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Graz, Austria: a cultural city guide

By *Stephanie Plentl*

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Sidelined by Salzburg, Vienna and a multitude of trendy Tyrolean ski resorts, this former European Capital of Culture is tucked into the pretty and largely pastoral province of Styria, but possesses plenty of distinctive qualities, with a ravishing old town and plenty of medieval and Renaissance corners....

The first thing I do is walk up the rock-embedded staircase of the Schlossberg to the city's clock tower – a site that Napoleon failed to capture. The lazy options are the funicular or the glass lift (the former being a favourite when I was a child), but the steps wind through a well-tended garden and the walk isn't too challenging for the semi-fit. If the view of the higgledy-piggledy red-tiled rooftops, the maze of alleyways, elegant church spires and misty mountains don't pull at your heartstrings, I'll be surprised. I've been coming here every year of my life and it's never failed me.

Even if I were not already a fan, Graz is so perfectly proportioned – and has such a satisfying mix of old and new – that it would be among my perfect foreign destinations for a long weekend. Its compact central area is a pedestrian zone, which means you can meander in peace – though watch for the deadly silent trams on the Herrengasse.

The amazing armoury (Landeszeughaus) contains the largest collection of antique armaments in the world. Just 10 minutes' stroll over the River Mur, by contrast, prepare to be bemused by the bright blue, bulbous contemporary art gallery (Kunsthaus).

Graz is full of such strange juxtapositions. On my last trip, I found a droll modern sculpture of a marble snowman in the courtyard of the Priests' Seminary, a college commissioned by the Jesuits in 1572. And the city's historic department store, Kastner & Öhler, recently added a glass-encased top-floor café that offers another thrilling roofscape and gives photographers like me a fresh perspective on the cherished yellow clock tower above.

That Graz revels in the avant garde is patent from my many visits to the glorious neo-Baroque opera house. Its provocative opera and ballet productions can be hit-and-miss, but with top-price tickets of €49/£40, I always take the gamble (oper-graz.com).

Did you know?

Graz takes its name from a Slavic word, 'grad', meaning a small castle or settlement

When it comes to food, however, I'm steadfastly conservative. One classic institution in Graz is the Frankowitsch delicatessen (Stempfergasse 2-4; frankowitsch.at), a place that

teems with locals perched on stools, eating elaborate open-faced sandwiches and drinking a pfiff (0.2 litre) of the local beer. The excellent local white wines are dry enough to challenge the heavy schnitzel, goulash, fried chicken backhendl and the ubiquitous and irresistible apricot-filled *palatschinken* (pancakes). More good reasons to take those stairs up the Schlossberg.

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The Austrian National Tourist Office (austria.info) offers a Graz Classic Weekend Package that includes a two-night stay and additional services at your selected hotel (the list includes all three reviewed below) and a 24-hour ticket to the Joanneum Universal Museums (which include the Landeszeughaus and Kunsthhaus), from £65 per person in a double room.

Did you know?

Arnold Schwarzenegger was born in Thal, a small village bordering Graz

The inside track

Graz Tourist Office (Herrengasse 16; 80750) offers walking tours with a guide or audioguide from €7.50/£6. Private guides can be found at grazguides.at.

The farmers' market beside the opera house has the best local produce (Monday-Saturday 6am-1pm). Have lunch at Schnableweider, a tiny café in the corner.

Pumpkin seed oil (kürbiskernöl) is the regional delicacy – dark green and viscous, with a nutty taste. Drizzle on salads and desserts.

Styria is known for its wines, notably weissburgunder, sauvignon blanc, welschriesling and schilcher rosé. The tourist office can arrange tours to the vineyards.

Ask the porter at the Landhaus for the key (der Schlüssel) to look at the Baroque interiors of the provincial parliament room.

The best hotels

Hotel Daniel £

A stylish budget hotel beside the station, with a youthful feel, but it is a 15-minute walk to the city centre; free Wi-Fi, an airy café, and the bar is open 24 hours. You can hire a Vespa for €15/£12 per day (0043 316 711080; [hoteldaniel.com](https://www.hoteldaniel.com); doubles from €59/£49 per night).

Hotel Wiesler ££

The spartan-chic and extraordinary design may not be to all tastes, but this hotel's central position is excellent; there's a vibrant restaurant and bar, plus a delicatessen and in-house barber. Ask for a room with a river view (70660; [hotelwiesler.com](https://www.hotelwiesler.com); doubles from €79/£65).

Schlossberghotel £££

A sumptuous hotel featuring colourful interiors and contemporary art; outdoor swimming pool and rooftop garden, spa and underground parking (80700; [schlossberghotel.at](https://www.schlossberghotel.at); doubles from €135/£112).

The best restaurant

Pension Zur Steirerstub'n £

A rustic, family-friendly bar/restaurant serving regional dishes using local produce. The meat here is excellent. It also offers 27 three-star rooms and apartments from €74/£63 and €100/£85 respectively (Lendplatz 8; 716855; [pension-graz.at](https://www.pension-graz.at)).

