

Soulful Salzburg

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ABDUL KARIM HANIF



As a frequent traveller, I've been fortunate enough to have visited a number of cities across the globe. While there have been a few memorable journeys to destinations that have found a special place in my heart, Austria's alpine city of Salzburg really connected with my soul. Its baroque architecture of the town centre 'Altstadt' with lush green towering hills surrounding the city, offer a serene atmosphere with a twist of elegance.

Translated as 'Salt Fortress,' Salzburg derives its name from the numerous salt mines located in the outskirts. The town's settlement is around the 'Salzach river' that flows through the city serving as its main artery. Until the 19th century, it had a played a role as the traditional route for vessels to transport salt through the waterway, prior to it being replaced by the railway network.

Its historical town centre has also been labelled as a UNESCO Heritage site. Apart from being the birthplace of Mozart and the backdrop of the popular musical *Sound of Music*, the alpine surroundings of this Austrian region continue to be a magnet for adventure seekers from the Middle East. A fun fact worth noting is that prior to it becoming part of Austria in 1816, Salzburg was an independent country, hence it is worth dedicating at least a few nights to discover this urban gem.

Additionally, fans of the popular energy drink 'Red Bull' would also be delighted to know that Salzburg is the birthplace of the beverage and the brand currently owns the local football team FC Salzburg.

The fourth-largest city of Austria ticks most of the boxes of what most explorers would want from a town. It carries historical significance, can be explored on foot, attractions tend to be light on the wallet and most importantly, safe at all times. With Covid-19 restrictions finally subsiding, there is a wave of optimism in Salzburg as well as its surrounding towns and hamlets. Musicians are back on stage, smiles have returned on the faces of shop owners, who are now look forward to welcoming international visitors.

In addition to the river, the other unmissable landmark is Fortress Hohensalzburg. Its construction dates back to 1077 and continues to be one of the largest fully preserved medieval castles across the world. If I have been able to convince you to travel here, you'd spend most of your time between the castle and the river whilst navigating through the narrow alleys and streets of Altstadt.

Courtesy of direct flights from Dubai and to the country's capital Vienna, Austria is an ideal hub



from where one could venture out to other parts of the continent, either by road or using its rail network. Keeping the Covid-19 protocols in mind, here's what you can do to make the most of your trip to Salzburg.

COVID-19 entry rules

Since May 19, 2022 travel to Austria has become similar to the pre-pandemic times. Travellers are no longer required to show proof of vaccination or present a negative PCR test on arrival. The restrictions were further lifted on June 1 this year, when the country ended the requirements of wearing a face mask indoors and even while using public transport. The rules differ for other neighbouring countries such as Germany, where you'd have to mask up as soon as the train crosses into their territory.

Useful tip

It is worth investing in the Salzburg card to secure free admissions or discounted entry into the museums as well as free access of local buses. Tipping at least 10 per cent of the bill is an unspoken rule in the town, so be prepared to have some loose change on you. If you intend to venture over to Munich for a day trip, they are currently running discounted train tickets for EUR9 per passenger for unlimited travel within a German region for a month.

Where to stay

Staying along or close to the Salzach river would be your best bet to be able to move around the city on foot and catch the best views. I based myself at Hotel Sacher Salzburg, which is located in the heart of the city's historical neighbourhood of Makartplatz. It is right on the river's bank and one cannot go wrong with the area, considering it is also where the renowned composer Mozart had chosen to live.

There are also a number of premium hotel brands in the surrounding towns, such as Kitzbuhel, though Zell am See has all that one would expect from a relaxing mountain retreat. I stayed at the Grand Hotel Zell am See located right on the shore and is one of the most in demand hotel amongst travellers from the GCC. The hotel's F&B team also ensures that halal food is on offer for their Middle Eastern guests.



A



B

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Closest international airports: Salzburg Airport W. A. Mozart, Munich International Airport and Vienna International Airport

Flight duration from the UAE: 5-6 hours

Visa requirements: Schengen visa

Covid-19 requirements: All restrictions lifted from June 1, 2022

Famous for: Sound of Music, birthplace of Mozart and Red Bull

Adding to its charm is House No.9 'Mozart Geberthaus' in which the Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born, way back in 1756. For an entry price of EUR12 or a one-time admission with a 'Salzburg-Card' visitors will get a glimpse into what life was like back in the 18th Century and how he spent much of his childhood and youth in the building.

Mirabell Palace

Built in 1610, Schloss Mirabell Palace is one of the landmarks that have featured in the *Sound of Music*. This is an ideal spot on the other side of the river to spend the afternoon admiring the gardens, which also offers a picture-perfect backdrop of the city. It has now become a popular venue for weddings and conferences, whilst also housing the Mayor's office and other municipal entities.

Fortress Hohensalzburg

This is the most pictured landmark of Salzburg and is the unmissable attraction. It also serves as the best vantage point for an aerial view of the city. It is one of the largest preserved fortresses in central Europe, where one can spend a couple of hours exploring the three museums. The Salzburg

card allows free access on the funicular to transport visitors up the hill to reach the fortress. The castle was built to protect the prince bishops and the principality from potential attacks, though no army found success in conquering the fort.

Zell am See

Located around 80km away from Salzburg city, along the shores of Lake Zell and close to the glacier Kitzsteinhorn is the must-visit town of Zell am See. A popular retreat amongst holidaymakers from the GCC region, one will feel at home in this tranquil town. From hotel staff to coffee shops and grocery stores in the locality, most will have an Arabic speaker present to cater to the requirements of the Middle Eastern visitors.

One can hop on a train ride of an hour and half to the lakeside-town, which promises to treat its visitors with breath-taking views of the alpine surroundings. Though it might come across as a nice day trip destination, it is worth spending a couple of nights here to thoroughly explore the sights and sounds of this mountainous territory. It is highly recommend to either drive here from Salzburg or to rent a car from one of the local outlets to make the most of the time here.

A) For best buys and souvenirs head to Getreidegasse; B) Find a picture-perfect backdrop at Schloss Mirabell Palace; C) Kitzsteinhorn hosts the highest point of Salzburg at an elevation of over 3,000 metres; D) The tranquil town of Zell am See with alpine surroundings; E) Fortress Hohensalzburg: landmark of the city



C



D



E

Activities for all

Zell am See usually attracted those looking for a ski adventure and over the years it has become a popular retreat during the summers to become an all-season destination. Zell am See is located on the base of mountain Schmittenhöhe, which is an ideal spot for hiking amidst the exceptional views of the region.

For the best views and a fun time together with your loved ones or family, the 'Top of Salzburg' on Kitzsteinhorn is the place to be. It is Salzburg's only glacier ski resort. If one's time is limited, then a trip up the mountain to reach the viewing platform 3,000 metres above is a must-try. It is Salzburg's highest-situated panorama platform. The high quality transport infrastructure and the facilities on offer will ensure a comfortable adventurous experience for all.

Overall, in addition to its dreamy surroundings, Salzburg state is a perfect blend of culture, music and exceptional aesthetics to make it an ideal getaway for travel enthusiasts from this part of the world. **W**

abdulkarim@khaleejtimes.com