



# SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

September 2007 Vol.2 #1

Continuing our series of student education abroad experiences, in this issue we hear from Amanda Hess who studied in Vienna, Austria, Spring 2007.



On a visit to Hallstatt, Austria

When you look at a map or a globe, the world doesn't look so big, so going abroad doesn't seem like such a big deal. That is, until you do it. My name is Amanda Hess and I'm currently a senior majoring in Finance and German. Last spring, I spent a semester abroad in Vienna, Austria and, for me, it was a dream come true.

Vienna is a truly incredible city. With only 1.8 million residents, it feels more like a large town. That is, until you want to experience Austrian culture. Then there are numerous museums, opera houses, and churches. The first district, which is in the center of Vienna, is the home to all of the important buildings in the city. On the road encircling the first district, called the Ring, you'll find City Hall, Parliament, and the State Opera House. It's truly the center of cultural and political Austria. When I first got to Vienna, it was all a little overwhelming, but as time went by, I started recognizing faces, even if I didn't know names. One woman in particular stands out in my memory because she walked her dog in front of the IES center at the same time every day.

Vienna is set up like a target, with the first district in the center, surrounded by the Ring. Then there are the inner districts, which are surrounded by the Gürtel, or the Belt. Finally, on the outside are the outer districts. This is where I lived with my six roommates. We were all from the States and were students with IES. Our apartment was pretty darn incredible, but you could tell our landlady had a thing for IKEA – everything in the apartment had that ubiquitous little label.

Getting into the first district, where we had classes in an old palace, was a bit challenging the first few days. I had never lived in a city before, and the only contact I'd had with public transportation was from riding the Blue Loop on campus. For the most part, we rode the Strassenbahn, or tram, into the city center. Since we lived on Thaliastrasse, one of the main shopping streets in Vienna, riding to school was a great time to window shop. We also passed the imperial palace and the State



Opera House every day, sights I thought I'd see only in travel books.

Travel books mention that Austria has a ball season during the winter months. The official season takes place between New Year's Eve and the beginning of Lent, and it's one of the oldest and most glamorous traditions in Vienna. Nearly every group of people imaginable holds a ball. One might be held by the goldsmith's guild and another by the gardening club of Vienna. The Technical University hosted the first ball I attended. It was in the Hofburg, the imperial palace in Vienna. I think it might have been only our second or third week in the city, so to be invited as a group to a function like a ball was huge. I think nearly everyone in IES went. This was our first time really out in Viennese society and the first time a lot of us had the chance to meet native Austrians. Before I had left the States, my boyfriend, who was a member of the Ballroom Dance Competition Team, taught me the Viennese Waltz. It turned out to be one of the most useful things I knew early on in the semester. I had also taken the ballroom class here at Penn State, so I could dance nearly every dance that the band played. The evening was almost surreal – I was in a palace, dancing waltzes on floors that had been walked on by great emperors and empresses, and I was learning about a tradition so completely different than anything we have in the States. It blew my mind at the time, and even now when I think about it, I get shivers.

Living in Vienna was like that though. No mat-



Viennese street, The Graben, at night

View from Salzburg





ter where you went, you were surrounded by history. In Austria, the historically significant buildings were decorated with a banner in the colors of the Austrian flag. In the first district, where I had classes and which was the oldest section of the city, those banners were everywhere. But the first district was more than just fancy old buildings.

Every evening, the citizens of Vienna would dress in their best and walk up and down Kärtnerstrasse, the main street in the first district. It was a pedestrian only street and covered in cobblestone. Musicians would also be out on Kärtnerstrasse at night, playing their instruments as the twilight came to Vienna. The unofficial festivities would last late into the night, and I used to sit and watch the people walk. Thinking about it now, I can almost hear the music and smell the scent of the local Würstel stand, which sold wursts and pizza.

My favorite stop on Kärtnerstrasse was Zanoni and Zanoni, the local gelato shop. I went there early in the semester with my roommates for a late night snack, and then I became a regular. I would be up there at least once a week for a small coffee and caramel cone. I always ordered from “my” gelato guy, and at some point in the semester, he started giving me discounts on my gelato. Of course, he also laughed at me when I went two times in one day!

Vienna is also known as the birthplace of Wiener schnitzel, which is a pork or veal cutlet that is pounded flat then dipped in an egg mixture and bread crumbs and deep-fried. It’s served with a wedge of lemon, and my favorite restaurant also served it with a sort of cranberry sauce. On the side, we always got potato salad, which is different from the one you’re used to in the States, but ten times better in my opinion. On Saturday nights, Selbstverständlich, a restaurant in the outer districts, would have a happy hour where all the dinners were half price. We tried to go as often as possible, and riding the metro there as a group came to be one of our own traditions. Our group changed in size every week, but the one thing that didn’t change was our order. Each of us had a favorite dish and we got the same thing week in and week out – but why mess with perfection? We’d spend hours in Selbstverständlich talking and eating and just

having a good time.

One of my favorite experiences in Vienna took place in the Winter Riding School within the Hofburg, where the world-famous Lipizzaner stallions practice and perform. During the week, the horses practice in the mornings with music. On Sundays and special holidays, the Spanish Riding School puts on a performance in the Winter Riding Hall within the Hofburg. On one particular Sunday, I was in the right place at the right time and bought a ticket for a discounted price. Watching the horses move with such precision and grace and listening to the sounds of Austrian waltzes is something I’ll never forget. The whole experience was so perfect and so incredibly hard to describe. It was magic, pure and simple.



As the semester came to a close, time seemed to move faster. But it does that whenever you want to make something last longer. I found myself thinking about my time in Vienna and how much I had changed as a person. I had become more self-reliant and more confident in myself. I had adopted Viennese bluntness and forthrightness when it came to topics like politics or religion that would be considered touchy in the United States. I grew to love a culture and a city that I have known for only a short amount of time. And I knew that I would return there in the blink of an eye if given the chance. I learned that the world isn’t quite as small as it appears on a globe or a map, but it’s not as big as you might imagine. In short, I grew up a lot. I saw what the world had to offer me and now that I’m back at Penn State preparing for graduation and the real world, I plan on grabbing onto the world’s opportunities with both hands and holding tight. - Amanda Hess



Danube Sunset



Viennese namesake dish  
Wiener Schnitzel

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