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SMARTER VIENNA

The Austrian capital is packed with history but it is embracing the future

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The Hofburg, former imperial palace of the Habsburg rulers



The radically modern University of Economics by Zaha Hadid

Smarter than your average city

In Vienna, you encounter history at every turn. But the city is also facing the future with a lot more confidence than many other European cities at this time. That's because Vienna has transformed itself into one of the "smartest" cities in the world.

TEXT: Stephan Burianek

Once the heart of Europe's mightiest empire, Vienna was a capital that sparkled like a gloriously bejewelled crown, a city that attracted the world's foremost thinkers, musicians and artists. In recent times, however, it had seemed more like a proverbial sleeping beauty, just waiting to be revived. But now it seems to have done just that, and there are signs that this great city on the Danube is becoming something of a shrewd catwalk model. And it is led not just by legions of visitors eager to take in its history and magnificence but by a transformation of philosophy that has seen it embrace a "smarter" sort of existence.

For a long time, the Austrian capital – politically in the west, but geographically more to the east than Prague – existed as if in the shadow of the Iron Curtain. Even its special diplomatic status as a seat of the United Nations could do little to change this. Only when the hated barbed wire fell along its eastern border from 1989 did the former world metropolis, with its magnificent buildings and renowned cultural provenance, move back into the international spotlight. Suddenly, the city was back in the middle of Europe; and suddenly, companies started to choose Vienna

as the central location for their businesses, particularly those doing business in Eastern Europe.

Fast forward three decades and the Smart City Index published by management consultants Roland Berger says that Vienna leads a list of 153 large and small cities across the planet as the "smartest city in the world". Unlike most competitors, the city on the famous river Danube even has its own Smart City Agency, and it promotes trend-setting concepts such as strengthening industries that have excellent environmental credentials. Similarly, and to name just one example, this year the Vienna Business Agency is providing 7.5 million euros to support innovative media start-ups.

Smart Cities are those that address modern urban challenges using interconnected digital solutions. According to criteria from the above-mentioned Roland Berger, an "e-mobility strategy, for example, should always be integrated into intelligent traffic management systems and powered via smart electricity grids. So, an integrated strategy that is planned and managed centrally is crucial."

Of course, Vienna's visitors benefit from well-thought-out planning and development. In recent decades, for instance, city authorities have done just about everything possible to encourage residents to sell their cars. It means that today Vienna is one of the most pedestrian-friendly capitals in the world. In the city centre, you can stroll through pedestrian zones and "meeting zones", areas where cars are allowed to drive, but pedestrians have the right of way. Even in other districts, the distances are comparatively short for people to traverse the city. Moreover, the public transport network is exemplary, and often the Wiener Linien (which runs much of the public transport infrastructure) provides faster options than travelling by car. At weekends, the five underground lines and the rapid transit trains run all night, and night buses even run during the week.

In the Smart City Index, Vienna was praised "not just for the fact that it has integrated solutions for mobility and the environment, an advanced e-health approach and ... open government data. It has also introduced a standardised monitoring system for all of its Smart City projects. Everything is coordinated by the central Smart City Agency, a »

unit that pools technical expertise and promotes links between the city administration, research, business and industry."

The city's reasoning for its transformational thinking is as simple as it is clever: the city is growing extremely fast and a smart strategy was necessary if Vienna was to once again thrive. A few years ago, Vienna replaced Hamburg as the second largest city in the German-speaking world. It's true that Vienna also had 1.6 million inhabitants in the 1990s, but demographic studies say the two million mark will be exceeded in around a decade. Then the former Habsburg metropolis will again have as many inhabitants as during its last heyday, around 1900, when the city was a cutting-edge centre of culture and science, burning with radical political ideas on the left and right.

Of course, the needs of the people have changed since then, and now they need more space. Above all in the area east of the Danube, where construction is being carried out. This includes on the former tracks of the Nordbahnhof at Praterstern, and around the site of a former slaughterhouse in St. Marx, where new districts with handsome, modern architecture have been designed, creating an exciting contrast between old and new buildings in the city. In a similar vein, the campus of the University of Economics designed by Zaha Hadid north of the Prater has been a famous attraction ever since it opened six years ago.

Overnight stays in Vienna are booming

In 2018, Vienna recorded 16.5 million overnight stays, more than ever before. Nevertheless, hotel prices are still comparatively moderate, which is probably not so much due to alternative rental platforms such as Airbnb

(which are being fought by the authorities and the hotel association in Vienna, as in many other places in the world). But rather because of the fact that many new hotels in the three- to five-star categories have been launched on the market in recent years. For example, in the new area around Vienna's main railway station, a Motel One (a company originating over the border in Munich) with more than 500 rooms has opened next to an Andaz hotel.



