

A tourist's take on the greening of Vienna

The Austrian capital is cosmopolitan, modern and whimsical, just like its evolving green scene.

By **Stephen Nash** Special to the Star Tribune | **OCTOBER 21, 2016 — 12:41PM**

I could see the garbage dump from my Vienna hotel room. Two-hundred-fifty truckloads of refuse a day. Five thousand tons a week, reduced to ash at an inferno called Spittelau.

I wasn't in a crummy neighborhood. It was just that this incinerator is a colorful mammoth, topped by a zany gold-domed minaret of a smokestack that is easily visible, far out on the horizon of Austria's capital.

Vienna is cosmopolitan, stylishly modern and sometimes whimsical despite the weight and girth of dozens of monuments that date from its 600-year span as the center of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It has been chosen as the city offering the highest quality of life in the world — for the seventh year in a row — by an international business consultancy.

One criterion for that selection is “nature and environment,” and it showcases Vienna's commitment to sustainability. The most visible evidence is the green space — 75 square miles of it within the city limits.

Many of its less obvious aspirations and achievements are “green,” too. My wife, Linda, and I decided to visit several, including eco-friendly hotels, stores devoted to artistically repurposed castoffs, and that high-tech incinerator complex outside our hotel window. These aren't typical tourist sites, but they're far less crowded and easily as interesting. They offer inspiration — ideas to take home that could wear a lot longer than the dirndls, lederhosen and Tyrolean hats you may have been considering.

These forward-looking entrepreneurial and public works are a counterweight to a rather darker — but also instructive — Austrian state of mind. Even tourism campaigns here are marketed with a certain precarious gusto, under this slogan: “Vienna, Now or Never!” That minor-key vibe is an echo of national politics.

The former leader of Austria's Green Party — one of the strongest in Europe — was recently elected president as the candidate of a political coalition. He won by only by six-tenths of 1 percent, however — a result so close that another election has been scheduled for late this year.

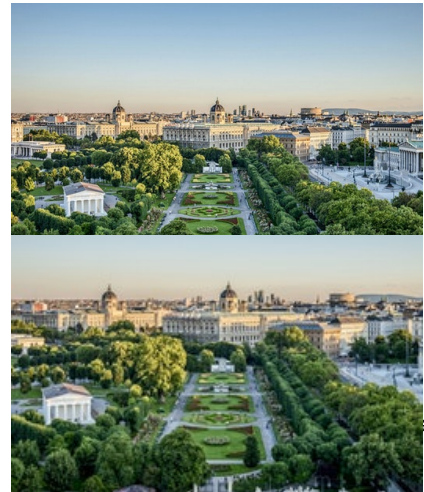
And his near-miss opponent is the first very-far-right politician to come this close to the leadership of a European nation in decades. His party was founded by former Nazis after the war, but parts of his campaign may sound oddly familiar to American visitors. It features high-voltage anti-immigrant appeals, such as “Native Austrian Rights Are Human Rights!” and the interesting “Don't Let Vienna Become Chicago!” Also, appeals for nationalistic toughness: “Austria Needs Security!” “Your Homeland Needs You Now!” “Show the Flag!”

In Vienna, with its distinct sensibility, that candidate lost in a landslide. As Steven Beller, an expert on the history of both Austria and of anti-Semitism, has written: “How these contradictory trends will play out is unpredictable ... history weighs heavily on Austria.”

Repurposed and beautiful

The exuberant exterior of Spittelau's environmentally advanced incinerator/power plant was designed by a local architect, the late Friedensreich Hundertwasser, a celebrated visionary who once delivered a formal lecture to astonished Viennese in the nude.

Nothing emerges from the fat golden orb atop Spittelau's tall exhaust stack but clean steam. Meanwhile, the busy burner underneath it generates enough electricity to power a substantial portion of homes, hospitals and industry in the city. Thousands visit the facility each year — mostly schoolkids, but tourists are welcome. Inside, you can watch operators wrest giant jaw-loads of colorful garbage up into the air, like one of those carnival “claw crane” games, and then drop them down a chute into the fires.



http://www.austriatourism.com/images/ows_147700409
VIENNA TOURIST BOARD VIA AP

Vienna is one of the greenest cities in Europe.

Our next stop was the largest of several local trash-into-treasure operations, a publicly funded four-story workshop that scavenges household electronics and appliances of all sizes from the waste stream. They are refurbished — as in the case of vintage, castoff stereo equipment — or ripped to shreds and repurposed, in astonishingly creative ways.

The drums of castoff clothes washers, for example, are transformed into shiny hip restaurant furnishings — much in demand. The washers' view-window glass is made over into beautiful salad bowls with hand-etched designs. Circuit boards become desk clocks or sculpture; wiring is gathered into exotic Day-Glo necklaces.

This operation, TrashDesignManufaktur, is staffed largely by skilled citizens who would otherwise be unemployed, we were told. They seemed vigorously engaged in their creative labors on the day of our visit, as trucks and forklifts delivered more piles of raw material, thus keeping it out of a landfill somewhere.

Along the Stilwerk, a commercial district on the Danube canal, other examples of commerce pull “green” away from the preachy, through the sublime and into the realm of the entertainingly ridiculous. One widely heralded store is called Garbage. Nearby, architects Jean Nouvel and Patrick Blanc have created a “vertical park,” a wall blanketed in 20,000 plants.

A plant-covered hotel

Our final stop of the day borrows a broad slice of that idea, to provide lodging that has earned international awards. The turn-of-the-century but completely redesigned Stadthalle offers the world's first (but not only) “zero-energy balance” hostelry. In the course of a year, one section of this boutique hotel creates the same amount of energy that is required to run it, from renewable sources like solar panels, groundwater heat pumps and wind turbines.

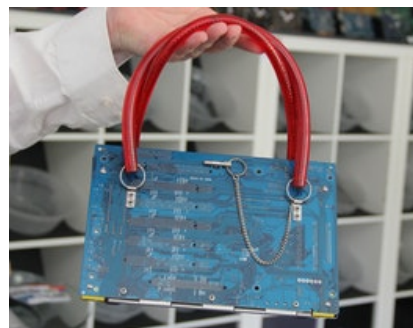
The Stadthalle is also mostly covered in a fur of green plants — a big challenge for the maintenance staff, who seem to double as farmers. From many of the rooms one can see clusters of beehives. They provide pollination service for the roofs, which are completely planted in native wildflowers and edibles.

Vienna, like the rest of us, is gradually warming, but air conditioning sucks a great deal of energy. That has been one of the hotel's obstacles in the trade-off between energy savings and guest comfort.

During my stay, the room was a cheerful blend of high-tech fixtures and recycled, artful ornament. You might have a chandelier made of wine bottles or another made from a bicycle rim fitted with industrial tube lighting. Or an old suitcase that opens into a lovely mirrored vanity. The room was warm enough during high season, though, to warrant taking a cold shower, sometime after midnight. From a water-thrifty showerhead, let it be said!

The hotel manager said her engineers are working hard to find reasonable solutions to adapt things to a changing climate. That spirit, as some Viennese told us, can also work well for Austria's social and political climate. They hope to serve as a persuasive example for their own national citizenry and, of course, for the rest of us.

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(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_1477004109)
LINDA NASH, SPECIAL TO THE STAR TRIBUNE

A purse made out of recycled materials at the Trash Design Manufaktur.