

## VIENNA BEFORE SUNRISE

How watching a romantic film for the under thirties helped forty-something travel writer **Duncan J. D. Smith** discover some of the Austrian capital's hidden places

“You haven't seen *Before Sunrise*?” an American friend (and film buff) enquired of me recently, knowing that I was researching a guidebook on Vienna's lesser-known sights. “No, I haven't,” I admitted “but I've seen *The Third Man*.” “Nah, everyone's seen that!” he replied, disapprovingly.

Suitably admonished, and not a little intrigued, I soon tracked down a copy of director Richard Linklater's 1995 romantic drama and proceeded to watch it attentively. The



plot is a slight one: it concerns a French student called Celine (Julie Delpy) who meets an American traveller called Jesse (Ethan Hawke) whilst on a train from Budapest. He has fourteen hours before flying back to the States and suggests she spend it with him walking the streets of Vienna. What follows is a gentle discourse on life and love, expounded by two freewheeling twenty-somethings open to new experiences.

It's a simple formula – and a successful one too it seems (Linklater has recently released a sequel, *Before Sunset*, bringing the story up to date in Paris). In *Sunrise* the two characters happen upon a series of evocative backdrops that can't fail to inspire their philosophical, and increasingly passionate, musings. Of course few directors filming in Vienna can resist the iconic settings of the city's imperial boulevard (the *Ringstrasse*), with its grand public buildings and clanking old trams, nor the colourful bustle of the *Volksprater*, the fairground dominated by the century-old *Riesenrad* Ferris wheel. Linklater, like others before him, uses both to great effect.

However, what interested this writer most, being on a quest to uncover some of Vienna's hidden corners, were those film locations well away from the tourist hordes. I was delighted to find that *Before Sunrise* provided a generous handful of such places; atmospheric places that any visitor to Vienna, searching for that 'sense of discovery' so rare on city breaks, would do well to add to their itinerary. Whilst you may need a few hours more than those Jesse and Celine had at their disposal, the following places will leave you with impressions both fascinating and lasting.

### Votivkirche

Glimpsed only fleetingly as Jesse and Celine board a tram, the twin-spired *Votivkirche* is sometimes mistaken by over-zealous tourists for the city's Gothic cathedral, the *Stephansdom*. Unlike its famous and always-busy counterpart, the *Votivkirche* rarely has more than a handful of visitors at any one time, which is surprising because what it lacks in ecclesiastical treasures it more than makes up for in atmosphere. The church was begun in 1856 to give thanks (hence *votive*) for deliverance of the young Kaiser Franz-Josef I from the knife of a would-be assassin, whilst out walking on the old city walls. The fortunate monarch would go on to become Europe's longest serving head of state (1848-1916). A competition held to

design the church was won by the 26-year old Heinrich Ferstel and the result was a neo-Gothic *meisterwerke* based on the cathedrals at Chartres and Cologne. The exterior positively bristles with sculptures of prophets, apostles and saints whilst the



inside is a sea of muted wall paintings and jewel-like stained glass (the Emperor's Window in the north transept depicts the assassination attempt itself). Before completion the church was designated a garrison church for the nearby Rossauer barracks, accounting for the numerous regimental chapels and wall plaques. Look out too for the Egyptian marble tomb of Count Niklas von Salm, saviour of the city during the

Turkish siege of 1529, as well as a 4-metre high candle designed to burn continuously for a hundred years (were it ever actually to be lit).

**Directions:** the Votivkirche occupies Rooseveltplatz (9<sup>th</sup> district) on the corner of Hörlgasse and Währingerstrasse; take Tram 1 or 2, or subway line U2, to Schottentor then Tram 37, 38, 40, 41 or 42 for one stop (or walk).

### Mölker Bastei

Just across from the Votivkirche is a curious hillock standing proud from the otherwise flat terrain of the so-called Inner City (the 1<sup>st</sup> district located *within* the Ringstrasse). Its name, Mölker Bastei, provides an explanation, namely that it is one of the very few remnants (a bastion in this case, on land owned by the monastery at Melk) of Vienna's Renaissance city walls. Built as a defence against Turkish invasion following the near-disastrous siege of 1529, the massive defences were still standing well into the nineteenth century. Only when space was needed for the city to expand were the walls eventually torn down and the space taken up by the Ringstrasse: most visitors today would never



guess the walls had ever existed. "I was walking down a street..." muses Jesse idly as he and Celine walk the cobbled bastion, soaking up the history of the place. And historic it is too, boasting the gable-ended *Dreimäderlhaus* where Schubert reputedly wooed three sisters simultaneously, the famously squalid *Pasqualatihaus* in which Beethoven penned his only opera *Fidelio*, and a doorway at Schreyvogelgasse 8 in which Orson Welles first appears as Harry Lime in Sir Carol Reed's classic film *The Third Man*.

**Directions:** the Mölker Bastei lies in the north western corner of the Inner City (1<sup>st</sup> district) where Schottenring joins Dr. Karl-Lueger-Ring (both part of the famous Ringstrasse); take Tram 1 or 2 to the Old University, seen on the left in the picture above.