Viennese evenings & wines

1 Classical music/opera: Vienna sees itself as the world capital of classical music and has three opera houses (Staatsoper, Theater an der Wien & Volksoper) and two large concert halls (Musikverein & Konzerthaus). In July and August, however, these venues are closed or rented out to external event organisers – at the same time, the Film Music Festival on Rathausplatz and the new Freu deNOW Festival at the historic racecourse in Freudenau attract visitors.

2 Dining at the Museum: every Thursday evening from 6:30 to 10:00 the marble domed hall of the Kunsthistorisches Museum is transformed into a gourmet restaurant. Between the aisles you can stroll individually through the comparatively empty exhibition rooms. One Tuesday a month the Kuppelhalle also becomes an "art treasure" cocktail bar.

3 Heurige: the traditional "Heurigen" at the foot of the vineyards on the outskirts of the city serve local wine. Their number has declined over the past two decades, but the quality has increased. Warm, down-to-earth food is served from a buffet. Recommendable are Weinbau Obermann (Grinzing), Hengl-Haselbrunner (Oberdöbling), Fuhrgassl-Huber (Neustift am Walde), Zahel (Mauer) and Gerhard Klager (Stammersdorf).



New buildings overlooking the river (below) contrast with imperial architecture (right) and remind visitors that Vienna continues to evolve

The meetings industry also has much to celebrate: 4,685 congresses, corporate events and other similar gatherings set a new record in 2018 with around 631,000 conference participants and over 1.9 million overnight stays. This means that around one in eight overnight stays can be attributed to a conference guest. Exactly 401 of these events were international conferences according to the criteria of the Union of International Associations (UIA), putting Vienna in fourth place worldwide. In total, there are around 300 congress organisers active in Vienna.

Vienna's international popularity is due to a large degree to its rich cultural and culinary offerings, many of which include popular characterisations that are still lived out in an authentic way. The legendary coffee-house culture is still very much alive, despite being increasingly displaced by international coffee chains. There are more first-class opera performances and classical concerts than in any other city of comparable size. And in the magnificent buildings from the periods of monarchy and empire one can visit the works of world-famous artists. In addition to the down-to-earth traditional cuisine (serving, of course, Wiener Schnitzel and goulash), there is a good selection of haute cuisine and trendy bars. And then, of course, there are the Austrian wines, which are now measured against some of the best in the world.

Certified quality of life

Vienna was declared the world's most liveable city for the tenth year in a row (ahead of Zurich and Vancouver) in the annual Mercer Quality of Living study in 2019. The study assesses data on "employees sent to work abroad", ranging from climate, disease and ease of communications to crime, environment and the political situation. The city is proud of its fresh, calcareous drinking water from the Austrian Alps and its smooth-running infrastructure. Moreover, the Viennese can quickly and easily get into stunning

countryside: the vineyards in Grinzing and the Heurigen are only 20 minutes by tram from the city centre. And yet the beauty of the city and its quality of life seem to be hard to bear for some, because the Viennese may be smart but some people consider them fussy, rude even. Similar to liveable city titles, this has become almost quasi-official, with the latest International Expat study listing Vienna as the third most unfriendly city in the world (only surpassed by Paris and Kuwait City). The Viennese themselves have always taken the unfriendliness they are accused of with self-irony: "How beautiful Vienna would be without the Viennese", sang the legendary Viennese cabaret artist Georg Kreisler in a humorous song in the 1960s.

For Vienna, a city famous for its high culture and its grand history, this isn't a bad response. The Viennese might even call it "smart".



Travelling to and in Vienna

Plane: regional trains and the S7 rapid transit railway run regularly from Vienna airport to the city. The fastest connection is provided by private provider City-Airport-Train (CAT), which takes 16 minutes non-stop to Wien-Mitte station.

Public transport: a one-way ticket costs €2.40, a day ticket €5.80, a 24-hour ticket €8.00.

Bicycle/scooter: the city has numerous cycle paths, and rental bike providers are Citybike Vienna and the Danish provider Donkey Republic. E-scooters are also popular, for example from Lime, Bird and Thier.

Uber/Taxis: There are various certified taxi companies; Uber still functions but is being opposed by the established taxi companies with increasing success.

Walk: Vienna is extremely pedestrian-friendly and particularly in the city centre you can generally get around best on your own two legs – and you can see even more.

The Vienna Staatsoper is a world-class opera house that puts on around 350 performances every year

The Kunsthistorisches Museum provides the perfect ambience for gourmet dining

