



Europe's olde world has plenty new delights

You'll have a ball visiting Vienna, Prague and Budapest, writes **Kate Turkington**

BARACK Obama was here, Kafka was here, Freud was here, Liszt, Schubert and Chopin were here, Queen Victoria was here, Sir Elton John and Rod Stewart will get here this year, but Freddie Mercury only made it after the Berlin Wall fell.

Until then, his 1975 rock masterpiece, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, was heard only on pirated records, muffled behind thick curtains, deep in dimly lit cellars, because eastern Europe was still cloaked under the pall of communism. Freddie was considered a subversive influence along with John Lennon.

Let's not forget that it was only a few decades ago that people were desperately trying to get out of Eastern Europe (many getting killed as they risked perilous border crossings), not trying to get in. But all that's changed, and now no traveller's itinerary would be complete without visiting the cities of Vienna, Prague and Budapest – where glorious architecture, cultural hot spots, delicious food, thrilling music, funky shopping, leafy boulevards, quaint, twisting lanes and friendly people mix in riotous profusion.

Let's begin our journey in Vienna, once one of the greatest cities of the world, centre of the mighty Austro-Hungarian empire, which held sway for more than 600 years. Vienna is just what you expect – full of opera houses, palaces, imperial architecture, glitzy shops, romantic coffee houses and sachertorte – the ultimate chocolate cake. But, amazingly, the historical centre, the Innere Stadt, is only a kilometre wide at its broadest point. I goggle through the frosty windows of my tour bus at incredibly beautiful and self-important buildings here and along the 5km-long Ringstrasse, which girdles the inner city. How could such a small city build such huge, imposing buildings? The town hall looks like a cathedral. There are statues everywhere: of mounted, moustached military men, Goethe, Mozart, Johann Strauss, Empress Maria Theresa (the beloved Princess Di of her day), and surprisingly (nobody quite knows why), Mark Antony in a chariot drawn by lions.

The main opera house (there are dozens in Vienna), the Staatsoper, performs 48 different operas a year, and six or seven ballets. If you can't get a ticket (which often sell out months in advance) there are hundreds of standing places available each night which go on sale 80 minutes before the performance at only a few euros a ticket. By all means go into one of the famous cafés, such as the Berg or Sperl, for your coffee and cake, but there are plenty of cheap eating places if you are cash-strapped.

Built during the golden age of the Hapsburg Empire, Maria Theresa's summer residence, the Schonbrunn Palace, a mini Versailles, will have you marvelling at the sumptuous luxury that the aristocrats enjoyed, as you begin to understand why the peasants revolted. Outside the palace, a Christmas market full of wooden stalls selling everything from handmade decorations to hot mulled wine and sausages has been set up. A lady walks her dog, which is wearing four fur boots and a fur-trimmed coat.

On the way to Prague, via Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, our bus takes us through flat, unexceptional landscape dotted by tall, red-and-black-tiled houses painted in ice cream colours – cream, pale yellow, pink, pale blue and peppermint green, with great piles of logs outside. Because it is winter, a light frosting of snow sparkles on the fields and the occasional pine forest looks like a traditional Christmas card.

In 1993, the former Czech Republic had a "velvet divorce" and separated into two new countries – Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Bratislava, only 60km from Vienna, (the two cities are the world's closest capitals) is a bustling small city on the banks of the Danube. It's the country's commercial and financial hub but its student population gives it a great nightlife.

Nearly trip over a pavement statue of a man climbing out of a manhole – the kind of irreverent culture which introduces a new liveliness to the old town dominated by its four-towered medieval castle. Two steaming mugs of Glühwein and a sausage that would put any self-respecting boerewors to shame, we're back on the bus, and on our way to Prague.

Who are we? A motley crew of Insight travellers from all over the world. Mainly Aussies, with a sprinkling of Singaporeans, Kiwis, Americans and South Africans, we have come to sample the famous Christmas markets and whatever else we can cram into our tight itinerary.

Adeline, a classical piano teacher from Auckland; Rick, a cattle auctioneer from Queensland; Fred, a history lecturer; Bill, a social worker from Alice Springs; and Jim and Frank, teenagers from Singapore. Over all,



MEDIEVAL: Prague Castle, which dates back to the 9th century, stands atop a hill on the left bank of the Vltava River.

PICTURES: KATE TURKINGTON



TOURIST FARE: Handmade puppets for Christmas stockings.

rules the experienced tour guide, Freddy, who, although born in Berlin during World War II, has an English accent that would do the Queen proud. She marshals us, advises us, and rules us with a velvet rod.

Prague, city of a 100 gilded spires, is delightful. Other countries fought for freedom from the communists. The citizens of Prague gathered in Wenceslas Square and jangled their door keys. "Every night for a week," writes local author Victor Sebestyen, "crowds gathered in Prague's Wenceslas Square. At regular intervals, thousands of people in unison waved their key rings above their heads. The noise echoed throughout the city, signifying to their hated communist masters: 'Go home, here's your key. It's time to leave'."

This good-humoured approach characterises Prague. Yes, it's terribly touristy, but you have to visit the huge castle that looms over the city and have your photograph taken with one of the chocolate-box guards; you have to wander round St Vitus' Cathedral and marvel at the stained glass; you have to walk down from the castle through the medieval cobbled streets to the Old

Tour tip

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Town Square and watch the astronomical clock strike the hour; you must walk across the famous Charles Bridge with its army of saints guarding each side; and you must go to a concert – the town is full of them – and you must drink the local beer. Buy brightly coloured Bohemian glass beads for next to nothing, and a handmade wooden puppet.

And so on to Budapest. Nothing prepared me for Budapest. I was told: "If you think Prague is beautiful, wait till you see Budapest", but I was blown away. Without doubt, it is one of the most beautiful cities I have seen anywhere in the world. The great sweep of the Danube divides Buda, the hilly

part of the city, from Pest (pronounced Pesh) the lower, flatter part. I had thought Vienna grand – Budapest is even grander, and even more elegant. A night-time river trip took us under bridges, past the 1.5km-long Castle Hill packed with palaces and old mansions, the Fishermen's Bastion, past churches, domes and spires. Floodlights illuminated the buildings and we felt we were in a fairytale.

Inside the main synagogue in the Jewish Quarter is the 5000-tube organ, once played by Liszt and Saint Saëns. Some of the Aussies took a bath in one of the grandest baths in Europe, the magnificent Gellért baths, with original art nouveau furnishings, stained glass, sculptures and mosaics.

We visit the 19th century parliament, with its gold-leaf 96m-high dome, and see where the parliamentary action takes places in a gilded, brocaded chamber. And view the medieval crown and coronation regalia of Hungary's oldest monarchs, guarded by fresh-faced young soldiers with lugubrious expressions. There's much more to tell. So much more. But you'll have to go and see for yourself.



CONTRASTS: A pavement statue in Bratislava, Slovakia, is a modern touch.



IMPOSING: The Hungarian parliament building in Budapest.