



Left to right: Cafe Demel; the view from Das Loft; Verdi's *Macbeth*; Sacher torte; chandeliers at Lobmeyr; and the State Opera, below. PHOTOS: WIEN BILD, GETTY



TRAVEL VIENNA

Trailing diamonds with Sisi

The legacy of the Hapburg empress is writ large in this grand and elegant city, writes **Jane Cornwell**

Royal heritage: Empress "Sisi" (Elizabeth), right, and the Sisi-style brooches still sold at jeweller A.E. Kochert. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Oh, Vienna. From the armfuls of fresh roses in the suites at the five-star Hotel Sacher Wien to the chandeliers that glitter in the great hall of your Spanish Riding School, from tableware and champagne glasses made by purveyors to the imperial court to an opera house done up in gold leaf and plush crimson velvet, no other city quite does luxury like you do.

Here, on the banks of the (slate) blue Danube, is a metropolis whose fairytale palaces and beautifully laid out parks were once enjoyed by members of the Hapsburg dynasty: mutton-chopped Emperor Franz Joseph, who ruled for 68 years before popping his clogs in 1916 aged 86, leaving behind 55 great-grandchildren. Empress Elizabeth, aka Sisi, beautiful and high maintenance (and randomly assassinated at 60), given to wearing 27 diamond-encrusted stars in her waist-length dark hair.

"Sisi was Franz Joseph's muse," says art historian Florian Muller, our guide at Schonbrunn Palace, a 1400-room baroque extravaganza on the city outskirts and Austria's most visited site. A year-long centenary exhibition, *Franz Joseph - Man and Monarch*, reveals a hard-working ruler with a penchant for paperwork and, despite various dalliances, an obsessive love for his wife: "Franz adored Sisi," says Muller, "even though she had a morbid fear of ageing and from her mid-30s refused to be seen in public".

Revered today as a sort of Austrian Princess Diana, Sisi's image is everywhere in Vienna's historic city centre, a sprawl of pedestrianised zones boasting sidewalk cafes and elegant eateries, exclusive brands and centuries-old businesses. All overlooked by mansion houses and the looming spire of St Stephen's Cathedral, the symbol of Vienna and one of the most important Gothic buildings in Austria.

Jeweller A.E. Kochert sells Sisi-style diamond stars out of a store entered, buzzer pressed, from the street, and offers mini-tours of a ye olde workshop with rough hewn tables, brass measuring scales and red leather chairs with splayed feet. Glass and chandelier



manufacturer (and former court suppliers) J. & L. Lobmeyr stocks everything from the '60s starburst chandeliers to hand fans trimmed with ostrich feathers, along with crystal tumblers so resilient that, dropped onto the carpet, they bounce.

Whether traditional, contemporary or both - the Kunsthistorisches Museum in the downtown Museums Quartier displays mediaeval suits of armour alongside chain mail-inspired 21st-century haute couture - it's the finer things in this new-old city that concern us here.

Such as the elegant Hotel Sacher, with its two gourmet restaurants, completely blue Blaue Bar and Original Sacher Torte cake, a masterpiece of chocolate, apricot jam and whipped cream invented in 1832 by a teenage Franz Sacher and the hallmark of the house.

Distinguished by its chocolate "Hotel Sacher" round seal, the cake is in high demand at the adjoining Cafe Sacher, past which horse-drawn carriage tours clip-clop and in front of which limousines glide to a halt outside the hotel entrance. Traditional coffee houses are

Here, on the banks of the (slate) blue Danube, is a metropolis of fairytale palaces and beautiful parks.

Vienna's forte: upstairs at Demel, the former imperial confectionary, it's easy to imagine the young Sisi popping a trademark candied violet into a glass of champers (for that extra zing), and admiring her reflection in mirrors inlaid with frosted curlicues.

Just as it is tempting to picture her strolling arm in arm with her whiskered husband through the Burggarten (Imperial Court Gardens) before stopping for lunch at the Palmenhaus (palm house), a monumental steel-framed glasshouse that now boasts a

cafe, cocktail bar and restaurant serving excellent local wine; Vienna is the only world city with a notable wine-growing industry.

Biodynamic wine is all the rage at the Michelin-starred likes of Konstantin Filippou, a 35-seater downtown eatery serving multi-textured, perfectly proportioned dishes (quail, langoustines, pistachio foam with grated comte and candied walnuts) from two menus - with a clutch of hipster staff pairing food with wine from home and away.

Out in the leafy 17th district at Pichlmaiers Zum Herkner, a historic building at the end of a tramline built in 1850 and recently reopened (kickstarting a new culinary district), *gasthaus* comfort food comes fresh from an authentic Viennese kitchen.

"We're casual yet classy, old-fashioned yet contemporary," says our host Martin Pichlmaier, overseeing a menu featuring cabbage pasta, pressed ox head and crispy, giant-sized schnitzels. "On the weekends we're full of young people who come out for our goulash, which we make from an old family recipe," he says.

