for Fritz or
Stammtisch.

San Antonio, TX

December 1: Beethoven King William Area
Event at the Beethoven Halle und Garten, 422
Pereida Street. Call 210-222-1521.

Fredericksburg, TX

December 1 - 3: 9th Annual Weihnachten in
Fredericksburg. Call 1-888-997-3600 or visit
www.tex-fest.com.

Leavenworth, WA

December 1 - 3: Christmas Lighting Festival.
Email info@leavenworth.org or call 509-548-
5807.

Tulsa, OK

December 1 - 3: 8th Annual Christkindlmarkt
at the German American Society of Tulsa
building, 2301 East 15th Street. Call 918-744-
6997 or visit www.gastulsa.org.

San Antonio, TX

December 2: Kristkindlmarkt at the Beethoven
Halle und Garten, 422 Pereida Street. Call 210-
222-1521.

Adamstown, PA

December 3, 10, 17, 24: Christkindlmarkt.
Events held at noon. Call 717-484-4386 or visit
www.stoudtsbeer.com.

Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

December 6 - 10: 10th Annual Kitchener
Christkindlmarkt.

Visit www.christkindlcanada.com.

Mifflinburg, PA

December 7 - 9: 18th Annual Christkindl

Market. Visit www.Mifflinburgpa.com/Christkindl.htm.

Leavenworth, WA

December 8 - 10: Christmas Lighting Festival.
Email info@leavenworth.org or call 509-548-
5807.

San Antonio, TX

December 9: Christmas Party, Maennerchor/
Damenchor at the Beethoven Halle und
Garten, 422 Pereida Street. Call 210-222-1521.

Leavenworth, WA

December 15 - 17: Christmas Lighting Festival.
Email info@leavenworth.org or call 509-548-
5807.

Danbury, NH

December 17: German Cookie Making Class.
Inn at Danbury & Alphorn Bistro. Call 603-768-
3318, email info@innatdanbury.com, or visit
www.innatdanbury.com.

Washington, DC

December 17: Washington Saengerbund's Tra-
ditional Christmas Concert. United Church,
20th & G Streets, NW. For information visit
www.saengerbund.org.

Oakford, PA

December 17: Christmas Party and Show. Visit
www.ughclub.us/.

Washington, DC

December 17: Viennese Ball. Meridian House.
Tickets required. Lessons given four weeks
prior to the event. Call 540-882-4808 or 202-
232-3002, email mbocek@verizon.net or visit
www.viennesewaltz.org/meridian.html.

San Antonio, TX

December 31: New Year's Eve Party at the
Beethoven Halle und Garten, 422 Pereida
Street. Call 210-222-1521.

Oakford, PA

December 31: A Gala New Year's Eve Party.
Visit www.ughclub.us/.

January

Frederick, MD

January 5: Der Stammtisch monthly social gath-
ering at Brewer's Alley, 124 N. Market Street.
Call 301-631-0127 and ask for Fritz or
Stammtisch.

For upcoming events to be included in *Calendar*,
e-mail editor@germanlife.com

Mail correspondence to *German Life Calendar*

1068 National Highway LaVale, MD 21502,

or fax requests to (301) 729-1720.

Information must be received four months in advance.

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riage (fares must be negotiated). Their stands - filled with handicrafts and home-made sweets - pull on the heartstrings. At both, you can watch as the artisans make your purchases - tin figures, hand-blown glass, candles, Christmas wreathes, and hand-carved wooden crèches, to name a few - before your very eyes. My favorite stand at Schönbrunn belonged to Gerhard Urbanke who painted a tin Buchangel to my requested color scheme.

By the way, if you fall in love with Christkindlmärkte, book a return trip to Vienna in the spring to enjoy the Ostermärkte or Easter markets also held in Schönbrunn's courtyard, in Freyung, and around the Kalvarienberg Church in the seventeenth district (tram 43). At all three you can choose between Easter eggs made of real hand-painted eggshells, chocolate, wood, glass, palm leaves, flowers, ceramics, and toys.

At all times of the year, to take advantage of free public transportation, gifts at the Christkindlmärkte and Ostermärkte, discounts at shops, restaurants, and cafés, and on entrance fees at Vienna's numerous museums (many of which are in their own neighborhood called Museums-Quartier), purchase the seventy-two-hour Vienna card. Besides art and more art, museums here cover fiakers, natural history, theater, Judaism, clocks, Lipizzaner horses, military history, butterflies, papyrus, Esperanto, globes, trams, Freud, torture, and Christmas crèches on display year-round in the crypt of St. Peters church near Stephansdom.

The newest cultural destination, indeed a place "to come in from the cold" is The Third Man Museum. Open only on Saturday afternoon from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., its displays concern the cinematic classic about international espionage in post-World War II Vienna based on Graham Greene's best-selling novel and starring Orson Welles.

One of the founders of this small private museum is Gerhard Strassguschwandter, a ceramics artist and licensed guide. Give yourself Vienna's best souvenir - a day on the town in his company - during Advent or any other season.

Lucy Gordan is a regular contributor to Bookdealer, Renaissance, Epicurean Traveler, Food & Beverage International, and La Madia, an Italian food and travel monthly.