

Sprechen Sie Deutsch?

Language-school vacations allow unique cultural contact.

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Vienna, Austria, 8:15 a.m. I bid Auf Wiedersehen to my roommate Francesca, grab my notebooks and rush outside. On my way to school I pass Vienna's spectacular St. Stephen's Cathedral, and despite the threat of April snow, I look forward to this afternoon's tour of the city. I hear the clip-clop of a *Fiaker*, its alabaster horses led by a bewhiskered fellow who nods his bowler-hatted head at me as he passes by. A shop owner calls out to me in German as I stop for coffee at a café on the elegant Kämtner Strasse, and I am able to respond. I'm not an ordinary tourist who knows just a few words in German – I am a language tourist.

From the Opera House I catch the red and white Tram D, switching to Tram 71 at Schwarzenbergplatz, where the equestrian statue of Prince Schwarzenberg solemnly overlooks one of Vienna's grandest squares. At Rennweg, I exit the tram, stepping over a Cocker Spaniel lying next to a gentleman who is reading *Die Presse*. I walk two blocks along a sloping hill beside Johan Lukas von Hildebrandt's formal Belvedere Palace gardens to reach Actilingua Academy.

Later in class, our teacher, Barbara, asks me, "Was bist du von beruf?" What do I do for a living? I have to think. "Ich bin computerprogrammiererin." I stumble over the bulky word. Barbara smiles and asks Hoi Ping, a young Taiwanese girl sitting next to me, "Wie alt ist Melody?" Hoi Ping gives me a shy smile, then, perhaps out of kindness, says "Sie ist zwieundzwanzig jahre alt." Translation: she is twenty-two years old. We all laugh, and then play a game identifying pictures of Austrian road signs, some real, some not. We joke at the "usefulness" of learning the German translation for a road sign that means "here one can photograph penguins."

The students in my class range in age from twenty-two to forty-one, and come from a

cornucopia of countries – Mongolia, Kazakhstan, England, Brazil, New Zealand, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Japan. I am the only American.

The students' reasons for learning German in Vienna are as diverse as their nationalities: Tomohiro, from Japan, wants to study music at the University of Vienna; Amara, from Mongolia, is adding German to the five languages she already speaks. Pip, from New Zealand, wants to communicate with her Austrian relatives. Sarah, a ski-instructor from London, would like to converse with the family of the Viennese boyfriend she met in Kitzbühel. And Svetlana, from Kazakhstan, wants to move to Vienna to be with the Austrian boyfriend she met while on vacation in Turkey.

Actilingua Academy offers students of all ages the opportunity to learn German in historic Vienna, a city renowned for its music, art, and architecture. The school's fee covers daily language classes in grammar and conversation; activities, such as lectures, volleyball games, and pizza parties; and accommodations with a Host Family or in a student residence. For a small cost there are also excursions to Vienna's cathedrals, palaces and wine taverns, cycling trips along the banks of the Danube to Klosterneuburg monastery, or excursions to Salzburg or Budapest.

For accommodations I chose to stay in Kolpinghaus, a student residence off Gentsgasse, an avenue dotted with shops, cafés and vibrant flower stalls. Each morning an appetizing continental breakfast is graciously served. The residence, populated by dozens of international students, is clean and safe, reasonably quiet, and its location, about 35 minutes from the school, allows me to learn my way around Vienna by tram and U-bahn.

Actilingua was founded in 1988 after Austrian Barbara Ernst traveled to Florence, Italy to do her dissertation and take an Italian language course. She enjoyed the course so much she decided to start a school in Vienna, which she runs with her husband Dr. Roland Ernst.

"Most people who want to study German think of doing so in Germany rather than Austria," says Dr. Ernst. "But in Vienna," he continues, "you

not only learn pure, correct German, but can experience one of the world's greatest cities of art, music and culture." Indeed, Vienna is a city where Mozart, Schubert, and Beethoven have lived. It is a city where street musicians play Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee" on the violin and young people tote cellos on trams. One can enjoy theater, opera, and dance as well as some of the world's greatest art museums.

After class, I wander Vienna's narrow, cobbled streets and gaze at the Baroque splendor of The Hofburg; I tour the quirky *Uhren Museum*, or Clock Museum, and relive my childhood in the Doll and Toy museum. I ride the U-bahn to Schönbrunn Palace and admire the symmetry of the gardens, and one night, I play dress up, and watch a ballet from a front row balcony seat at Vienna's celebrated Opera House. I even venture into the Vienna Woods one day, when a heavy rain pours down upon the verdant trees that dangle branches over a babbling brook.

Vienna is a food connoisseur's paradise, too. I sample Vienna's famous *Sachertorte*, an exquisite chocolate layer cake topped with a layer of apricot jam under a thick, chocolate coating; at *Naschmarkt*, Vienna's lively outdoor market, I nosh on fresh vegetables and the softest dates I've had since visiting Morocco. And when I need to do homework or study, I relax in Vienna's legendary coffee houses, where a tuxedoed waiter serves me *Apfelstrudel* and I can linger as long as I like.

The real advantage of a trip like this, besides the obvious benefit of knowing a few sentences in the language of the country you're visiting, is the opportunity to get off the tourist track and live like the locals. While most tourists breeze through a city and gawk at the sights, a language student has a purpose for being there. For students who stay with a Host Family, the view of Austrian life begins the minute they arrive at their temporary home.

By the second week this imperial city has begun to feel like my home. Some days, as I walk through the city, I run into my classmates. I see Sarah and her boyfriend at the movies

watching *The Shipping News*, and my guilt at watching the movie in English subsides. I run into a Japanese classmate, Mayumi, window shopping on the Kärntner Strasse. And to my surprise, my German is improving. One nippy morning before class, at *Naschmarkt*, I find myself asking for fresh

dates in German without stumbling. It is getting easier.

Suddenly it is the last day of class for Mayumi and I, the only students leaving after two weeks. Others will stay for a month or more. As we exchange e-mail addresses with our classmates, we both feel a bittersweet sadness at leaving our new companions.

That afternoon, as the train swiftly carries me towards Salzburg, I reflect on my time in Vienna. By choosing a language study vacation I opened up a world of possibilities. Not only did I learn about Vienna from the locals – I made friends from all over the globe and learned about their cultures and countries as well.

On the train, I open my backpack, and the picture of the penguin sign accidentally flutters to the floor. The man sitting opposite me reaches down to pick up the paper. He hands it to me, smiles and says, "Ahh, hier kann man die Pinguine fotografieren." Translation: "Ahh, here one can photograph penguins." I understand him, and we laugh.

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