

How a romantic film aimed at twenty-somethings can inspire romantics of all ages to discover the hidden city

Vienna for Valentines

by Duncan J. D. Smith

February 14th is St. Valentine's Day, when lonely hearts woo would-be lovers with anonymous missives. All very odd given that the saint in question was an obscure third century Roman poet, with little proven interest in targeting Cupid's bow. That said there is little doubt regarding Vienna's part in the most romantic day of the year: the Austrian capital's fairytale fabric makes it the perfect backdrop for Valentines.

As an inveterate 'Urban Explorer', I've made it my business to track down Vienna's hidden and unused corners, far from the madding crowd.

But what about the city's most romantic ones? The answer arrived unexpectedly, whilst exploring one of my favourite hidden places, the old Melk Bastion (Mölker-Bastei) at Schottentor, when a film buff friend enquired suddenly: "Have you seen *Before Sunrise*?" "No," I admitted. I had seen *The Third Man*...

"Everyone's seen that!" he retorted, obviously, unimpressed.

Suitably admonished, and not a little intrigued, I secured a copy of film director Richard Linklater's 1995 romance, and watched it. The plot is a slight one. Celine, a French student (Julie Delpy), meets Jesse, an American traveller (Ethan Hawke), on a train between Budapest and Vienna. He has fourteen hours before flying onwards to America, and suggests she spend the time with him walking the streets of Vienna. What follows is a gentle discourse on life and love, expounded by two freewheeling twenty-somethings.

Like most directors filming in Vienna, Linklater can't resist the city's iconic backdrops, including the imperial Ringstrasse, with its grand buildings and clanking trams, and the bustling Volksprater, dominated by the century-old *Riesenrad* Ferry wheel. He

uses both to great effect but what I found especially interesting were the half dozen less well-known spots. So it was that I embarked on my own Valentine's Day odyssey.

Shadows and Whispered Voices

First stop is the *Votivkirche* in Rooseveltplatz, glimpsed fleetingly as Jesse and Celine board a tram. Unlike the Gothic Stephansdom, the *Votivkirche* is rarely busy, which is surprising since what it lacks in ecclesiastical treasures is more than made up for in atmosphere. It was begun in 1856 to give thanks (hence *votiv*) for deliverance of the young Emperor Franz Joseph I from the knife of a would-be assassin. The interior is awash with wall paintings and stained glass, shadows and whispered voices. A great start for those who enjoy their sightseeing on a sensual level.

Across from the church is the Mölker-Bastei (where my quest began), one of the last remaining fragments of Vienna's Renaissance city walls (it was here that the assassination attempt was made). The now-cobbled bastion survives because of what sits above it: the house where Beethoven penned his heartstring-tugging opera *Fidelio*, and another where Schubert reputedly wooed three sisters simultaneously. Perfect inspiration for prospective lovers.

Quiet Back Streets

Like Jesse and Celine, most romantics will be delighted to climb the steps that lead up to *Maria am Gestade* on Salvatorgasse. This church, with its delicate filigree lantern, was once used by boatmen navigating a long-lost Danube tributary along *Tiefer Graben*. Scrutiny reveals the building to be out of line, recall-

ing the awkward nature of the building plot, on the edge of a steep-sided plateau once occupied by the Roman fortress of Vindobona.

