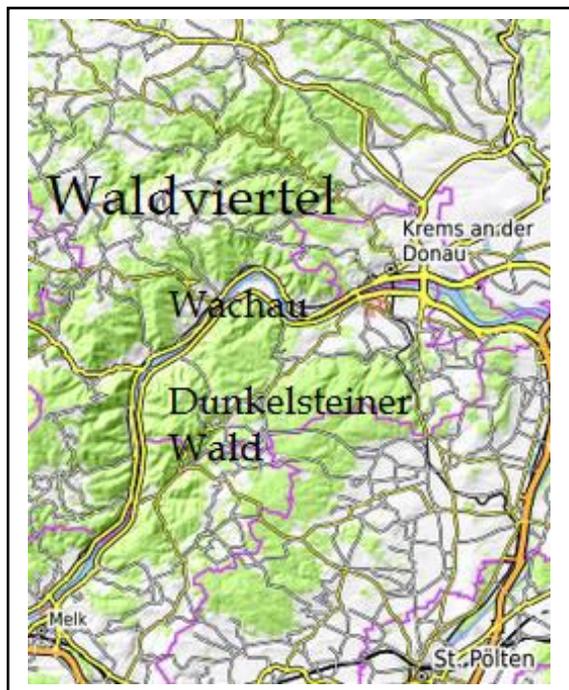


A WALK TO A GLASS OF WINE

Wachau and Waldviertel in a day

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ONE HOUR FROM VIENNA: AN UNDERVALUED WALKER'S PARADISE

If you think about Austria and walking you probably think of the Alps. Few non-natives ever explore Austria north of the Danube. Yet an hour's train ride from Vienna to Krems will take you to the edge of a region with limitless opportunities for easy hill walking: Lower Austria's part of what geologists call the Bohemian Plateau, rolling uplands that were a mighty mountain range well before the Alps existed. It rises from about 500 metres at Krems to just over 1000 metres near the Czech Border. The ascent is very gradual, though, so only two mountains actually feel like mountains: the Grosse Peilstein and the Jauerling.

The uplands cover an area of about one-fourth the size of Wales. Much of it is under mixed forest - pine, oak, birch and spruce - sprinkled with odd-shaped rock formations looking like oversized dolmen or Tolkienesque towers, remnants of the Bohemian Massif. Rough winters and relatively poor soils discourage modern large-scale farming, and one of the great attractions of the region is its 'old fashioned', complex rural landscape. Forest and farmland are crisscrossed by dense networks of tracks where access problems are virtually unheard of.

The plateau is split in two parts, the Waldviertel and the smaller Dunkelsteinerwald (Wald= forest), by a spectacular

gash cut by the Danube millions of years ago: the Wachau. Its steep slopes favour wine growing, tier upon tier of vineyard climbing up to dark forests spilling over the plateau's edge. Dotted along the Danube are picturesque market towns dating back to the Middle Ages, when the river became a major European trading route. With the exception of Krems the river barges now ignore them, but the picturesque character of the Wachau has turned it into a major tourist destination. And the excellent white wines are beginning to attract more than local attention as well.



Narrow fields separated by rows of birch trees, forest all along the horizon – a typical Waldviertel landscape.



'Tolkienesque towers, remnants of the Bohemian Massif'.

PICTURESQUISSIMO

One of the ancient little towns is Weissenkirchen. Its name means white church, and there is a white church alright, a fortified one from the 12th century. It provided refuge for the local population in times of war. After



Weissenkirchen seen from the foot of the Dunkelsteiner Wald, with the Waldviertel plateau behind it.

an early bus from Krems has dropped us off we admire the panorama from the battlements, make a leisurely round of the winding streets with their ancient houses and conclude our efforts with the obligatory Austrian coffee and cake session.

Then it's time for serious work: our walk back to Krems. A ferry takes us across the river, away from the coach-borne crowds, to the start of a series of tracks hugging the foot of the Dunkelsteiner Wald. Uphill, eroded rock towers remind you of the force with which the river broke through the plateau, downhill, there are great views across the river from above the vineyards and orchards around Rossatz.

At Rossatz, we re-cross the Danube. This time the ferry is a flat-bottomed little thing with outboard engines. After an alarming lurch across the fast-flowing Danube it drops us below the walls of the picturesquissimo little town of Dürnstein. At the height of the tourist season you can walk over the heads here. As we have already had a generous helping of medieval, Renaissance and Baroque architecture in Weissenkirchen we skip the sightseeing and head for the rough 300 meter rock 'staircase' that takes you to the plateau.



Dürnstein and the pedestrian/bike ferry.

A 300 METRE ROCK CLIMB



As far as the castle ruin the staircase is very busy as well, but natural selection reduces the average age of the tourists by about two decades compared to Dürnstein's main street. The ruin is only one of the many in the area; the crowds are explained by the fact that Richard the Lionheart was a prisoner of the Duke of Austria here in 1192-93. Info boards tell the story, and there are wonderful views of the river valley.

Info board at the castle ruin.

After leaving the uphill gate of the castle it is suddenly quiet. There is still a stiff climb to the plateau, and the intimate character of Waldviertel landscape doesn't attract fans of the outdoors the way the Alps do.



'There is still a stiff climb to the plateau.'

So it comes as a surprise to find a crowded *Gasthaus*, the Fesslhütte, in the middle of the woods after reaching the top. Until you see the parking lot. It's a roundabout way by car – but of course a lot easier. We stop for a quick drink and disappear into the forest.



