

Austria

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Vienna's Innere Stadt** Explore the twisting cobbled alleyways and wide boulevards of an Old Town that dates back to the Roman age (p76)
- **Salzburg** Wander a town where baroque beauty and fabulously kitsch tours of the *Sound of Music* go hand in hand (p91)
- **Hohe Tauern National Park** Road-trip along one of the world's most scenic highways, where 3000m peaks are a dime a dozen (p100)
- **Salzkammergut** Cruise from one lakeside town to the next, then catch a cable car to salt mines and ice caves (p95)
- **Innsbruck** Experience Tirolean hospitality and glorious alpine scenery in this westerly city (p96)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 83,870 sq km
- **Budget** €45 to €60 per day
- **Capital** Vienna
- **Country code** ☎ 43
- **Famous for** apple strudel, Wiener schnitzel, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Freudian psychoanalysis
- **Languages** German (Slovene, Croat and Hungarian are also official languages in some southern states)
- **Money** euro (€); A\$1 = €0.55; C\$1 = 0.60; ¥100 = €0.78; NZ\$1 = €0.43; UK£1 = €1.12; US\$1 = €0.74
- **Phrases** *Grüss Gott* (hello), *servus* (hello and goodbye), *ba ba* (bye bye), *danke* (thank you)



- **Population** 8.3 million
- **Visas** no visa needed for citizens of the EU, Australia, New Zealand, the US and Canada; see p102

TRAVEL HINTS

Make lunch your main meal, when there are cheap *Tagesmenus* (daily specials/menus). Make sure to have a shot of schnapps, just for the hell of it (and it helps digestion).

ROAMING AUSTRIA

Many backpackers arrive on a train from Zürich or Munich, stop at Salzburg, move on to Vienna and head straight to Eastern Europe. With more time, stop first in Innsbruck and later visit the Salzkammergut lakes district south of Salzburg. Graz makes a good budget stopover en route to Hungary or Slovenia.

There's no need to tell people Austria is an alpine country. Everyone's seen Julie spinning around in *The Sound of Music*, with one snowcapped mountain spilling out behind her after the next, all sloped in thick forests of pine. And it's all true – this small land in central Europe

is an outdoor purist's dream, with some of the best skiing and snowboarding in the Northern Alps and a largely untapped network of hiking and mountain-biking trails.

But Austria has more to offer than its plethora of peaks. Vienna, the capital and heart of the country, is an architectural extravaganza where past and present mix and mingle with ease. Salzburg, guarded by a powerful hilltop fortress, is baroque beyond belief. Lesser-known drawcards wait in the wings. Graz, a student town with drive and energy, hides contemporary architectural gems, while Innsbruck, a city with an intact medieval centre, proudly sits among towering alpine ranges. Then there are the lakes and peaks of the Salzkammergut, meadows and mountains of Vorarlberg, and sunshine and wine of the Wachau.

Whether you can spare a day or a month for Austria on your European travels, you certainly won't be disappointed.

HISTORY

Austria is a small nation with a big past. It may be hard to believe that this diminutive, landlocked Alpine country was once the epicentre of the mighty Habsburg empire and, in the 20th century, a pivotal player in the outbreak of WWI. For centuries the Habsburgs used strategic marriages to maintain their hold over a territory which encompassed much of central and Eastern Europe and, for a period, even Germany. But defeat in WWI brought that to an end, and in 1918 the republic of Austria was formed.

Like so many European countries, Austria has experienced invasions and struggles since time immemorial. There are traces of human occupation since the Ice Age, but it was the Celts who made the first substantial mark on Austria around 450 BC. The Romans followed 400 years later, who in turn were followed by Bavarians, and, in 1278, the House of Habsburg took control of the country by defeating the head of the Bavarian royalty.

The 16th and 17th centuries saw the Ottoman threat reach the gates of Vienna, and in 1805 Napoleon defeated Austria at Austerlitz. Austrian chancellor Metternich cleverly reconsolidated Austria's power in 1815 after Waterloo, but the loss of the 1866 Austro-Prussian War, and creation of the Austrian-Hungarian empire in 1867, diminished the Habsburg's influence in Europe.

However, these setbacks pale beside Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination by Slavic separatists in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. When his uncle, the Austro-Hungarian emperor Franz Josef, declared war on Serbia in response, the ensuing 'Great War' (WWI) would prove the Habsburgs' downfall.

During the 1930s Nazis began to influence Austrian politics and by 1938 the recession-hit

country was ripe for picking. German troops met little resistance and Hitler was greeted on Heldenplatz as a hero by 200,000 Viennese.

Austria was heavily bombed during WWII, but the country recovered well, largely through the Marshall Plan and sound political and economic decisions. Austria has maintained a neutral stance since 1955, been home to a number of international organisations, including the UN since 1979, and joined the EU in 1995. In recent history, Austria's biggest impact on the international scene was its political foray in the '90s with the far-right Freedom Party – FPÖ – and its former controversial leader, Jörg Haider (Haider died in a car accident in October 2008). FPÖ's current leader, HC Strache, has used his good looks and populist propaganda to win over many young voters in the last years, and ranks high in Austrian poles.

THE CULTURE

At first Austrians seem reserved and even slightly suspicious of strangers, and are not generally regarded for outward displays of friendliness. However, when you get to know them better, most are friendly and exhibit genuine interest in sharing a multifaceted culture with the rest of the world. Politeness and formality are highly esteemed and expected, especially among the older generation.

Vienna has always been a paradox, mixing Austrian conservatism with a large dollop of decadence. The scene you might find at Viennese balls – grand old society dames flirting with drag queens – aptly reflects this. The capital's pervading humour, *Wiener Schmääh*, is quite ironic and cutting, but is also meant to be charming.

ARTS

Beethoven, Brahms, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert and other European composers were