

Thema: Prater Wien

Autor: k.A.



CITY LIFE

# Vienna's Playground

Open to the public for 250 years, the Prater is the city's ever-evolving leisure center

BY BINU STARNEGG



If play is an integral part of a well-lived life, then every community needs its playground, a place to blow off steam where normal societal rules don't quite apply. New York has Coney Island, San Francisco Fishermen's Wharf, Tokyo Yoyogi Park, and Vienna has its Prater. First mentioned in 1162 and gifted to the public by Emperor Josef II on April 7, 1776, the beloved retreat-within-the-city serenaded through the centuries by Mozart, Strauss and Robert Stolz, celebrates its 250th anniversary this month.

### GREEN MACHINE

With six square kilometers, the former imperial hunting grounds are a vast recreation area, popular for sports. On foot, wheels and horseback, Viennese frequent the 4.4km-long Hauptallee (promenade). Centrally located are the nation's largest stadium, a velodrome, and swimming pool (all built for the 1931 International Worker's Olympiad, a proletarian olympic games). There are two horseracing tracks, a golf course, a BMX track, and numerous playgrounds, as well. The Prater is also home to many amateur and semi-professional sports clubs, including the Wanderers, Vienna's baseball team, who built their own diamond in 1995.

### BEGINNINGS

At first, the Prater wasn't much to look at: largely wooded wetlands comparable to the Lobau, with only the Hauptallee and a few side paths traversable. The

PHOTOS: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: WIEN MUSEUM; RIGHT: WIEN MUSEUM

Anfragen für weitere Nutzungsrechte an den Verlag

**Thema:** Prater Wien

**Autor:** k.A.



The modern buildings around the Prater's convention center house Vienna's University of Economics and Business

novelty nonetheless made it hugely popular for day-trips, with high society driving their carriages up and down the Hauptallee, turning at the Lusthaus (rebuilt in its current form in 1781). At any one of three coffeehouses built along the main drag (unimaginatively dubbed First, Second and Third Coffeehouse), everyone (even unescorted women) could linger and people-watch for the price of a beverage. This period also marked the beginnings of the Würstelprater amusement park: Innkeepers and coffeehouse owners eager to capture the growing public began to build swings, carousels, bowling alleys and dance halls. Soon Beethoven, Josef Lanner and Johann Strauss were performing to enthusiastic crowds. Otherwise, there were bombastic fireworks displays by Johann Georg Stuver, who also began making ascents in hot-air balloons in 1784 – a publicity stunt that made him an aviation pioneer.

#### THE GOLDEN AGE

Stuver notwithstanding, it wasn't until the 1873 World's Fair that things really got off the ground. Intended to reassert imperial confidence after the loss of Italy and expulsion from the German Federation, no expense was spared at the *Rotunde*, an enormous pavilion with the largest dome of its time, the centerpiece of the extensive fairgrounds. The Prater's improvised entertainments were deemed inadequate for such an occasion and were reorganized as permanent stalls, much in the form

they retain today. The exposure from over 7.2 million visitors from all over the world made it the premier pleasure district in the empire, with both family and adult entertainment, including the nation's first cinemas in 1905.

Of particular note was one of the world's first theme parks, Venedig in Wien (Venice in Vienna). Opened in 1895 by theatre impresario Gabor Steiner, it was a faithful mini-reproduction of the lagoon city, complete with canals and gondolas, and continuously augmented with sideshow attractions to keep attendance up.

One such side attraction survived despite the theme park's ultimate demise: a giant Ferris wheel erected for Emperor Franz Joseph's golden jubilee in 1897. The Riesenrad, as it became known, remains the Prater's landmark. The 108m Rotunde also remained a center of Viennese life for decades after the World's Fair, before succumbing to an electrical fire in 1937.

The fair grounds continued to be used for extravagant, ostentatious mass events: "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West show came in 1890 and 1906, performing in a special arena built for 20,000 spectators. 1913's Adriatic Expo surpassed Gabor Steiner's wildest dreams with its simulated stretch of Dalmatian coast, complete with a full-size steamship. As a last gasp, the propagandistic war expos of 1916 & 1917 still managed, despite desperate shortages, to pull off mock naval battles and realistic large-scale reenactments of trench warfare.

