



ADVENT CHRISTMAS JOURNEY IN CENTRAL EUROPE 9-21 DECEMBER 2024

What a trip this has been! Our third journey in the comfort of two eight seater vehicles driven by our Viennese friend and agent Claudia with her husband Michael. But this trip was to be different. Upon Claudia's advice to avoid ever increasing numbers of

tourists to Europe in summer months we decided to arrange and organise a winter journey - our first. An Advent Christmas journey to Central Europe would be both very beautiful and very special we thought. Christmas concerts as well would surely be wonderful and with Claudia and Michael's willingness and expertise in stopping regularly and speaking eloquently about the many fascinating and historical aspects along the way then this could all be great. And it was! A good omen as the two cars turned out to be the very same cars in which we drove our groups on our Italian tour from Rome to Lake Como and our summer Austrian tour from Munich to Schwarzenberg, Austria in 2023.



Commencing in *Prague* and staying at the *Clarion Hotel* in the centre of the Old Town, we all rendezvoused flying in from various parts of the world. As always, we invite friends who we think will enjoy the particular journey, and this time our group included Deborah and Robert Hay from Brisbane, (whose family were close friends with mine when we were children), Monica Cable and Mark

Muirhead, Jean Taylor, Judy Chapman, Elspeth Drury, Pam Menzies, Vanessa Baillie, Susan Russell, and Sarah Howard.



On our first day in Prague, and before most had arrived, Susan, Sally and I set off in the cold to explore and to walk across the famous Charles Bridge. It was Sunday in Prague and the Charles Bridge was simply

thronging with people, mostly young students, backpackers perhaps and all smiling and enjoying themselves taking selfies as they viewed the river up and down, the historic statues, plaques, and mingled with prams dogs and general mayhem. We stopped to watch a delightful vignette play out in front of

us where an enormous swan somehow landed up on bridge (way about the river) and despite being stranded seemed to strut importantly towards the hordes of well wishers including us. A



swan the river) stranded

police car jostled the pedestrians and drove on to the bridge, presumably to remove it, but then the lone policeman seemed immobilised and stood by seeming happy to let the swan talk in swan language to the crowds around it.



Suddenly a second police strode onto the bridge and purposefully walked to the swan, threw a coat over it and swept it up in his arms and and walked off the bridge to loud cheers. The little piece of theatre was now over!

Prague. o A city everyone seems to love and is taken quickly to heart by visitors. Upon the last arrival (Pam who flew in from Paris) our first 'official' beginning was to walk into the thronging Old Town Square filled with stalls from Christmas Markets and overlooked by the Astronomical clock to celebrate our arrival with copious glasses of gluewein before or our Welcome Dinner in a private

alcove in the magnificent art deco restaurant of the Obecní Dum. A wonderful beginning!

The historical overview and context of the Czech Republic is best served by a visit to Museum of Communism, a chastening experience when explained and articulated so comprehensively by Michael from his depth of great personal knowledge from his family background. Political harrowing photographs and artefacts made this exhibition fascinating giving us insight and knowledge to inform us as in the full sweep of occupation and independence and the legacy of the communist regime. Some of us then had a tour of the Obecní Dum with its elegant art nouveau rooms starting with the concert hall, a gorgeous high-ceilinged show box style that is the home of the Prague Symphony Orchestra. Prague has real musical luxury as this orchestra and its splendid concert hall are only No. 2 in the city's musical hierarchy, as the Rudolfinum, its most famous river-side concert hall and its incumbent orchestra

the Czech Philharmonic, is regarded as one of the top five orchestras stars in Europe. Others in the group explored the city independently whilst Sally, Vanessa and Sarah caught a tram to the porcelain factory to drink gluewein and select their treasures!



That evening, our first concert, the leading Czech choral ensemble, Martinu Voices, presented Britten's Ceremony of Carols, much beloved by English speaking audiences and presented mainly at Christmas time, was however lacking the right feeling somehow when sung and expressed in a language not so familiar to Czech



singers and audiences. However the walk home through the narrow streets from the church to the hotel was medieval and wonderful and not a crowd to be seen despite being only a short distance from the throngs of the Christmas markets.

