

Christmas is celebrated in cities throughout the world, but what takes place in the Austrian city of Vienna is unique. These are the darkest days of the year, and the need to be reminded that eventually the sun will return, goes back to prehistoric times. The ancient Romans handled the problem with the Feast of the Unconquered Sun, which declared that sun-filled days were just around the corner. As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, the idea of light overcoming the powers of darkness became a symbol for the birth of Christ--the arrival of hope when times were darkest. And Vienna has been celebrating the Unconquered Sun, in one form or another for over 2,000 years.

For centuries, Christ was called the "Unconquered Sun" and the straw radiating like rays of light from the baby Jesus in the manger is a visual presentation of that idea. The theme of Christ bringing light to the world is the reason fires and bright objects are part of the Christmas celebration.

### CHRISTMAS MARKETS

Central to Vienna's celebration are the Christmas markets which are called Christ Child Markets. The Viennese have been setting them up since 1296 when Emperor Albrecht decided that the markets would guarantee a sufficient supply of things during Christmas.



One of the most important rules for any festival is that the festival itself and most of the things associated with it must be temporary. A festival, by definition, is something out of the ordinary, different from everyday life. If it stays around too long it loses its impact. Food is always important to a festival for the very reason that it doesn't last long.

December 6<sup>th</sup> is St. Nicholas Day and St. Nicholas dressed as a bishop walks through the market passing out candy. He is often accompanied by his "dark side", a scary fur-covered character called *Krampus*. Sometimes, St. Nicholas will question children as to their behavior during the past year. Parents often warn their children that if they do not behave properly *Krampus* will carry them off. It is

difficult to estimate the number of children who have gone into therapy as a result of this experience but there appears to be little concern---after all---Vienna was the home town of Sigmund Freud.

The ancient Roman festivals that predated Christmas made no special reference to children or family. The story of the birth of the Christ Child changed the focus of the holiday---children and family became central to the festivities and Vienna's City Hall is transformed. It becomes a fairy tale world for kids



with golden leaves, luminous hearts, giant sweets, and glittering stars. There's an old Viennese carousel, a mini-railway, and pony rides. The City Hall market is a traditional market and the oldest in

the city. Inside the hall, there is a workshop where experts help children make their own Christmas presents or bake their own cookies.

And every weekend choirs from around the world come to the hall and perform the Christmas music of their homeland.

### THE TREE

The Christmas market is also the place to buy your Christmas tree. Ancient societies from the Celts to the Egyptians marked the darkest days of winter by decorating their homes with evergreen plants.

In Catholic communities, St. Nicholas, The Three Kings and the Christ Child were represented in human likeness. Protestant communities felt that the representation of humans and animals was inappropriate, and during the 1500s introduced the Christmas tree as a counter balance.

It was man-sized but had no personality. It could signify Christmas in an abstract way and was therefore thought to be pure. Like Christmas, the tree was new every year and yet it was always the same---bringing light during the darkest days of the year. And it took over the role of the Three Kings and St. Nicholas by bringing



## WHO IS ST. NICHOLAS?



Saint Nicholas of Myra (Turkey), lived in the 4th century. He was a bishop and is the patron saint of sailors and thieves. He was known for his generosity, coming to the defense of the accused, and for several miracles.

December 6th—St. Nicholas Day, is said to be the date of his death. It is a festival for children in much of Europe. In Austria, children will put a boot outside their door the night of December 5th. If they were good they will wake up on December 6th to find it filled with gifts and sweets. If they were not good, they will find their boot filled with charcoal.

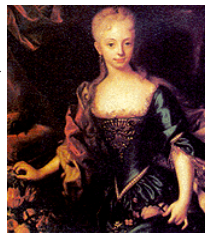
The names Father Christmas, Kris Kringle and Santa Claus are all variations of St. Nicholas. America's Santa Claus is actually the result of a mispronunciation of *Sinterklaas*, which is what the Dutch call Saint Nicholas.

presents. Eventually Catholics decided that the tree was OK and Protestants decided that even though St. Nick was human, he was still welcome.

Austrian families often have homemade Christmas tree decorations or a collection that they purchased over the years in the market. They are passed down from generation to generation as family heirlooms. There was, however, one particular Viennese family that was obsessed with passing things down in their family. They were the Hapsburgs and what they passed down was Vienna.

### HERE COME THE HAPSBURGS

Vienna was built at the crossroads of two major trade routes. The north-south axis was the Amber Road that went from Northern Germany to Greece. The east-west traffic was handled by the Danube River. The Danube was essential for the growth of international trade. Vienna got rich because the city controlled the



traffic heading down river.

And Vienna was controlled by the Hapsburgs. The Hapsburg family came to power at end of the 1200s and hung onto it for almost 900 years. The Schönbrunn Palace was their summer place. Now, most royal families increased their land and their power by using military might, but the Hapsburgs used marriage.

