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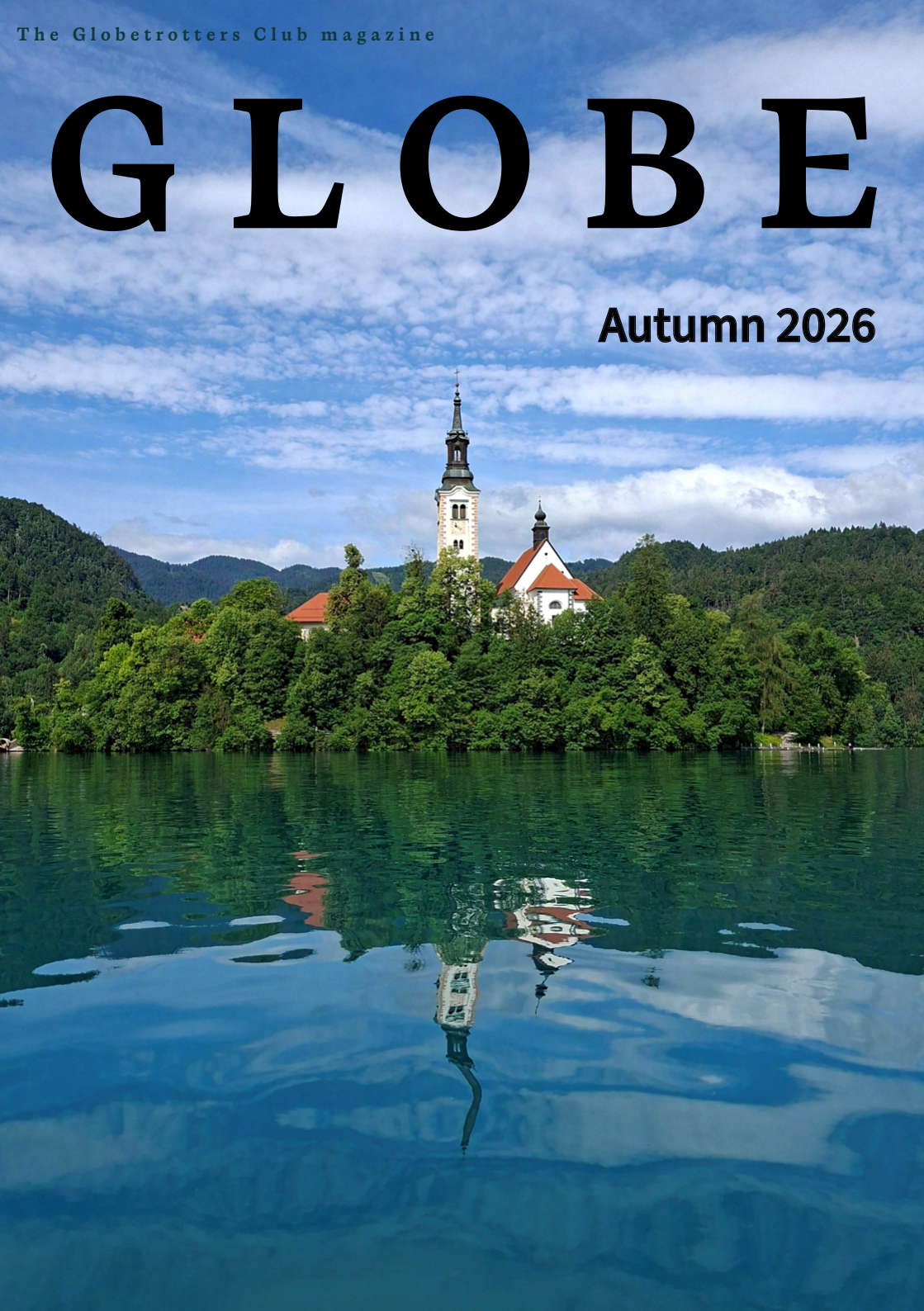

At the Viennese coffeehouse

By Duncan J D Smith

Since 2011, Vienna's world-famous coffeehouse culture has been designated and protected as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. This makes it every bit as important as the Argentine Tango, the Mediterranean diet, and the Panama hat. According to the listing, the Viennese coffeehouse is a place 'where time and space are consumed, but only the coffee is found on the bill'.

The Vienna coffeehouse tradition goes back to the late-17th century, when Armenian traders were allowed to roast and sell coffee beans by royal decree. The new beverage was well received, and coffeehouses sprang up rapidly throughout the city. In the early days, however, the various varieties of coffee had no official names and customers would make their selection using a colour chart. These days popular varieties include *Schwarzer Brauner* (espresso), *Mélange* (espresso with milk and foam), *Verlängerter* (espresso diluted with water), and *Einspänner* (black coffee served in a glass with whipped cream). The latter was traditionally popular with Vienna's horsedrawn carriage drivers as they awaited their clients (it is named after the one-horse cabs common when fodder was short after the First World War).

The traditional Viennese coffeehouse has a distinctive atmosphere and a specific protocol dating back to its *fin de siècle* heyday. Against a backdrop of dark wood, cream-coloured walls, and golden lights, coffee is served by waiters dressed in smoking jackets and bow ties. It always arrives on a silver tray accompanied by a glass of water. Customers sit at marble-topped tables on either Thonet bentwood chairs or sturdily upholstered banquettes. Once settled they can read from a selection of daily international papers for as long as they wish. Indeed, if they remain for several hours the chances are that they will take lunch or an evening meal, and probably succumb to a slice of *Apfelstrudel, Millirahmstrudel*, or *Gugelhupf* along the way. With only discreet attention from the waiter, it has been said that the Viennese coffeehouse is the best place to be alone in company.

Although all traditional Viennese coffeehouses share a similar atmosphere, each offers its own individual charm. The grandest include the beautifully vaulted Café Central in the Palais Ferstel at Herrengasse 14

Café Bräunerhof

and Sigmund Freud's beloved Café Landtmann at Universitätsring 4. Together with other leading writers and artists of the day, Freud was drawn by the conversation and cosmopolitan air that only the coffeehouse offered. Tucked away in the backstreets is the cosier Café Hawelka at Dorotheergasse 6, where a special attraction is hot, jam-filled *Buchteln* served daily at 9pm. In the suburbs there is Café Sperl at Gumpendorfer-strasse 11, once the favourite of Adolf Hitler, Café Goldegg at Argentinierstrasse 49, with its billiard tables, and Café Weimar at Währinger Strasse 68, frequented by theatre-goers from the nearby Volksoper.

This author's favourite is Café Bräunerhof at Stallburggasse 2 behind the stables of the Spanish Riding School. Opened in 1920, it was the writer Thomas Bernhard's favourite, and not much has changed since his day. Come here on a weekday mid-morning and the atmosphere is timeless, with customers thumbing the day's papers or just watching the world go by. Visit on a Saturday and the atmosphere is positively riotous as a trio belts out waltzes and classical music.

The author has written an in-depth guide to Vienna as one of his 'Only In' series *(see p23).*