

BE epicurious!



Weibel's Wirtshaus is an old Viennese institution. Below left: Shredded pancakes with caramelised apples.



Sharon takes some time out between meals.



This city takes THE CAKE

SHARON STEPHENSON BITES OFF MORE THAN SHE CAN CHEW

After four days in Vienna, there's only one answer to the question: "Does my bum look big in this?"

That's because the Austrian capital is Ground Zero for calorific cakes, from apple strudel and kaiserschmarrn (shredded caramelised pancakes doused in fruity syrup), to sugar-dusted buchteln (doughnuts injected with hot plum jam that would give the health police nightmares).

The granddaddy of them all, however, is sachertorte, a delicious slab of chocolate cake and apricot jam which, legend has it, was invented in 1832 for Prince Wenzel von Metternich at the famous Hotel Sacher. You'll need an extra mortgage to eat here, but don't forget that you're paying for the atmosphere as much as the food – and although this dessert is offered throughout Vienna, there's nothing quite like dining at its birthplace.

Opulent cafés are the lifeblood of this city and the Viennese really understand the sacred art of drinking coffee and eating cake. It's also perfectly acceptable to loiter for hours over a single coffee and a glass of water.

"Most Viennese apartments are too small to entertain, so social life is conducted in the coffee house," says my guide Alexa. "The first cup of coffee is a down-payment on your table rental and you can stay as long as you like."

It's a tough assignment, but I make it my mission to café-crawl through this city of 1.7 million. The best place to start is at Café Landtmann, which was a favourite of Dr Sigmund Freud before the Nazis exiled him to England in 1938. Here, strudel with vanilla custard is listed under main courses – a sign of how seriously they take their confectionery.

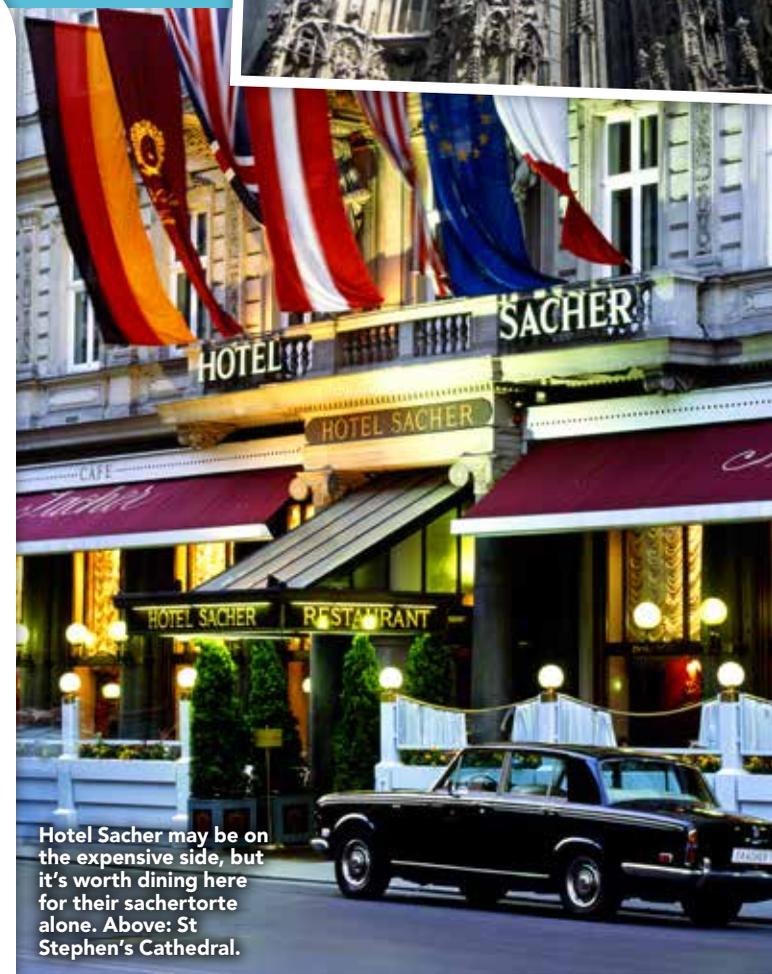
In the more bohemian Café Leopold Hawelka, in the Innere Stadt or first district, the counter is groaning with fattening cakes. I settle for a hot chocolate topped with a generous dollop of whipped cream but am unable to resist at my next stop, Konditorei, where I manage to cram in a hunk of Scheiterhaufen (bread and apple pie).

Fortunately, everything in Vienna is within walking distance and I try to convince myself I've walked off some of the excess calories getting to my next destination, Café Central.

Opened in 1876, this café was frequented by artists, writers and historical figures, such as Trotsky, Freud and even Adolf Hitler. At 11am on a Monday the place is packed. Soaring ceilings, elegant décor and cakes that are like works of art make this more than just a place to get a decent long black.

Cakes aside, the Viennese are famous for Wiener Schnitzel, the crumbed and fried cutlets of veal or pork that are an institution in this city. Just be warned: the portions are huge and come with potatoes and dumplings (knodel), so you'll need to bring an appetite.

However, for my money, which tends to be limited, you can't go past one of the many wurst stands, which specialise in Viennese sausages. One of the best is Bitzinger, across the road from the stunning central opera house. It's common for punters to finish a night at the opera with a visit to a wurst stand, and although it's slightly odd to be scoffing hot chips in our posh dresses, we're surrounded by locals in tuxedos and ball gowns doing the same. Although with all the good food in this city, I'm surprised any of them can fit into their clothes!



Hotel Sacher may be on the expensive side, but it's worth dining here for their sachertorte alone. Above: St Stephen's Cathedral.



Insider's guide to... Vienna

BEST PLACE FOR LUNCH The Naschmarkt – a farmers' market on the Linke Wienzeile that sells fruit and veg, cheese and wine. Or pay a few euro and get a huge, delicious kebab. On Saturday there's also a flea market.
BEST VIEW From the 19th-century Riesenrad or giant ferris wheel that appears in the movie *The Third Man*. At the highest point, you're 65m above Vienna.

BEST CAKE FOR KIDDING YOURSELF IT'S HEALTHY Sachertorte. It has apricot jam in it, so surely that must count as one of your five plus a day?
BEST PALACE Schönbrunn Palace – the most visited tourist attraction in Vienna and one of Austria's most important cultural monuments.
BEST COFFEE Caffeine addicts are spoiled for choice. There's no such thing as a bad coffee in this city.