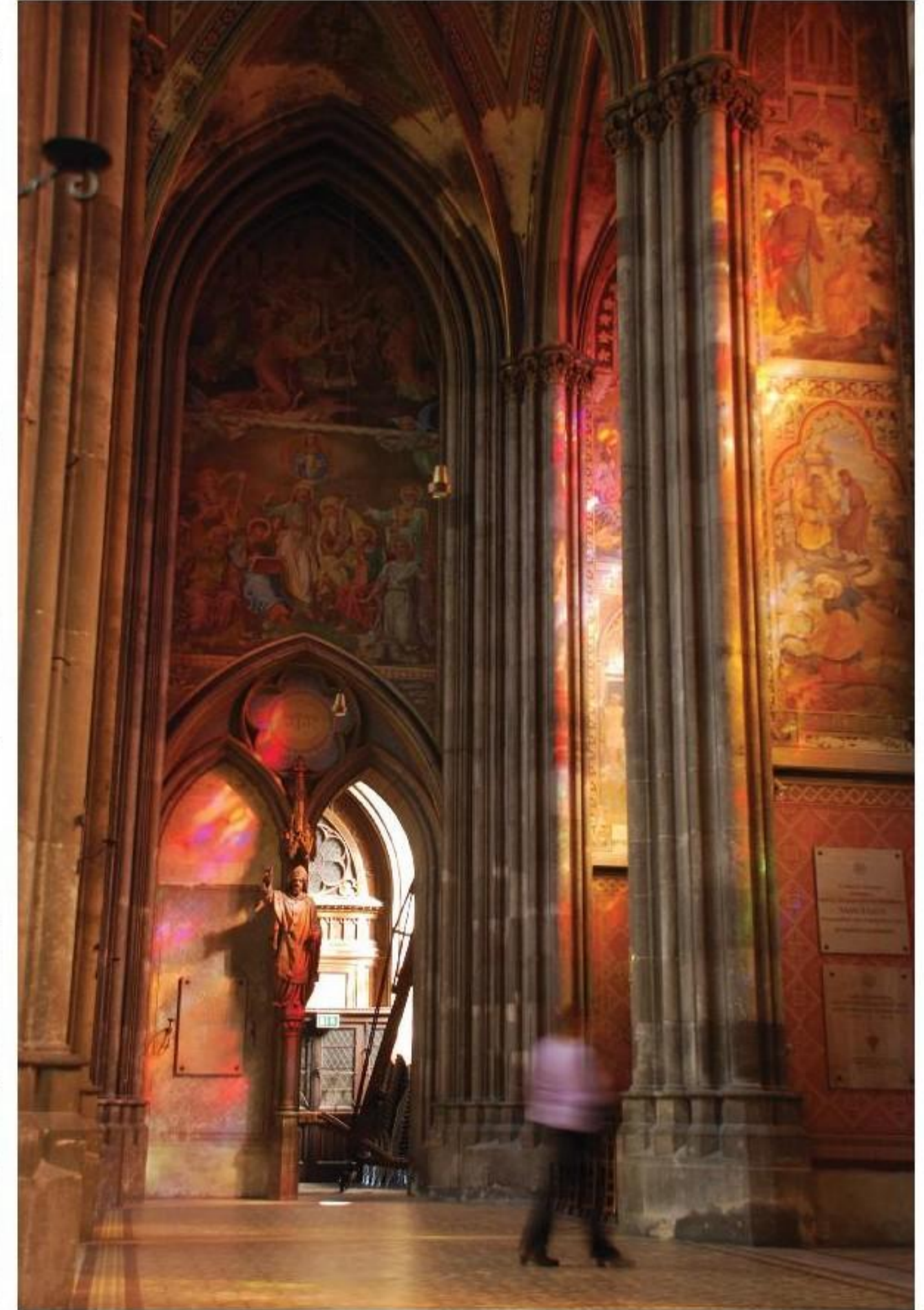
As dusk approaches, Jesse and Celine continue along Vienna's quiet back streets, and stumble upon Franziskanerplatz, surely the most charming square in Vienna. It is home to the Kleines Café, Vienna's most intimate coffee house, and was founded by actor Hanno Pöschl, who makes a cameo appearance in *Before Sunrise*.

A Nice Bridge

Onwards now to Stubenring. "This is a nice bridge," proclaims Jesse, as the pair stroll across a graceful iron footbridge over the River Wien. He's right regarding the aesthetics of the Zollamtssteg bridge but it's historically important, too: it was an element in Otto Wagner's Metropolitan Railway, or *Stadtbahn*. The ensemble of railway, culverted river, and *Jugendstil* bridges were designed to make *fin de siècle* Vienna every bit as glamorous as Paris.

A Place of Rest

The *Friedhof der Namenlosen* provides a poignant end not only to Jesse and Celine's journey but also to mine. Located in Kaiserfeldsdorf, on the edge of the city, this tiny cemetery leaves a lasting impression on all who visit. Hardly surprising when one learns that this is the last resting place of those drowned



Inside Vienna's atmospheric *Votivkirche* Photo: www.duncanjdsmith.com

by accident or suicide in the nearby Danube. Although some have been identified, the majority of those buried here remain unknown, nameless, *die Namenlose*.

With its handful of candles flickering amongst clumps of iris, it's a romantic if melancholy place, and one not easily forgotten. Rather like Vienna itself.

Duncan J. D. Smith is the author of *Only in Vienna* www.duncanjdsmith.com (Christian Brandstätter Verlag)