### Maria am Gestade

Most visitors to Vienna, like Jessie and Celine themselves, will be genuinely thrilled to discover "an old church like this", as the two whisper, climbing the impressive flight of stairs that lead up to Maria am Gestade. It is a striking setting, the steps having once given boatmen and barges access to the church from a long-silted Danube tributary now occupied by a road called Tiefer Graben (meaning 'deep ditch');

*Gestade* means riverbank). The building itself, one of the city's very few Gothic churches not to have been altered during the Baroque period, is a hidden gem. Noteworthy are surviving fragments of medieval painted glass (more would have survived had Napoleon not used the church as an arsenal-cum-stables during his 1809 invasion) and its delicate filigree lantern rising 56 metres into the air. Unusual too are the facts that its nave and chancel are of equal length (the former is usually longer) and that the nave is narrower and slightly askew. This latter is due to the awkward nature of the building plot used, located at the very edge of a steep-sided plateau on which once sat the Roman fortress of Vindobona, precursor to modern Vienna.



**Directions:** the church of Maria am Gestade is at Salvatorgasse 12 in the Inner City (1<sup>st</sup> district) and may be approached either from the Freyung, via Tiefer Graben, or the Ringstrasse, via Börsegasse.

### Franziskanerplatz

As night falls, Jesse and Celine stumble upon one of Vienna's most intimate old squares, hidden away amongst the maze of medieval back streets behind the Stephansdom. It is called Franziskanerplatz after the Franciscan church here, the only one in the city to have a Renaissance façade (it is said because the city walls cost so much to build, leaving little money for other buildings). Next door is a leafy cloister whose outside wall is pockmarked with curious roundels that once contained saintly portraits. The centre of the square is marked by the pretty Moses fountain (the original was melted down by the Nazis) and nearby is the delightful Kleines Café, Vienna's smallest coffee house. It is run by actor Hanno Pöschl who himself makes a cameo appearance in *Before Sunrise*, as an argumentative husband on the Budapest-Vienna train.



**Directions:** Franziskanerplatz is tucked between Weihburggasse and Singerstrasse, the former running east off Kärntnerstrasse close to the Stephansdom (1<sup>st</sup> district).

### Zollamtssteg Bridge

"This is a nice bridge," proclaims Jesse, as he and Celine walk onto a graceful iron footbridge arching across the River Wien, a tributary of the Danube. Below them runs



a second, more workaday bridge carrying a subway train thundering along part of Vienna's extensive underground system (*U-Bahn*). Jesse is right regarding the aesthetics of the so-called Zollamtssteg bridge, but it is historically important too. The River Wien carries rainwater from the Vienna Woods (*Wienerwald*), which surround much of Vienna, down to the Danube and had been prone to serious flooding for centuries.

The Habsburg summer palace at Schönbrunn was a long-suffering victim. As a result, in the late nineteenth century, celebrated architect and engineer Otto Wagner was commissioned not only to tame the river, but also to instigate a new

public transport system at the same time. The result was the Metropolitan Railway (or *Stadtbahn*), carrying what is now the U-4 subway, alongside the newly channelled and culverted river. Taking Paris as his model, Wagner embellished his work wherever possible with *Jugendstil* (Viennese Art Nouveau) details and green-painted ironwork. His bridges and stations stand elegant witness to Wagner's ambitious vision of transforming *fin de siècle* Vienna into a city capable of rivalling Europe's other great capitals.

**Directions:** the Zollamtssteg bridge straddles the River Wien from Zollamtsstrasse (3<sup>rd</sup> district) towards Stubenring, near the southern terminus of the Ringstrasse; take Tram 1 or 2, or subway line U3 to Stubentor.

### **Friedhof der Namenlosen**

We are told that this tiny cemetery, rarely visited because of its edge-of-town location, made "a bigger impression than any of the museums" on Celine when she visited Vienna as a young girl. Translated as the cemetery of the nameless, it is the only location used in *Before Sunrise* that elicits any sort of description from its characters. This is hardly surprising when one learns the poignant, and frankly irresistible, story concerning this cluster of unkempt riverside graves: they mark the last resting places of those drowned by accident or suicide in the nearby Danube. Although some of these poor souls were later identified, the majority remain unknown, nameless, *namenlos*. With its handful of candles flickering amongst clumps of mournful iris it's a place that won't be easily forgotten. Rather like Vienna itself.

**Directions:** the Cemetery of the Nameless is located in the outer suburbs at the Alberner Hafen docks (11<sup>th</sup> district). Take the U-3 subway to Simmering, then Tram 71 to its terminus at Kaiserebersdorferstrasse and then Bus 76A (or walk).

Extracted from the book *Only in Vienna: A Guide to Hidden Corners, Little-Known Places and Unusual Objects* by Duncan J. D. Smith (Christian Brandstätter Verlag, 2008)

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