Der Steirer ££

Contemporary design but traditional cuisine – dishes might include simple fried chicken and decadent apple strudel. Also operates as a merchant for Styrian wines (Belgiergasse 1; 703654; [der-steirer.at](https://www.der-steirer.at)).

Santa Clara £££

Has a sophisticated ambience and a short menu of seasonal offerings with a Mediterranean flavour. Brick-oven baked bread; impressive wine cellar (Bürgergasse 6; 811822).

What to avoid

Crossing the street without looking – the trams are virtually silent and it's all-too-easy to step in front of one.

Curbing your nosiness. Graz has 55 pretty Renaissance-style courtyards – if the gate or door is unlocked, it's perfectly acceptable to go right in.

Judging a hotel by its star ratings – some top hotels have boycotted the system.

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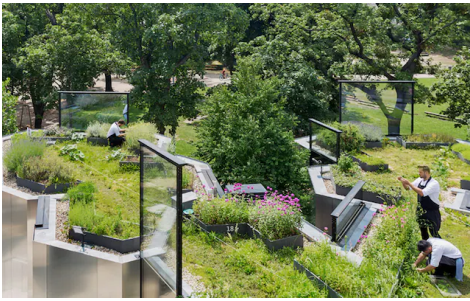
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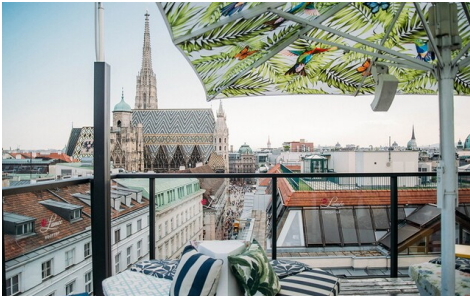
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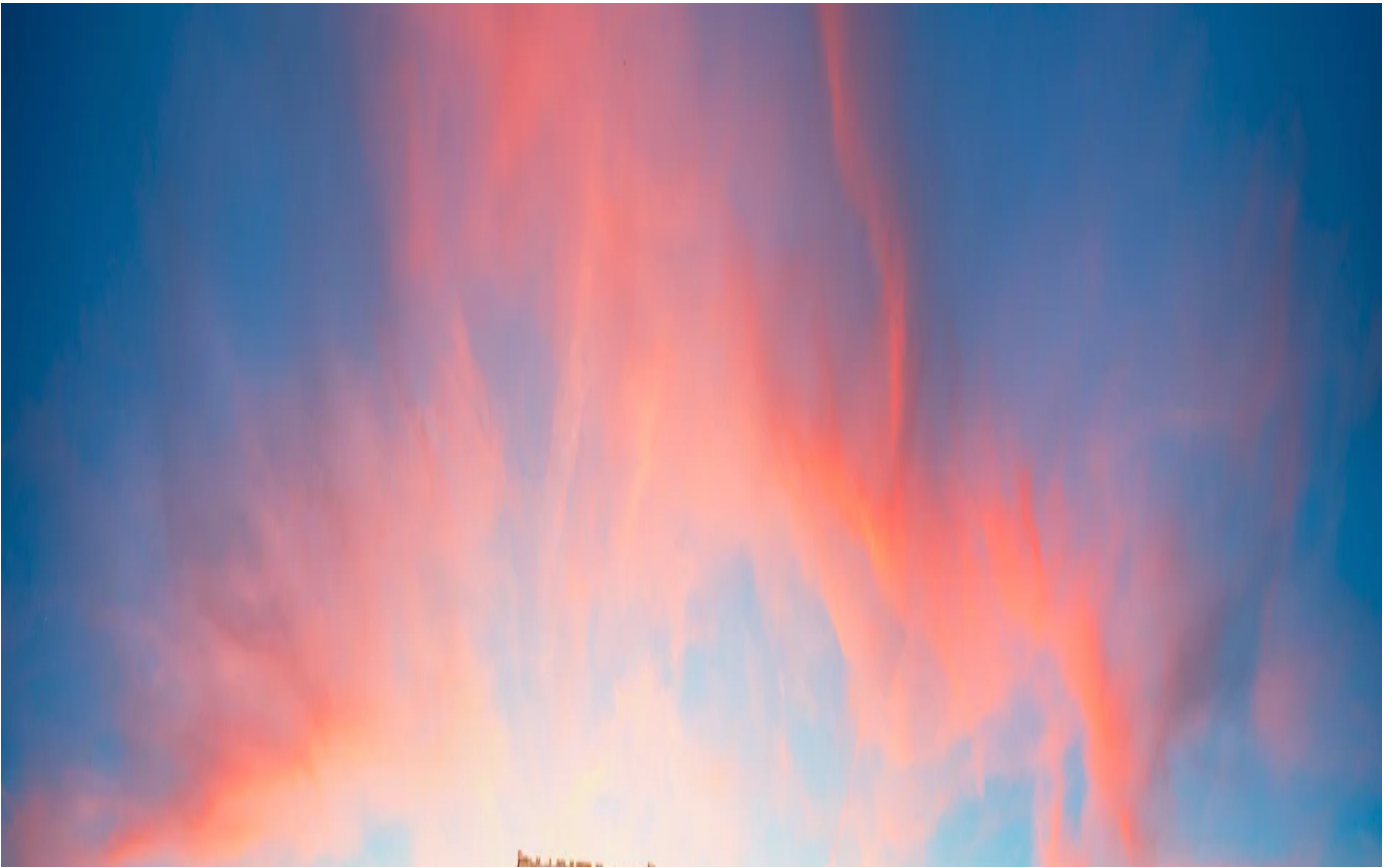


