



EIGHT CLICKS

Vienna through a viewfinder, by Sharon Stephenson

WHAT'S THE CORRECT response when confronted by a group of teenagers who has taken an unhealthy interest in your camera?

I'm not sure but, to be honest, I don't blame them.

I'm on a PolaWalk tour through Vienna, the world's first guided walk with vintage Polaroid cameras, and there's something intriguing about the clunky, old-fashioned camera that weighs heavily around my neck.

It's a sunny Monday afternoon when nine of us meet in Spittelberg, once the Austrian capital's red light district. Gentrification has been tugging at the edges of this inner-city suburb for the past few decades and it's now the postcode of choice for the city's beautiful, bearded and excessively tattooed.

And, apparently, pre-pubescents with an excess of time and vanity.

"I'm photogenic, take my picture," four or five of them yell good-naturedly as they follow me up the street.

"People still long for the magic of Polaroid," says Gilbert Lechner, who started PolaWalk with his friend Thomas Preyer last year. "It's like having a darkroom in your hand. Digital hasn't quite found a way to capture or recreate that quality."

While too young to remember analogue technology, the pair is part of a wave of creatives rejecting the five-frame-per-second perfection of digital photography in favour of 70-year-old technology. Most of their cameras were eBay finds and they lucked out when a group of their countrymen decided to rescue Polaroid's bankrupt Dutch plant in 2008.

Gilbert points out that shooting

into sunlight causes an unwanted silhouette effect, and that the strongest colours produce the best results before setting us loose to capture our eight pictures.

Snapping without the aid of a zoom function and being denied the digital safety net of instantly deleting any unpleasant results takes a bit of getting used to. Harder still is choosing what to photograph: Spittelberg is an over-achiever when it comes to visual bling. Situated behind Vienna's Museumsquartier, this pedestrianized patchwork of cobbled streets has been perfecting beauty since Napoleonic days.

Gilbert tells us the suburb was once farmland but became the site of the city's major hospital in 1525.

"But things went downhill in the 18th Century when Spittelberg was a hot-bed of prostitution. It wasn't until




CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: There's no shortage of photogenic landmarks in Vienna, including cathedrals and Biedermeier houses; the tour group gets the low-down on Polaroid cameras before venturing out; the writer's eight results.

the '70s that the developers moved in to rescue the charming Biedermeier houses, which no longer have charming price tags!"

Like so much of Vienna, the suburb has one foot rooted firmly in the past. The pretty stone-coloured Amerlinghaus Theatre, for example, pays tribute to artist Friedrich von Amerling, one of Austria's leading 19th Century painters. Today it's a cultural and events centre, a busy sort of place, where flyers announce auditions for Snow White.

Vienna isn't a city to deny yourself the calories you'd normally avoid for health reasons and at Witwe Bolte, Spittelberg's oldest restaurant, I eat a large slab of the traditional Austrian cake, sachertorte, and watch what looks like half the suburb drop in for their caffeine fix. I wonder if anyone actually has a job here, or if they're all too cool and beautiful to work.

"This area is fondly called Boboville, because it's home to so many bobos, or bourgeois bohemians," explains the barista.

It's also a good opportunity to wait for my eight photos to reveal themselves. The new Polaroid films take between 20 and 40 minutes to cough up the results and when I lay out my photos I'm pleasantly surprised. Several may be a bit over exposed, and a couple look as though they were taken by someone with severely compromised eyesight, but on the whole I think I've managed to capture a little of Spittleberg's whimsical character... 

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Sharon Stephenson travelled as a guest of Avalon Waterways (avalonwaterways.co.nz), the Vienna Tourist Board (vienna.info) and Cathay Pacific (cathaypacific.com/nz).