It all started with Maximilian who married Mary the daughter of the Duke of Burgundy, which added the Netherlands and Luxembourg to his lands in Austria. Then Max's son Phil married Joan the heiress of Castile. And that got him Spain, Naples, Sicily, Sardinia and all the newly conquered Spanish lands in the Americas.

These guys were marrying all over the place and getting all the places where they got married. But at one point they made a fatal mistake. To keep anyone from marrying a Hapsburg and getting their land they started marrying each other---a genetic disaster. It's good to have a close family, but not that close.

Swimming in the same gene pool made them weirder and weirder. In the end they lost everything. Fortunately, what they lost is now on display to the public.

### SCHÖNBRUNN PALACE

Schönbrunn has its own Christmas market with a focus on handicrafts, tree decorations and food. One booth sells Kaiserschmarren, a traditional dessert made from fluffy pancakes that have been scrambled and topped with jam. And every weekend during the Christmas season Mozart's *Magic Flute* is presented in the marionette theater.



### THE SOUND OF CHRISTMAS

Along with Christmas foods and Christmas trees, Christmas music plays an essential role. There are thousands of musical compositions from *Silent Night* to



*Jingle Bells* that are only played at Christmas. They always bring back memories of the celebration. *Silent Night*, by the way, is Austria's most beloved Christmas carol. It was first performed on Christmas Eve in 1818 in a small Austrian village.

During the second half of the 1700s, the Hapsburgs played a critical role in turning Vienna into the music capital of Europe--- a title which it held for over 100 years. Mozart, Hayden, Beethoven, Schubert, Strauss, Brahms, and Mahler all worked in Vienna.

The Vienna Boy's Choir which was founded by Emperor Maximilian in 1498 is still one of the city's great musical attractions. For over 400 years it was a private

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choir for the royal family and sang exclusively for the court, at mass, at concerts and on state occasions. In 1918, following the collapse of the empire it became a private not-for-profit organization that supports itself through concerts, recordings and royalties. The Imperial uniforms were replaced with sailor suits which were the height of boys' fashion at the time. Today the choir consists of about 100 boys between the ages of 10 and 14. They are divided into four traveling groups that give a total of 300 concerts each year. They have added to their repertoire by recording their first pop album with songs by Madonna and Celine Dion. But they also maintain part of their tradition as Imperial musicians by providing the music for the Sunday Mass at Vienna's Imperial Chapel, as they have done since 1498.



At Christmas time the city is filled with music and some of the finest can be heard as part of the regular church services.

### ADVENT

A central element in Vienna's Christmas celebration is Advent. Advent is a four-week period leading up to Christmas. The four weeks symbolize the time covered in the Old Testament---the world was once thought to have lasted four thousand years from creation to Christ.



A central idea behind Advent is anticipation: getting ready for a great feast by not feasting. A feast always stands out more if you have been holding back before the feast arrives. The word "Advent" means "coming" and the period is marked by a

sense of expectation.

One of the most common traditions during Advent is the keeping of an Advent calendar. It is made up of a series of miniature doors. One door for each day--from the first day of Advent through Christmas. Each day, one of the doors is opened and inside is a picture or a saying or a little present---a little promo for what's coming soon.

### SCENES OF THE NATIVITY

The tradition of Nativity scenes outside a church goes back to St. Francis of Assisi. In the year 1223, St. Francis set up a live Nativity scene in the forest, using a manger and real animals and invited the local population to come and join him in celebrating the birth of the Christ



## VIENNA'S COFFEE HOUSES



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Child. At a time when very few people could read or write, the scene was a powerful teaching tool.

Sculpture and paintings of the birth of Jesus following the descriptions in the Gospels is a major theme in Christian art. It was first represented during the 4<sup>th</sup> century and became an important subject in Early Christian art because it emphasized the reality of the incarnation of Christ and Mary's role as the Mother of God. In the early versions along with Jesus and Mary there was usually an ox and an ass, one or two shepherds and the Three Wise Men (the Three Kings). The shepherds symbolize the revelation of Christ to the Jews as the Wise Men symbolize the revelation to non-Jews.



In Austria, the custom of setting up a nativity scene at Christmas began in the mid-1500s. The early scenes were simple---Mary, Joseph, the Christ Child, and a few animals. But as the tradition took hold additional biblical elements were added. The shepherds join in and the Three Kings arrived with their gifts. Eventually, the entire village of Bethlehem surrounded the manger.

### THE FOODS OF CHRISTMAS

The Imperial Hotel was originally built as a palace for the Duke of Württemberg. But when the Duke heard that a new street was going to pass near the building, he

## WHERE TO STAY



### THE IMPERIAL HOTEL

KÄERTNER RING 16  
A-1015 VIENNA, AUSTRIA  
MAIN T: 011 (43) 1 501 100

[WWW.LUXURYCOLLECTION.COM/IMPERIAL](http://WWW.LUXURYCOLLECTION.COM/IMPERIAL)



Located on the magnificent Ring Boulevard in Vienna, the HOTEL IMPERIAL, built in 1863, was originally built as the Vienna residence of the Prince of Württemberg. Transformed into a hotel for the World Exhibition in 1873, Hotel Imperial showcases the 19th century romance of Vienna with pristine marble, hand carved statues, and spectacular crystal chandeliers. Named one of the "Best of the Best" and one of the "Top 75 Resorts in Europe," the hotel is renowned worldwide for its discreet and impeccable service.