Unsporting... The crowd at the Fesslhütte.



'We disappear into the forest.'

BUSHWHACKING TO A BUSCHENSCHANK

There is a thin sprinkling of walkers on the maze of marked tracks above the Fesslhütte. Once you leave those you won't meet a soul – 'bushwhacking' is not part of Austria's outdoor culture. Some people even believe that you are not allowed to leave marked trails. But the law is quite straightforward: unless there are signs (or fences) making it clear that you should keep out you can go wherever you like as long as you keep out of recently planted areas, don't cause damage and don't leave litter.

We follow a pathless ridge above the Danube, first covered in pine, then sparsely clad in oak, which eventually curves down to steep vineyard terraces. On the horizon, a huge hilltop fortress: the ancient monastery of Göttweig. A place well worth a visit: its architecture spans a millennium and on the terrace overlooking the valley you can admire the view while sipping a fine glass of the monastery's own wine.

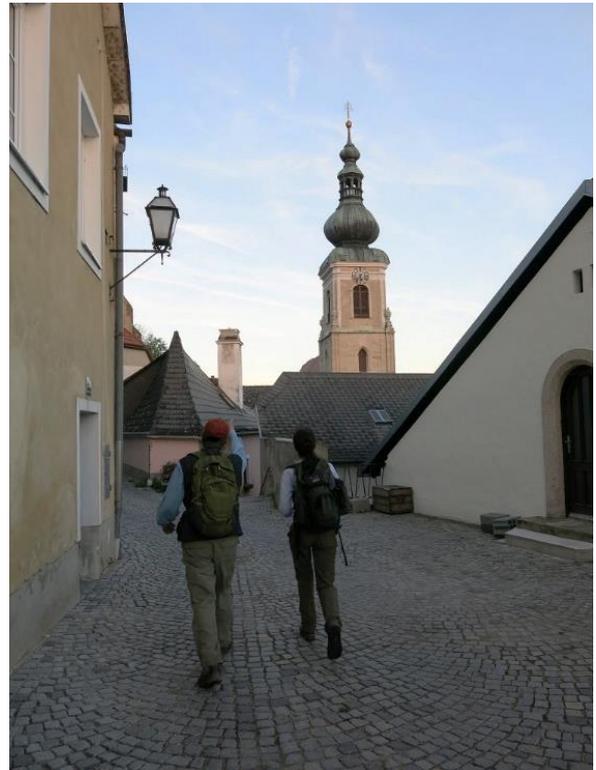


'A pathless ridge above the Danube.'



'On the horizon, a huge hilltop fortress: the ancient monastery of Göttweig.'

We zigzag down through the vineyards to the ancient town of Stein. The cliché 'time has stood still' applies to most of its narrow streets. To close the day, we head for a typical Austrian institution which has also seen little change over time: a *Heuriger* or *Buschenschank*, a place where a vintner sells his wine – and only *his* wine.



Stein. 'The cliché "time has stood still" applies to most of its narrow streets.'

A VENERABLE AUSTRIAN INSTITUTION



The *Heuriger* has its origins in an 18th century law allowing a farming family to sell anything they make from the premises. Apart from wine there is usually a buffet as well. The character of these places varies widely – you may find yourself in a cellar, a tractor shed, a courtyard or an orchard – and so does their oenological and culinary sophistication. But they are all family businesses and an authentic *Heuriger* will have limited opening days and hours, as it can only sell what the generally small vineyard produces. The name derives from *heuer* – this year: originally, only new wine was sold. The alternative name, *Buschenschank*, means bush-taproom and refers to the pine branch advertising the establishment; alternatively, a straw or metal wreath may serve that purpose. In rural areas they are centres of social life, where the locals congregate for Sunday afternoon drinks accompanied by a *Jause*. The word translates as snack, but you should see the trenchers of cold cuts that are consumed.



We find a *Heuriger* with a terrace overlooking the ancient roofs of Stein and order a bottle of Veltliner, a typical dry white wine of the region. Around us, the quiet murmur of other customers – these are places to let the time pass over a glass of wine, not boozers. With five different nationalities – American, Dutch, Macedonian, Russian and Uzbek – we see the world from multiple perspectives, but our conversation has a common theme: our love of the outdoors (and a good bottle).

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Walks in the area: This walk is a composite of walks made by the VIC Hiking and Mountaineering Club. There is a vast potential of interesting walks in the area – see the maps and guides.

Maps/guides: Österreichische Karte 1:50.000, sheet NM 33-11-17 Krems. This is the topographic service map; it can be viewed on line: <http://www.austrianmap.at/amap>. The Freytag & Berndt and Kompass maps of the region cover a larger surface but have less detail. Walks similar to this one can be found in the Rother and Kompass guides for the Wachau. All maps and guides are available from Freytag & Berndt in the Wallnerstrasse, Wien 1.

Accessibility of the area: Krems is conveniently located for day trips from Vienna (hourly train service from Heiligenstadt station, trip takes just under an hour). Regular buses through the Wachau from Krems. See <http://fahrplan.oebb.at> and <http://www.postbus.at> for train and bus services (English versions available).

Accommodation: You won't need it for the present walk, but further exploration of the area is recommended! Check the tourism section of the municipal web sites. Farm B&B (Urlaub am Bauerhof) is often very good value for money in the Waldviertel.

Season: Any time of the year. The Dürnstein 'staircase' can be tricky or unpassable in snow, but there are no exposed sections.