

A Day at the Races

By Duncan J. D. Smith

Vienna is one of Europe's great romantic cities. Its ancient streets are adored by visitors, especially when the soundtrack is provided by the nostalgic clatter of horses' hooves. Few realise, however, that the city's equestrian life extends well beyond the Fiakers and Lipizzaners of the historic First District.

In harness

Not far from the famous Wurstelprater in Leopoldstadt, between the chestnut-lined Hauptallee and the Danube, is the Krieau Harness Race Track (Trabrennbahn Krieau). Opened in 1878 it is the second oldest harness race track in Europe after the Moscow Hippodrome. The unusual



name is derived from Kriegsau ('war meadow') recalling a time when ownership of this former river island was contested between Vienna and Klosterneuburg.

Visiting the Krieau today is like stepping back in time. Much of its original fabric is still standing, including the timber-framed headquarters of the Viennese Harness Racing Club (Wiener Trabrennverein) and a five-storey Jugendstil observation tower straight out of Jules Verne. Together with a matching grandstand it was erected in 1913 to a design by several of Otto Wagner's students and was the first such structure to be constructed from reinforced concrete and steel.

Sand and Sulkies

The original president of the club was Hungarian nobleman Count Kálmán Hunyady de Kéthely. He did much to popularise the sport and after his death in 1901 a race was established at the Krieau in his honour. Together with the Österreichisches Traber-Derby established in 1886 it remains a major event in the European harness racing calendar.

The track itself is a thousand metres long and paved with sand. It is wide enough to accommodate eight two-wheeled trotting buggies known as

Sulkies. They race twice a month between September and June, with the track hosting live concerts and outdoor cinema the rest of the year.

Galloping along

Alongside the Krieau and almost hidden by trees are the Praterateliers. These imposing artists' studios were constructed for the World Exhibition of 1873, when a significant chunk of the Prater was transformed from a royal hunting preserve into a world class cultural and entertainment facility.

Farther along the Hauptallee, just beyond the Lusthaus (itself a former imperial hunting lodge), is another historic race track. Like the Krieau the Freudenau Horse Racing Track (Galopprennbahn Freudenau) occupies land that was once riparian forest. It is even older though having been inaugurated in 1839.

Again much historic fabric remains, notably an ornate cast iron grandstand of 1858 unveiled by Emperor Franz Joseph I. Designed by the Ringstrasse architect Carl von Hasenauer in the emperor's beloved Historicist style it can be glimpsed momentarily from the Ostautobahn, where it crosses the Danube Canal on the way into Vienna. The elegant green dome denotes the emperor's personal loggia added in 1870.

The last race

Austria's first Derby took place at Freudenau in 1868. Racing continued unabated thereafter until the Second World War, when Allied bombing devastated the track. Reconstruction was carried out with help from the British and in 1967 the renewed race course was acquired by the Republic of Austria.

Twenty years later, however, the Viennese Horse Racing Club (Wiener Galopprennverein) ceased their activities at Freudenau, and the writing was on the wall for the old track. Despite being sold to another management company racing events moved away to the plush new Magna Racino track in Lower Austria. With its last race run the track at Freudenau was forced into reinventing itself for a very different audience. Where horses once churned up the turf private picnics now take place, couples get married in the emperor's loggia, and film crews recreate bygone race days purely for cinemagoers.

Visit www.krieau.at and www.freudenau.at

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