

After Hours



Choosing gifts at the Christkindlmarkts.



The markets at the city hall have been a shopping hot spot for centuries.

Photos: Vienna Tourist Board/Peter Figaud

Viennese whirl

Christmas is the perfect time of year to enjoy a visit to Austria's glorious capital.

VANESSA MURRAY

FLAKES of snow fall in liling drifts around our faces and pile gently onto the cobblestoned streets. Meanwhile, the sweet scent of candied fruits mingles with the rich, nutty smell of roasted chestnuts and the heady spiciness of hot *Gluhwein*.

We're loitering with intent at the towering, Gothic-style City Hall in the Austrian capital of Vienna, where the atmospheric, open-air *Christkindlmarkts* (Christmas markets), have been in full swing since mid November.

Despite the sub-zero temperatures and an average of just two hours of sunshine a day at this time of year, these markets have been a must-do during the festive season as far back as the Middle Ages. Locals come here to socialise, enjoy the festively adorned trees and fairytale displays, shop for Christmas gifts, and indulge in seasonal treats like the aforementioned *Gluhwein*, a version of mulled wine, which does much to keep us warm from the inside out.

Vienna, or *Wien*, as the locals call it, boasts the most green spaces per capita of any city in the world, and is one of just a handful with a bevy of vineyards (more than 600 hectares' worth) within its urban boundaries.

Consider this alongside its status as a UNESCO

world heritage site and reputation as a destination for lovers of secessionist and high art par excellence, and it's no wonder Vienna consistently ranks as one of the world's most liveable cities in various indices of cultural and economic esteem.

In summer, temperatures average about 24 degrees, and public leisure time centres around the River Danube, a deep blue vein running through the city. During the daytime, its banks teem with people getting about on foot and bicycle. They come here to canoe, swim, and simply soak up the sunshine. At night, it pulsates with the energy of beach bars and restaurants.

But in the depths of winter, the mighty Danube freezes over and becomes one of several spots where the hardy locals (all 2.4 million of them, it sometimes seems) glide and pirouette on the ice.

If that sounds too cold to be outdoors, it's a relief to discover December is the perfect time to while away the hours inside one of Vienna's dozens of renowned galleries.

One frosty afternoon, we visit the famous Museum-sQuartier in the city's seventh district, Neubau. One of the largest art and museum complexes in the world, the Quartier opened in 2001 and boasts nine permanent museums and exhibition and event halls, an urban living space, and an ever-changing array of initiatives from architecture, music and fashion to theatre, dance and digital culture.

We head for the Leopold Museum, which houses an enviable collection of 19th and 20th century art assembled over five decades by its benefactor, Dr Rudolf Leopold. This light and airy museum displays valuable handicrafts and furnishings, African and Oceanic sculptures, as well as classic modernist, art nouveau and expressionist masterpieces.

Another day, we take a tram to the Belvedere in the third district, Landstrasse, south-east of the city centre. The former summer residence of Prince Eugene of Savoy, the Belvedere is now an extensive museum and contemporary art complex set in a majestic baroque

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park landscape. We marvel at its opulence, and ooh and ahh over the most famous work of the city's most famous son: artist Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*.

Later, we discover that *The Kiss* never leaves Vienna, and who can blame it? This grand old city is European living at its best, any time of year. ●

Ms Murray was a guest of the Vienna Tourist Board.



A souvenir from the markets.

FACTFILE

Getting there: Several airlines offer flights from Australia to Vienna via London, Munich or Frankfurt. Or travel from other destinations in Europe by air, train or bus.

Where to stay: Reside in sustainable comfort at the zero-energy Hotel Stadthalle (rooms from \$160 per night for two, www.hotelstadthalle.at/en); or stay in the art district, Spittelberg, at wine-themed Hotel Rathaus Wine & Design (rooms from \$217 per night for two, www.hotel-rathaus-wien.at); or the romantic Hotel Altstadt (rooms from \$188 per night for two, www.hotel-altstadt-vienna.com).

Practicalities: The currency in Vienna is the euro and ATMs are located around the city. Credit cards are accepted in most places. Australian citizens visiting Austria for 90 days or less do not need a visa.

Special events: Fans of Gustav Klimt will particularly enjoy visiting Vienna in 2012, when the city celebrates the 150th anniversary of his birth with more commemorative events than there are colours in a painter's palette.

More information: www.wien.info
www.mqw.at
www.belvedere.at
www.leopoldmuseum.org
www.klimt2012.info