

Burgenland



Often given a wide berth by tourists, Burgenland is all but the typical Austria you hear of or read about. It has neither bombastic architecture nor deep lakes and soaring mountains. On the contrary, it is small and sleepy, and in large sections a flat province situated on the border with Hungary. Even the jewel in its crown – Neusiedler See – has dried up and disappeared several times in its natural history – most recently in the mid-19th century.

This is the kind of place where everyday life takes precedence, but it is precisely this ‘everyday’ aspect that makes it interesting. The province receives a reputed 300 days of sunshine a year; couple this with a rich soil base and a wine history dating back to pre-Roman times, and you have Austria’s best wine-producing region. What better way to spend an afternoon than sampling local *Weine* (wines) in a *Heuriger* (wine tavern) under a warm sun? Throw in the shallow Neusiedler See and a section of it that is now the Neusiedler See-Seewinkel National Park, tack on a bike path that leads into the park and through Hungary before re-emerging in Austria, and add a swampy, medieval town such as Rust, and you might find yourself fascinated by Burgenland’s charms.

Stork-spotters will be in their element here in summer, when feathered friends populate the roofs of several towns near the lake – including Rust, one of the nicest places to observe them. Although it does have a handful of interesting cultural sights, such as Schloss Esterházy in Eisenstadt, the province’s small capital, Burgenland is more a place where people are content to enjoy good wine and food, and relax in the great outdoors.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sipping golden wines and supping in one of Burgenland’s pretty **Heurigen** (p194), dotted across Burgenland
- Swimming, splashing or sailing in the **Neusiedler See** (p193), Austria’s slurping steppe lake
- Cycling at a leisurely pace through the **Neusiedler See- Seewinkel National Park** (p197), a haven for birdlife
- Staring into the face of the mummified Roman legionnaire Constantine on a grand tour of **Schloss Esterházy** (p191) in the capital, Eisenstadt
- Revelling in views from Eisenstadt’s **Bergkirche** (p191) after completing the Stations of the Cross



■ POPULATION: 279,300

■ AREA: 3966 SQ KM

■ HIGHEST ELEVATION: GESCHRIEBENSTEIN 884M



History

Burgenland is the youngest of Austria's provinces, arising after the collapse of the Austrian empire at the end of WWI. It's so named for the 'burg' suffix of the four western Hungarian district names at that time – Pressburg (Bratislava), Wieselburg (Moson), Ödenburg (Sopron) and Eisenburg (Vasvár).

The region was first settled some 7000 to 12,000 years ago, and over the ensuing millennia many peoples tried their hand at settling permanently, including the Illyrians, Celts and Romans. However, the arrival of the Hungarians in the 10th century changed the face of Burgenland forever. The region soon became a buffer zone between the Hungarians and the Austrian-Germans,

who traded uneasy peace with outright war throughout the centuries.

The arrival of marauding Turks in the 16th century quashed both the Hungarians and the Austrian-Germans, and devastated the local population. Landlords, without anyone to tend their farms, invited substantial numbers of Croats to settle. Their presence is still felt today – around 10% of the population is Croatian, Croatian is a recognized local language and a few small towns in middle Burgenland bear Croat signs.

With the defeat of the Turks at the gates of Vienna in 1683 (p37), relative peace settled over the area. With the demise of the Habsburg empire after WWI Austria lost control of Hungary, but managed to retain the German-speaking western region of Hungary under the Treaty of St Germain. The new province of Burgenland was born, but Hungary was loath to lose Ödenburg (Sopron) to Austria, and a plebiscite held in December 1921 (under controversial circumstances) resulted in the people of Ödenburg opting to stay in Hungary. Burgenland lost its natural capital, and Eisenstadt became the new *Hauptstadt* (capital).

Climate

The Pannonian microclimate of hot summers and mild winters is perfect for wine production. The Neusiedler See, to the north of the province, consistently records some of the highest summer temperatures in Austria, but the large expanse of water ensures high humidity.

Language

With its close proximity to Hungary, it's no surprise that some Burgenlanders speak German with a slight Hungarian accent. Burgenland is the only province to include Croatian and Hungarian alongside German as official languages.

Getting There & Away

Eisenstadt and the northern extension of Neusiedler See are easily reached by train from Vienna and Lower Austria. Lower and middle Burgenland are less accessible by train; here the bus is often your best option. The A2 autobahn, heading south from Vienna towards Graz and Carinthia, runs parallel to the western border of Burgenland.