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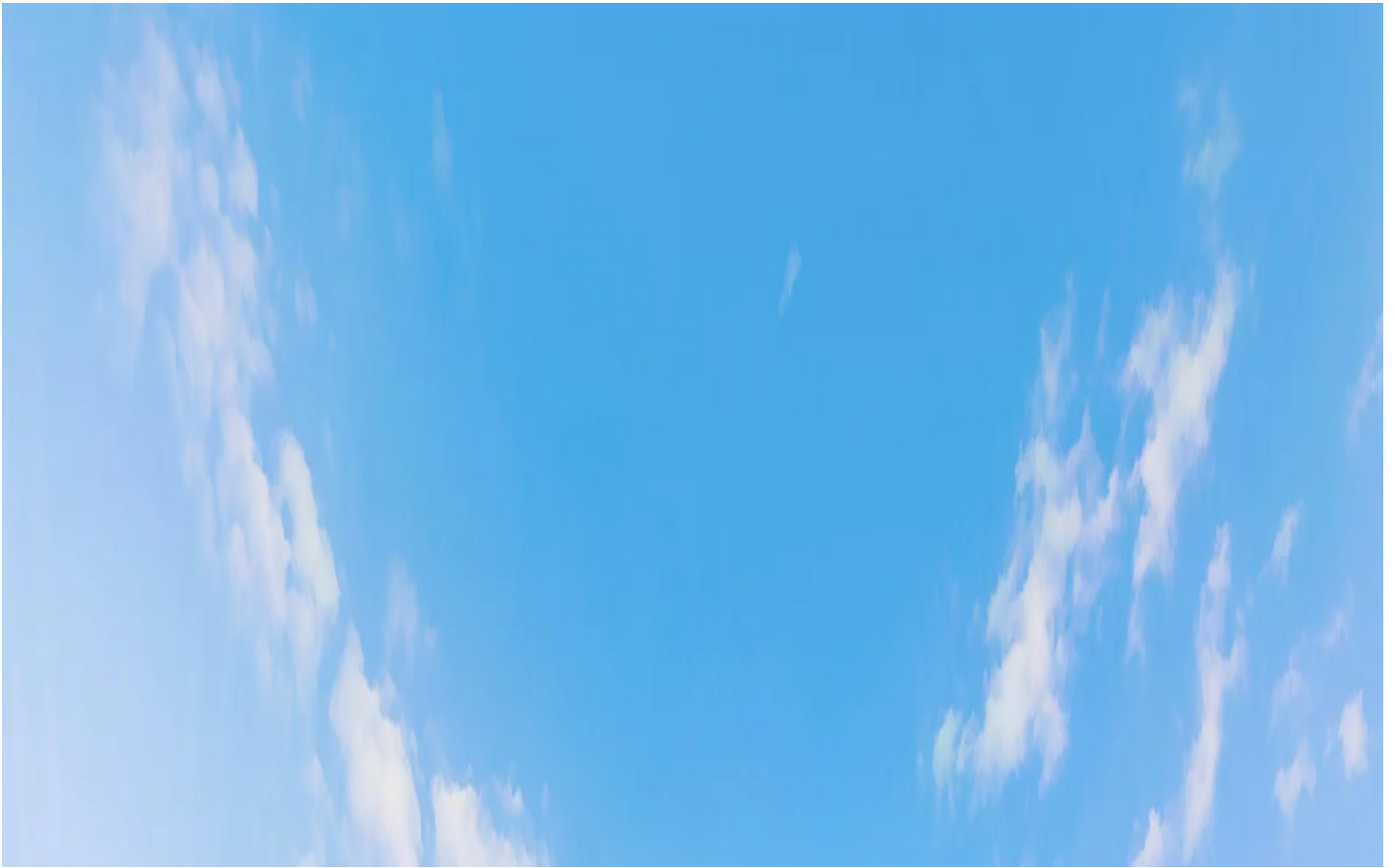
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