Classic with a twist is the go, too, at prestigious shoemakers Rudolf Scheer & Sohne, who host boutique dinners of an evening in a basement cellar clad in fine leather, before back-lit shelves of artfully arranged footwear. Up at Das Loft, the rooftop bar of the Sofitel - designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Jean Nouvel, the Frenchman behind One Central Park in Sydney - cocktails are had under a bold, bright ceiling artwork by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist, and before a panoramic view of Vienna.

There, lit up in neon, is the giant Ferris wheel marking the entrance to the Prater amusement park in Leopoldstadt, the city's second district. There, glowing amber, is the spire of the St Stephen's Cathedral. And there, the lights of Ringstrasse Boulevard, opened in 1865 by Franz Joseph and home to most of Vienna's upscale accommodation including the Hotel Sacher - and, should you be a Lipizzaner stallion, the Spanish Riding School, the oldest riding academy in the world.

Our guided tour of the stables of this 450-year-old establishment reveal magnificent white beasts with flaring nostrils and tails like waterfalls, chilling in stalls strewn with fresh straw or basking under infrared light in preparation for public performances in the sunlight-flooded great hall, where a portrait of Emperor Charles VI, the school's founder, is positioned opposite the entrance: each rider doffs his hat at the likeness as they come in.

The school has classic dressage shows featuring such balletic movements as the *levade*, the *capriole* and *pas de deux*, in which two horses and riders work symmetrically. For our visit, a bonus: eight stallions prancing about to live music by the string section from the Vienna Philharmonic and arias by soprano Alexandra Reinprecht, her red

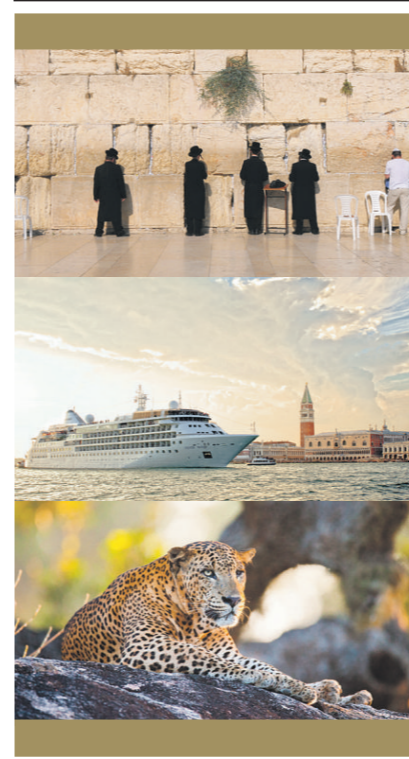
ballgown dappled by the planet-sized chandeliers above her.

But for all-stops-out, it doesn't get much better than this luxury, nothing beats a night out at the Vienna State Opera. Opened in 1869 under the auspices of Franz Joseph and Sisi, damaged during World War II and duly rebuilt, the building is a riot of colour and good-natured pomp. In the lobby, a grand marble staircase winds around under the ceiling painting *Fortune, scattering her gifts*. Outside on the verandah, frescoes depict scenes from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* - a performance of which inspired Sisi to commission her 27 stars, a la a diamond-bedecked Queen of the Night.

We take our seats to the sound of the orchestra tuning. Individual screens on seat backs show English surtitles: "Giuseppe Verdi, *Macbeth*", they read before curtain up. The Staatsoper has a different program of work every day; this acclaimed modern production (from German director Christian Rath) not only features a brilliant 3D stage design by Gary McCann but is conducted by Sydney-born Simone Young.

As the soloists' voices soar thrillingly over a large chorus, and the music flows and builds under Young's full-tilt conducting, a rapt audience cranes forward, eager not to miss a thing. Above the balcony, the Royal Box is empty, dark. But for the briefest of moments, something seems to be twinkling. **L&L**

The writer travelled as a guest of the Vienna Tourist Board.



EST. 1994

CAPTAIN'S CHOICE

JOIN US AT A FREE INFORMATION SESSION

Since 1994, Captain's Choice has offered an inspiring range of tours and destinations. We invite you to join us to learn more about our unique collection of tours.

Thursday 28 July 2016 THE WESTIN MELBOURNE	Tuesday 26 July 2016 THE WESTIN SYDNEY	Wednesday 3 August 2016 SOFITEL BRISBANE CENTRAL
Tuesday 2 August 2016 THE CUBAN BROADBEACH	Thursday 4 August 2016 PEPPERS NOOSA RESORT	Thursday 4 August 2016 BREAKFREE CALOUNDRA

For full session details or to secure your place, freecall 1300 165 203; email RSVP@captainschoice.com.au; or register online at captainschoice.com.au/sessions