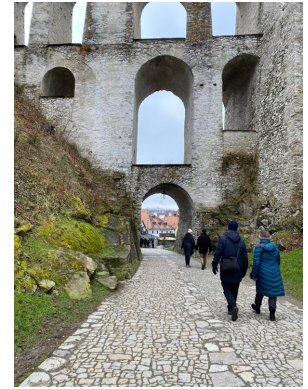
The next day, onto the trams to wend our way to the remarkable

Lobkowitz Palace high on the hill on the other side of the Vltava River. The huge courtyard is known to many as it was here many scenes were filmed for the movie Amadeus. Cold temps, a shower threatening but all thoughts of discomfort vanished when we entered the Lobkowitz family museum and wandered from beautiful room to beautiful room viewing their heritage of priceless treasures,

paintings, porcelain, tapestries, sculpture, objets d'art, and even original musical scores - because of course Prince Lobkowitz provided Beethoven with a salary and commissions. We gazed at Beethoven's Symphony No 3 (Eroica) as well as some Handel. We concluded our visit with a concert in the music room (unnamed trio comprising, pianist, flute and viola) of an array of light-hearted popular classics - pretty much designed to please the tourists.



That same evening, my first visit to the National Opera of Prague (despite many visits to the Prague) which unexpectedly became touch & go due to unexpected traffic snarls. We were all to ride in a contingent of taxis but suddenly a hiatus and no more taxis arrived. Stress was high! The last of us all fell into our seats in the beautiful baroque opera theatre for Jean Philippe Rameau's **Platée**. This opera, Rameau's best



known comedy, has had quite a renaissance in modern times. Sally and I saw a hilarious production by Pinchgut a couple of years ago (Australia's première) and in June earlier this year we saw it again at Garsington Opera in England, where it was set as idiotic hi-jinks in a film studio. Again hilarious but far removed from what

Rameau must have imagined. But this time in Prague, it was not only 'laugh out loud' but superb in every way: tremendous cast, both the dancers and singers, especially the plainest Platee you could have wished for and an extraordinarily elaborate set alternating between a jungle and baroque Heaven. I walked out after the performance feeling this was the best production of any opera I had seen in years.

Thursday morning Michael bundled all our luggage in the cars and we're off through picturesque snow covered countryside heading south to one of Czechia's most attractive and historic towns Cesky Krumlov, The UNESCO World Heritage historic centre with its 13th century Castle complex has been honoured thus since 1992 with UNESCO listing. As we walked through the castle complex, the

sight of the Vltava
spectacular old town



bisecting this
with old homes on
either side inspired
Egon Schiele and
indeed he was
born in Český
Krumlov. A
magnificent lunch

in a cellar and in elated mood, we sped off to *Linz*, 3rd city of Austria. Time for a quick change and something to eat before a concert at the superb Brucknerhaus, named after the great 19th century composer who Linz has always claimed as their own. This concert was a revelation - featuring French cellist Gautier Capuçon who gave an incredibly intense, even overwhelming performance of the Shostakovich cello concerto. It was followed by a performance of Schubert's lyrical Unfinished Symphony in two movements, but for my taste and someone who loves this work rather spoilt by the addition of two extra 'movements' and no authentic relationship to the symphony. No matter as everyone else loved it!

The next day, Friday 13th, despite the significant date, was particularly special. Claudia arranged a private organ recital in the Augustinian monastery of St Florian that dates back to the 9th century. Powerful and very moving complete with an improvisation given by the organist (something Bruckner himself was famed to do). There followed a tour with a guide down to the crypt then all over the Augustinian monastery and its splendid rooms and religious and artistic collections. Of special interest was the huge and spectacular library containing thousands of ancient and rare books. That evening we attended a truly Christmas spirit filled

