

by Duncan J. D. Smith

People have been enjoying Vienna's Prater for almost 250 years, and it's easy to see why. The vast island of green has something for everyone, including a thrilling fairground with a past every bit as colourful as its present.

The early years

The word *Prater* (from the Latin *Pratum* meaning "meadow") was first coined in 1403 to describe a Danube island north of Freudenu. In 1560, it was purchased by Emperor Maximilian II for use as an imperial hunting ground. To keep poachers away, access was restricted until 1766, when the enlightened Emperor Joseph II declared the area open for public enjoyment.

The chestnut-lined *Hauptallee* has long formed the main axis. At one end stands the Lusthaus, a former hunting lodge now used as a café and restaurant; at the other is the Volksprater, the fairground established after the emperor permitted the establishment of bowling alleys, food stalls, and puppet booths. One of the puppets, the Punch-like *Hanswurst*, gave rise to the alternative name, *Wurstelprater*.

Venice in Vienna

Hunting continued in the Prater until 1920 but by then the Volksprater had long taken centre stage. Although much of it was destroyed during the Second World War, the original fairground still lives on in the little-known Pratermuseum. On the walls hang posters advertising Lionel the Lion Man and Sylvia the Tattooed Lady, and all around are

STONES OF VIENNA

For nearly 250 years, the Viennese and their visitors have the enjoyed the weird and wondrous entertainments of the Prater

The Fun of the Fair

fragments of rides and sideshows long since dismantled. The photos reveal a lost world of moustachioed strong men, fat ladies and giants, as well as the little people employed to inhabit the miniature town of Liliputstadt.

The museum also recalls the 1873 World Exposition held on the nearby showground. The 26,000 exhibitors and their visitors were housed inside a colossal rotunda, which eventually burned down in 1937. By

way of entertainment the Volksprater staged an attraction called *Venedig in Wien*, featuring full-size Venetian canals along which gondolas drifted past Italianate palazzi. The fabulous Dogenhof apartment building and *Kaffeehaus* on nearby Praterstraße date from the same era.

White knuckles

The Pratermuseum also contains a model of the Riesenrad, the British-built Ferris wheel erected in 1897 and made famous by Orson Welles in *The Third Man*. The model includes the original complement of thirty cabins, half of



A goblin on top of one of the Geisterbahnen in the Wurstelprate Photo: Duncan J.D. Smith

which were not replaced on the real thing after it was weakened by fire during the war. The wheel's then owner, Eduard Steiner, died in Auschwitz.

The stately Riesenrad is hardly a white-knuckle ride. For that, try the world's oldest extant ghost train dating back to the 1930s or the vintage wooden Helter Skelter. For children, there is a 19th-century-style carousel using real ponies that thunder around to the sound of a pipe organ.

Of course, the modern rides make the old ones seem tame, especially the recently installed chain carousel, which transports its passengers to a dizzying 117 metres above the ground. The obligatory visit to the Schweizerhaus for beer and pork knuckle is best made afterwards!

A New Republic

Alongside the Pratermuseum is a planetarium, and behind that is something very unusual. Surrounded by barbed wire there stands a spherical house. It was originally constructed in Lower Austria by the artist Edwin Lipburger and moved here in 1984 after the Austrian authorities refused to grant him a building permit. Lipburger was so affronted that he declared the structure an independent nation, calling it the "Republic of Kugelmugel" (Spherical Hill). As Head of State in Kugelmugel, he refused to pay Austrian taxes and insisted on issuing his own stamps. Eventually, only a pardon by the Austrian president saved him from going to jail. ♦

*Volksprater: open daily 10:00-23:00;
Pratermuseum: Fri. – Sun. 10:00-13:00,
14:00-18:00*

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Only in Vienna (Christian Brandstätter
Verlag) www.duncanjdsmith.com*