### HOTEL BRISTOL

KÄERTNER RING 1  
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MAIN T: 011 43 1 515 160

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Vienna's HOTEL BRISTOL is located in the heart of Vienna and right opposite to the Vienna State Opera. The hotel has been an elegant meeting point for the city's cultural and business life for more than 100 years. Named one of the "Top75 Hotels in Europe" by Condé Nast Traveler in 2006.

decided to move to the suburbs. He sold his palace and never really lived there. The new owner had it refurbished into a hotel. But it still feels like a palace.



During the month of December the hotel presents the dishes that make up the traditional foods for Christmas in Vienna.

The usual pre-Christmas meal on Christmas Eve is rather simple. The main dish is fish, most often carp. It is considered to be a sign of good fortune if you get the fish roe with your portion. It's a common belief that a lot of little eggs will

bring you a lot of good luck. The vegetable dishes usually include beets and cabbage.

Red and green are always the colors of Christmas--- they remind people of summer and flowers and fresh fruit. Red is for warmth and brightness; green is a

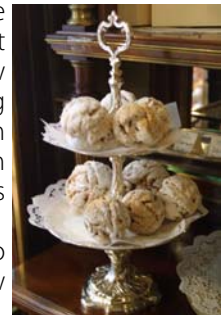


promise that the leaves will turn green and return to the trees. Santa Claus is always red and real Christmas trees are always green.

The Christmas Eve meal is simple, but the Christmas feast, which in Vienna is the mid-day meal on Christmas Day, is anything but simple. The center piece is traditionally a roast goose but during the last few decades turkeys have been showing up. Every family will have its own stuffing recipe which will often include sauerkraut, dried fruits, apples and chestnuts.

At any feast we try to do two things: we make an effort to show that we are united, a part of a group, while at the same time we try to show our individuality. The turkey or the goose is a universal container; it's the same bird that's being roasted by all the other families. But the stuffing is unique. It is the family stuffing and makes one family different from all the others.

There are always lots of festive breads. Christstollen is a good example---filled with nuts, raisins and other dried



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fruits, it is the Austrian answer to Christmas pudding.

Apples and nuts are important symbols for Christmas. The apple represents the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. It's an ancient fruit, bright and shiny, it represents hope and light during the darkness of winter. Austrians have been making apples part of Christmas for hundreds of years. Nuts represent "destiny" and life's great puzzles. You must break them open to find out what's going on inside.

### THE VIENNESE COOKIE MONSTER

Of all the foods associated with Christmas in Vienna, the most significant are the cookies and they are on sale throughout the city.



The official home of Vienna's cookie monster is Demel. Demel got started in 1786 when Ludwig Dehne, a confectionary assistant, settled in Vienna and started selling decorated baked goods. His shop which served coffee and hot chocolate along with the pastries became a gathering spot for the local aristocracy and his cookies became an essential part of Vienna's Christmas

celebration.

Using pepper and other strong spices in cakes goes all the way back to the time of the ancient Romans and the birth of Christ. Spices were extremely expensive and their use showed the importance of the occasion.

### COFFEE HOUSES

At some point during Vienna's Christmas celebration you will end up in a coffee house. Coffee houses have been part of Viennese life since the 1600s. They are a place to read the newspaper, play a game of billiards, have a light meal, a glass of wine, a bottle of beer and maybe even a cup of coffee.



During the late 1800s individual coffee houses began attracting specific clientele. There was a coffee house that was frequented by politicians, another for painters and writers. Composers of music had their own place. There was even a coffee house that was a hangout for psychiatrists.

The waiters in a true Viennese coffee house will be dressed in tuxedos and they will offer you over 20 different types of coffee and with each cup there is a small glass of water to aid your digestion.

### THE UNCONQUERED SUN

Vienna celebrates a very traditional Christmas with most of the religious aspects in place. But in some countries there has been considerable resistance to the commercial part of Christmas. Many people feel that the

religious elements have been driven out and all that's left is the need to buy presents. But the idea of gift-giving is central to the story of Christmas.

Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that Christmas offers us an annual opportunity to renew our understanding of the Unconquered Sun. It gives us a chance to remember that the greatest light might not be the light around us but the light inside us. And the darker the outside world looks the more important it is to keep the light inside us from going out.

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### VIENNA CHRISTMAS MARKETS

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### ASSOCIATION OF FRIENDS OF CRECHES

PETERSKIRCHE

PETERPLATZ, 1<sup>ST</sup> DISTRICT

A-100 VIENNA, AUSTRIA

T: 011 43 1 533 6433

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