

GOING SOLO

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CAROL PEREHUDOOF PHOTO

The happy expression of Austria's Empress Elisabeth, or 'Sisi,' in this portrait, above, contradicts the tragic life of the woman who felt trapped by courtly pomp and ceremony and who often sneaked away from her palace to walk the streets of Vienna, where she would buy herself treats such as candied violets, right.

Just the facts

Delve into the world of an empress with a Sisi Ticket that includes admission to the Hofburg museums: the Silver Collection, Sisi Museum and Imperial Apartments as well as the Vienna Furniture Museum and Schonbrunn Palace. Adults \$36. www.hofburg-wien.at/en/plan-your-visit/tickets-tours/sisi-ticket.html

For information on Vienna and Austria visit www.vienna.info and www.austria.info.

Bump up the hip factor of your trip with a stay at a boutique hotel in Vienna's trendy Spittelberg district:

Altstadt Vienna: Contemporary art mixes with Patrician architecture in this seductive funky hotel. Singles start at about \$190, doubles from \$223. Kirchengasse 41, www.altstadt.at Tel: +43 (0) 1 522 66 66

Hotel Rathaus Wine & Design: A wine theme runs throughout this airy hotel with a well-stocked wine lounge and rooms dedicated to top Austrian vintners. Singles start at about \$189, doubles from \$237. Lange Gasse 13, www.hotel-rathaus-wien.at, Tel: +43 (0) 1 400 11 22

Vienna exhibitions trace tragic life of beautiful, melancholic `Sisi'

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Vienna— Retracing the steps of a reluctant empress has led me between the Imperial Palace Hofburg and the Kohlmarkt, down a posh pedestrian street in the city core.

"It's said Sisi would sneak out of the palace and walk this way to Demels to buy candied violets," says Maria, my lively guide. "She was always trying to escape the court."

Beautiful, melancholic and trapped by a life of pomp and protocol, Sisi, a.k.a. the Empress Elisabeth, is the 19th century Lady Di. Born in Bavaria and married to Hapsburg Emperor Franz Joseph at 16, she was an accidental empress. Franz Joseph was meant to marry her older sister, but it was love at first sight with the wrong girl, and in 1854 he and Sisi were married.

With her fresh Liv Tyler looks, penchant for writing dark poetry and loathing of ceremony, Sisi was a free spirit in an ailing, rigid regime.

Her cult status was assured by her assassination in Geneva in 1898 and further bolstered in the 1950s with a trio of mega-popular movies. Today, Sisi-mania continues to grow.

My fascination with Sisi relates to our one shared trait – wanderlust.

"Every ship I see sailing away fills me with the greatest desire to be on it," she once said.

Fine if you're a backpacker but not so easy if you're needed at endless state dinners and under the thumb of a domineering mother-in-law.

Increasingly defiant, Sisi fled Vienna for long periods, citing ill health. The city still lays claim to her, however, and it's easy to tread the Sisi trail.

My first task is to taste the food of empresses, candied violets. Demels, one of Vienna's oldest coffee houses, is famous for its confectionary, though these days it caters more to tourists than the aristocracy. A small box of candied violets costs about \$25, which makes me reconsider playing empress.

Maria, my lady-in-waiting – I mean guide – comes to my rescue, taking me to the nearby gourmet food store Julius Meinl am Graben, where, for \$3, I buy a small handful. Popping a petal in my mouth, the taste is so delicate I feel like a hummingbird sucking nectar.

Back at the palace we head for a trio of museums: the Imperial Silver Collection, the Imperial Apartments and the Sisi Museum.

The Silver Collection displays a telling detail of Sisi's unhappy life. A silver juicer. According to the tag, it was used to make drinks of duck blood and marrow, which, as Sisi battled anorexia, the physicians forced her to drink. As empress food goes, I prefer the violets.

Opened in 2004, the Sisi Museum offers a glimpse into a deeply troubled mind.

Sisi's portraits, clothing and toiletries highlight her obsession with beauty and her mania for exhaustive exercise – years before exhaustive exercise was in vogue.

Her death mask, the file with which she was stabbed in the heart by an Italian anarchist, and lines from her poetry like "I have awakened in a dungeon with chains on my hands," add to the ambiance, while conversely, the connected Imperial Apartments show the rococo luxury in which she lived.

The Vienna Furniture Museum focuses on a different angle of the Sisi story – the camera angle. A permanent exhibition created in 2006 highlights the prominent role that the original imperial furniture played in the "Sissi" movies (which in Germany earned more money than *Gone With the Wind*). Various sets have been recreated, accompanied by clips from the movies.

It's oddly compelling to watch the pretend Sisi, the stunning Austrian actress, Romy Schneider, walk through the very set I'm standing in front of. The role propelled the young actress into superstardom, but typecast her in a prison of her own.

"Sissi sticks to me just like oatmeal," Schneider once complained. Addicted to pills and alcohol, she died at 43.

This empress for a day idea is starting to freak me out. Who needs the yoke of an empress curse? My juicer may not be silver, but it squeezes carrots rather than ducks and my cage, while not gilded, is open. Life as an empress, it seems, is best enjoyed from afar.

Carol Pehudoff's trip was subsidized by the Austria Tourist Office and the Eurail Group.
<http://www.eurailgroup.com>