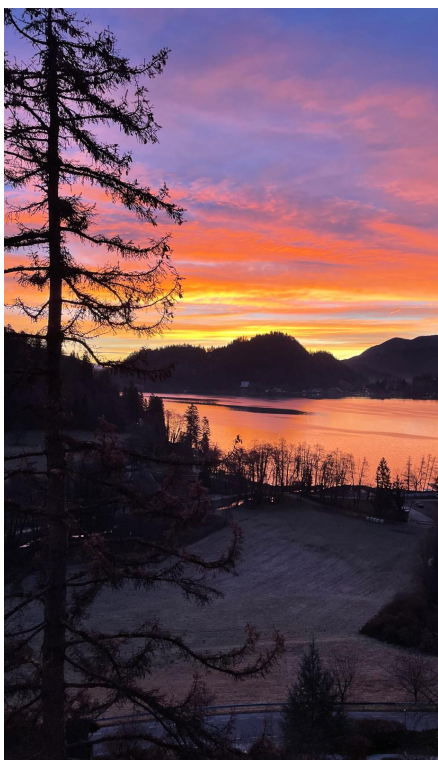


performance: for months, Claudia and I had been looking for a Christmas performance in Linz, without success until Michael spied just the thing. In a nearby spa town *Bad Zell* in a tiny church a chamber ensemble with a virtuosic pan flutist held us spell bounds with a performance Christmas delights. But first an early dinner in a near by fabulous spa hotel then we walked in the cold night air in crisp clear temperatures with magic Christmas lighting to shine our way to the local church to sit in the 2nd and 3rd rows and be honoured as guests to this small spa town. The young woman in a bright red (strapless) dress (we Aussie women were amazed -

freezing!) thrilled us with her virtuosic Pan flute instrument: her presence and her brilliant, even overwhelming sound gave a multi dimensional aspect to the music. We all cheered her to the echo. (Sally has since researched her name - Andrea Chira and she performed with the Ensemble Classico).

Today (Saturday) our longest drive from Linz all the way south across Austria till the beautiful lake *Wörthersee* along the border with Slovenia. We paused for lunch at its western end at the holiday village of *Velden* and more Christmas Markets! . It was then only a short drive to *Bled* in Slovenia to arrive in the glorious *Triglav Hotel* situated high on a ridge overlooking the beauty of Lake Bled with snow capped mountains in the distance. Claudia does not take groups to this particular Hotel - only those she considers worthy of the privilege of enjoying their superb food - near Michelin

standard - as well its location. For the next two nights we dined like Royalty and even breakfast, no common or garden buffet, but a menu and fine waiter



service!

Sunday dawned with a glorious sunrise and after breakfast we all set off to walk round the lake to Bled and to travel on the gondolier to the island in the centre of the lake. A rest day for some, including a swim and a sauna in the hotel whilst others enjoyed more walking and a slice of famous Lake Bled Cream cake (cremeschnitten in German or kremna retina in Slovenian). No better back drop than Lake Bled and more Christmas Markets for locals enjoying a beautiful Advent Sunday in glorious sunshine and no snow which surprised and delighted us all.

Leaving Slovenia and returning to Austria, our journey remained centred on this famous country, for centuries the centre of the Holy

Roman Empire, now a small but beautiful and historic country full of cultural treasures. *Graz*, Austria's 2nd city, was the day's destination, but on the way, we stopped at *Piber*, a small town where the world-famous Lipizzaner stud for breeding and (much later) retirement for horses of the famed Vienna's Spanish Riding School. Fascinating couple of hours guided by Peter a senior executive who stepped in to explain the intricacies of the breeding mares, both in the yards and in their stalls. We "talked to" some of



the mares kept apart from the stallions that comprise the performing horses of the Spanish Riding School. We heard a great deal about their history and the breeding process to ensure the perfection and purity of the horses is maintained. Then it was off to a family run restaurant for a wonderful Austrian meal served to us with tankards of beer for those who wished it or more Gruner Veltliner and of course strudle to finish!

We found Graz, capital city of the state of Styria, to be a beautiful, almost perfect small city. Elegant streets and squares and precincts, historic and more modern buildings, divided by the Mur river, which our hotel overlooked. The historic centre is now a World Heritage site and the city is noted for its wealth of higher education institutions making it a home for young people and students. Our first evening we walked across the bridge and not far into the centre to the Graz Concert Hall,



another traditional concert hall of great beauty, looking like a smaller version of Vienna's timeless Musikverein. A short program - a rather unremarkable concerto for harp and orchestra by 19th century composer Reineke followed by a suite from Humperdinck's opera Hänsel und Gretel featuring two Austrian children singing the parts which of course the audience loved.

