

The Berlin Wall in Vienna

By Abi King | Austria

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This post forms part of the Iron Route series: [a journey from Istanbul to Berlin by train.](#)

Vienna, Austria

The year is 1945 and ash, smoke, poverty and despair rise through the rubble of Europe. Nearly ten million Soviets died on the eastern front. Eleven million

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Hi, I'm Abi and Inside the Travel Lab is a luxury travel and lifestyle blog for thoughtful travellers.

* No 1 Independent Luxury Travel blog UK (Vuelio 2019)*

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I'm a doctor turned writer who's worked with Lonely Planet, the BBC, Nat Geo Traveller, UNESCO and more and travelled to over 60 countries.

in the concentration camps. And the Soviet Red Army have just captured Vienna.

Berlin stands divided between the victorious Allied Forces: France, Britain the US and Russia. This division, hastily conceived out of the urgent need to manage a crippled city, paved the way for some of the most dramatic scenes of the Cold War: [the Berlin Wall](#), the Berlin Airlift, and in 1989, the scenes of reunification.

But I haven't reached Berlin yet. I'm in Vienna, in 2011, in Austria. A country known for Mozart, the Habsburgs, coffee houses and rich, sharp-tasting chocolate cake called Sachertorte.

What isn't so well known is that Vienna, too, stood divided in 1945. Just as in Berlin, the Allies carved the city into different districts to sift through the wreckage, repatriate the displaced and [generally try to make sense of the new world and new world order](#).

Berlin went on to become a central focus for the Cold War; Vienna declared itself neutral after only ten years.

Why? How? And does this fit into [the context of the Iron Route?](#)

Berlin went on to become a focus for the Cold War; Vienna declared itself neutral. Why? How?



Vienna's History

"The short version is that Stalin traded Vienna for Berlin," surmised my guide, the incredibly intelligent and interesting man with the longest name imaginable: Gerhard Strassgschwandtner.

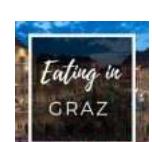
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BEHIND THE SCENES ON INSTAGRAM



He runs [The Third Man Museum](#), an excellent homage to the hit film that scooped up a shelf of Oscars back in 1950.



If both screenplay and novel are unfamiliar to you (and don't worry, they were to me too) the Third Man tells the story of a man named Martins who arrives in Vienna during its occupation at the end of the Second World War. Within hours he learns that the friend he's come to visit, one Harry Lime, is dead and buried. Yet there's a policeman lurking around who seems convinced that Lime was not all he seemed.



Enter detective work, adventure, conspiracy and derring-do as those involved try to work out who the mysterious third man was at the moment when Lime was killed, all set against the backdrop of post-war Vienna and the farce of the four-power governing system.

The backdrop, by the way, isn't a Hollywood screen. The Third Man really was filmed in post-war Vienna. That rubble, that darkness, the raw and decimated feel. It's real.

Out on the streets of Vienna today, the grey cloak of winter blunts – but cannot disguise – the city's classical beauty.

Vienna's Classical Beauty

It's a masterpiece of imperial European resplendence. Of columns, arches, sweeping grand driveways, statues, sculptures and cosy cobbled alleyways. Vienna remains a global centre for culture, classical music and history.

And it's a powerful history. I stood in the Museumsquartier, listening to Gerhard describe the buildings around me. First, the statue of Empress Maria Teresa and the story of her sixteen children and 40 years on the throne.

Then, we crossed the road and he showed me another picture.

I recoiled.

There, in black and white, but there nonetheless was a photo of the ground I was standing on. The balcony I was looking at. The skyline of Vienna.

Only this photo had more than the odd duffel-coated tourist and a ramshackle line of schoolchildren.

This photograph had a rapturous crowd filling every available space, with every face turned to idolise one man: Adolf Hitler as he welcomed Austria into the Third Reich in 1938.

I tried to ignore my heartbeat and the cold seeping into my toes. Nausea coiled around my stomach.

*With every face turned to idolise one man:
Adolf Hitler as he welcomed Austria into
the Third Reich.*

[I've wondered before about the purpose of visiting historical sites.](#) Whether they should carry any power or significance at all and whether it should make any difference where I am when I think about something. Whether it should make any difference if there's something I can reach out and touch.

"You have to realise," said Gerhard, "that Hitler was promising a dream. He was promising them hope and a better future, a release from the miserable years of the Great Depression and the shame at losing the empire during the First World War.

"He didn't arrive saying 'we will kill the Jews, destroy your homes and leave you in ruins. The Third Reich was supposed to last for 1000 years.

"At the end, people felt humiliated. They felt duped. They'd fallen for the dream, believed it, supported it and," he taps the photograph of the ruins and the rubble. "This was how it ended."



Our conversation continued onto the public tram, where I, for one, felt awkward.

I ask whether we should lower our voices, but Gerhard shakes his head.

"After the war, nobody wanted to talk about it," he says. "People said that 'Austria was a victim.'"

"And you, what do you say?"

He sighs. "I think that the tourist board wants to say to the world 'Just look at how beautiful Vienna is. Look at Mozart and Sachertorte and the riding school. Forget about that unpleasantness. Look at how pretty our Vienna is.'"

"Vienna is beautiful," I say, "even without the chocolate cake. But to be fair to the tourist board, they are paying for me to be here...Talking to you."

"Well, they don't help fund the museum," he replies.

We enter a traditional Viennese coffeehouse and talk among the smoke.

We discuss the borders with Hungary, the ideological divisions that grew between the US and the USSR. The need, for everyone involved, to avoid yet another war in Europe that would spread across the world. To avoid another war that no-one could afford.

Ultimately, we arrive again at the central question: Berlin and Vienna. Two cities, both divided. Why the different destinies?

Stalin hungered to keep his territories in the east. And to punish Germany for bringing Russia to its knees twice in half a century. While Vienna had power and great geographical prominence, Berlin remained the heart of the enemy's core.

Negotiations intensified as the former allies became opponents in a new Cold War. And the short version, when it comes down to it, is that Stalin traded Vienna for Berlin, along with a continued Soviet influence in a communist East Germany.

There would be no Berlin Wall in Vienna.

There is still, however, a wall.

There is still, however, a wall.

It's located just outside the royal city centre, on a quiet side street lined with cars. It bears a sign that reads *Wunden der Erinnerung* and the stone is

pockmarked at around head height.

Those marks come from gunfire between the Soviets and the Nazis.

The words mean Scars of Remembrance.

Scars of Remembrance

This article forms part of a series called the Iron Route about [the journey from Istanbul to Berlin by train](#), zig-zagging across the former iron curtain. It was sponsored by [InterRail](#) and you can read more about it [here](#).

[Disclosure](#): The Austrian National Tourist Office supported my stay in Vienna

I'd highly recommend a visit to the small Third Man Museum for a fascinating look at pre and post-war Vienna. I'd also recommend meeting [Austrian tour guide Gerhard Strassgschwandtner](#) if you can, for a fascinating conversation about European history.

The Sewer from the Third Man

What do you think? Is it “worth” visiting historical sites?



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