## Exhibitions & Events

### 47 BLUMENCORSO

A throwback to the glory days of the empire, the Prater celebrates its official anniversary date by reviving the Blumencorso, a parade down the Hauptallee in carriages and antique cars decorated with flowers, ending in a spring festival at the Riesenrad.

Apr 9, 13:30-16:00, Hauptallee & Riesenradplatz.  
[praterwien.com](http://praterwien.com)

### 58 MEET ME AT THE PRATER! VIENNESE PLEASURES SINCE 1766

The Wien Museum offers a comprehensive walk through the Prater's entire history, with additional exhibits at its Pratermuseum annex at the Riesenrad. Through Aug 21, Wien Museum & Pratermuseum. [wienmuseum.at](http://wienmuseum.at)

### 11 250 YEARS PRATER & PRATER VARIÉTÉ

Not to be outdone, the Circus & Clown Museum has its own tribute exhibit to the nearby Prater, topping it with a live reenactment of a typical 1890s vaudeville show on World Circus Day. Exhibit opens Mar 31; World Circus Day show: €15, Apr 16, 19:30, Circus & Clown Museum. [circus-clownmuseum.at](http://circus-clownmuseum.at)

### 23 ROADS TO LEISURE ENTERTAINMENT IN THE PRATER AND THE CITY

With the area around the Prater largely a Jewish immigrant neighbourhood, the Jewish Museum takes a closer look at some of the most intriguing historical venues and stars. Through Sept 18, Jewish Museum. [jmw.at](http://jmw.at)

### 15 UTOPIE FILM: IM PRATER

In conjunction with the Wien Museum, a selection of films set in the Prater are shown, including works by Erich von Stroheim and Joseph von Sternberg. Tuesdays in April and May, starting Apr 12, 20:45, Filmmuseum. [filmmuseum.at](http://filmmuseum.at)

PHOTOS: NEXT PAGE: WIENMUSEUM

**Thema:** Prater Wien

**Autor:** k.A.

## CITY LIFE

### DECLINE AND COMEBACK

Mirroring Austria's larger problems, the Prater struggled in the interwar years, suffering from population decline – Vienna lost a quarter of its residents after WWI – and the Great Depression. In 1933, Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss chose the Krieau racetrack as a venue to proclaim his principles of Austrofascism. Then after the Anschluss in 1938, all Jewish businesses were “aryanized,” including a quarter of the Prater’s stands and the Riesenrad. The Second World War brought a brief surge in business as soldiers on leave sought distraction, but came to a fiery end as the amusement park was completely destroyed by incendiary bombs during the Battle of Vienna in the final months of the war, leaving only the steel skeleton of the Riesenrad. Tellingly, the Prater’s landmark was one of the first things to be rebuilt, with repairs beginning almost immediately and normal service (with half of the original 30 gondolas) resuming in 1947, making it a powerful symbol that life was returning to normal. Two years later, Orson Welles took his iconic ride on the Ferris wheel in the movie *The Third Man*, putting the Prater – and Austria – back on the map.

### COMING ATTRACTIONS

In recent years, the Prater has continued to adapt to the needs of the people it serves, and as the city gentrifies, so does the Prater, thanks in large part to the banning of street prostitution, extension of the U2 subway line, and development of prestigious building



Built for the 1873 World’s Fair, the Rotunde held expositions until its 1937 demise.

projects like the new Messe Prater convention center and the University of Economics and Business’ shiny modern campus on the grounds of the old Rotunde. Even surrounding neighbourhoods, such as the formerly seedy Stuwerviertel (named after the pyrotechnic dynasty that settled there 250 years ago) – have been revived. New neighbours have also led to a revived nightlife scene, catering to both the low-brow (the Praterdome, the city’s largest discotheque) and artsy upscale scene (fluc wanne and the Pratersauna, currently undergoing remodelling). As Vienna grows and develops, again approaching its pre-WWI population of over two million, the best years of the Prater may still be ahead. 📍