The following morning we were guided around the historic centre and once complete we were free to continue our own exploration. But first a coffee break and we headed to the Cafe Sacher considerably less crowded than the Vienna. Somewhat dry I thought but I pronounced that if I had been destined to live in a small city, Graz would have been my first choice. In the afternoon a guided tour to the Zeughaus Armoury, filled with weapons and armoury from the middle ages - all those knights and battles and reputedly the world's largest collection of historic weapons and armour. It was certainly impressive, but very grim, most of us were happy to exit when her presentation was finished, and go back to the charming streets of Graz.

So, to the last leg of our journey: driving north east to our final destination, *Vienna*, via the picturesque Vienna Woods, stopping at the spa town to enjoy wandering around Baden bei Wien. Further on we stopped at Mayerling and heard the sorry and awful tale of Rudolf, Crown Prince of Austria only son of the emperor Franz Josef I and Empress Elizabeth (Sisi).

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mayerling_incident). His is a sad and tragic story. Neglected and abused as a child he grew up to be precluded from royal duties, unhappy, syphyllic, so drunk, was promiscuous and deeply unhappy in his marriage to Princess Stephanie of Belgium. But he met and fell passionately in love with the 17 year old Baroness Mary Vetsera. At the hunting lodge in January 1889 in a murder suicide pact both young people were found dead. This was a shocking scandal for the Hapsburgs, because in fact the Crown Prince now a murderer and as explained so eloquently by Claudia, the incident was hushed up and hidden from the Austrian people. With an elaborate cover up by the Hapsburgs and a scandalous treatment of the Vetsera family the

incident was buried but of course had massive repercussions as the dynastic consequences lead to the out break of the First World War. .



And so to *Vienna*! The Hotel Royal ready to greet us warmly (where we always stay) dead centre in the city behind St Stephen's cathedral. Our English friends Vicky and Andrew Neill arrived to join us for dinner and together we all proceeded to **Beim Czaak** a short walk through the streets of Vienna to her Claudia's family restaurant, where the chef Peter (Claudia's brother)

prepared Wiener Schnitzel for us all with their signature accompanying potatoes. We hosted our farewell dinner in style in this now familiar Austrian restaurant.

Our last two days of our journey: in *Vienna*!. The city was on show at its best: Christmas decorations were at their height; shops and public buildings dripping with colourful finery and the main street had 'ceilings' of fairy lights. In the huge foreground of the Rathaus (City Hall) the massive Christmas Market with lavishly decorated stalls of every shape and colour, an ice skating track winding its way through the precinct and thousands of people eating and drinking every variety of gluevein, buying Christmas presents. Incomparable, where could you see anything like it?



Hordes of people celebrating Christmas along the Graben, Kärntnerstrasse leading to the State Opera, and Kohlmarkt leading to the Hofburg and all its fabulous museums and for us all it was the Treasury, but then we were free to choose our own delight. Amongst which was to savour the shops, the Albertina, with its incomparable treasures and major exhibition of Chagall paintings.

the Kunst Historische Museum with its Rembrandts and Bruegels, and the Leopold in the Museum Quarter full of Klimts and Schieles.



Our final two musical performances were unforgettable. Offenbach's tragicomic masterpiece *Tales of Hoffmann* in an ancient 1993 production at the Vienna State Opera was crazy but beautiful, bringing out all the eccentric characters to perfection and especially the three heroines lost to Hoffman: the wind up doll Olympia, the dying singer Antonia, sung to perfection by Australia soprano Nicole Car, and the courtesan Giulietta. A brilliant concert incomparable Musikverein to cap off our last night performed by the Vienna Symphony Orchestra. The world's



the

beloved concert venue, a long 19th century shoebox style hall with perfect acoustics and gorgeous elaborate classical and baroque style decorations where people vie for the ballot for famed New Years Day concert. The wonderful melodious Tchaikovsky Violin concerto

performed by Augustin Hadelich, Dvorak 6th Symphony and the exciting brilliant performance of Unesco's Rumanian Rhapsody that started our evening - with the Rumanian conductor Christian Maceleru was perfect



music.

And so farewell everyone to various destinations in time



leave and travel to for Christmas. We

remained in Vienna however for our own special once-in-a-life-time unforgettable family Viennese

Christmas. And as a post script this beautiful Advent Christmas Market Tour was, according to both Claudia, Sal and I, one of the most enjoyable and happy trips we've ever done.



Antony and Sally Jeffrey
January 2025