



As the Danube River runs west from the Austrian city of Vienna it passes through some of the most picturesque terrain in Europe. For over 35,000 years people have been living on these shores. They were originally attracted to the neighborhood because of the mild climate and the ideal conditions for farming. The ancient Romans occupied the area and when Christianity became the official religion of Rome the locals slowly gave up their pagan beliefs and over the centuries built dozens of monasteries and abbeys on the hills.

KLOSTERNEUBURG ABBEY

The ideal way to pass through this part of Austria is to travel on one of the river boats.

The Klosterneuburg Abbey is just a few miles up river from Vienna and has been home to a group of Augustinian clergy since 1133, making Klosterneuburg one of the oldest and also one of the richest monasteries in Austria.

The Augustinians are members of the Roman Catholic Church who base their lives on the Rules of St. Augustine. Starting in the 11th century, they were the first religious order of men to combine the common activities of daily life with their clerical work.

The legend of the founding of Klosterneuburg describes Leopold Babenberg, a member of the German nobility and the military governor of the province and his wife Agnes stepping onto the balcony of his castle at the conclusion of their wedding ceremony. A sudden gust of wind blew Agnes' veil from her head and swept it into the

meadowland below. Immediately, Leopold's servants began searching for the veil but couldn't find it. Leopold then vowed that he would build a monastery on the spot where the veil was discovered. Nine years later he was out hunting. Suddenly his dogs began barking. When Leopold caught up with them they were yapping under an elderberry tree which had the veil caught in its branches. Leopold remembered his vow and built Klosterneuburg Abbey.

Nice story but historically not even close. Legends, however, are not designed to teach historical facts—they work on a bigger canvas. Legends about the founding of churches and places of pilgrimage often deal with the recovery of something that was lost. They also introduce the relationship between God and certain important people. This story shows that Agnes had an essential role in the founding of the abbey and that God was in control of the events. Historic accuracy doesn't count.



THE VERDUN ALTAR

What does count at Klosterneuburg is the Verdun Altar, which is one of the world's most important medieval works of art. The altar was produced by Nicholas Verdun who worked on it for ten years starting in 1171. It presents religious history in three layers that compare similar events at different times. It's an unusual idea that was probably developed at the abbey.

There are three horizontal rows. The top row represents scenes from the time before the law,

THE SYMBOLISM OF LAMB, FISH, BREAD, EGGS, AND WINE

Bread and wine are two of the most sacred symbols in Christianity. At the Last Supper, Christ took the bread and said, "This is my body, eat this in memory of me" and of the wine he said, "This is my blood, drink this in memory of me."

Wine was the basis of Christ's first miracle. Christ was a guest at a marriage feast that was running out of wine. His mother asked him to do something about it. By a miracle he turns the water into wine and saved the wedding.

Fish is an early symbol for Christ. The letters of the Greek word for fish formed an acronym for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior". And several of Christ's miracles were related to fish. There is one where a group of fishermen are failing to find any fish. Christ tells them to drop their nets again and this time the nets come up filled with fish. Christ encourages them to follow him, saying they will become 'fishers of men'.

Fish and bread appear together in Matthew's gospel. Christ is speaking to a large and hungry crowd of 5,000 and tells the Apostles to feed them. They report that they have only five loaves of bread and two fish. Yet everyone gets fed — the miracle of 'loaves and fishes.'



The egg is a symbol of Christ's resurrection and appears throughout Europe in connection with Easter. It speaks of eternity since the shape of an egg has no beginning and no end.

The lamb is a symbol of Christ and it appears in three different forms. First as the lamb in a wounded state, representing Christ's crucifixion. Second in a triumphant state as Christ resurrected. Lamb is always the food of choice at Easter. And finally as Christ carrying a lamb on his shoulders as the Good Shepherd caring for his flock—carrying us to heaven on his shoulders.



which is seen as the time before Moses.

At the bottom are scenes from the time under the law—the time between Moses and Christ.

In the middle are a series of panels with scenes from the time of grace—the Christian age.

In the top row Joseph is cast into an empty well by his brothers and left to die—yet he survives and becomes the savior of his people in Egypt. In the



lowest row the prophet Jonah is swallowed by a sea-monster but is then released unharmed to proclaim God's word. In the center strip, Jesus is entombed only to rise three days later.

Three stories with similar themes—entrapment, escape, and a community saved through the will of God.

THE IMPERIAL APARTMENTS

Klosterneuburg is a religious community but from its very beginning it had a close relationship to the rulers of Austria. So close that the emperor even kept an apartment in the abbey—nothing like his big place in town but not bad.

Klosterneuburg was designed as a summer residence for Charles VI—a place where the royal family would stay for months at a time. This was very different from the royal apartments at most other monasteries which were planned for very short visits. Klosterneuburg combines royal splendor with domestic comfort.

In spite of the fact that it was a summer residence, every room was built with an elaborate stove, just in case the air on a cool summer evening was too chilly. The stoves were operated from the corridor so the royal inhabitants wouldn't be disturbed by the servants.

The detailing is elegant—stucco ceilings by Italian craftsmen, carved and gilded doors, paintings of

Austrian Monasteries

the Emperor Charles and his wife Elizabeth Christine. The ceiling in the dining room depicts King Solomon giving a banquet for the Queen of Sheba, a banquet designed to impress her with his wealth and wisdom. The Emperor liked to think of himself as a new Solomon.



CHEERS

The Klosterneuburg Abbey has the largest and oldest wine estate in Austria. Documents show that the monks at Klosterneuburg were drinking their own wine as far back as 1136, which happened to be an excellent year for whites but only so-so for the reds.

Their present day cellars can be visited as part of a special tour in combination with a tasting. Wine is a serious business here.

The abbey has its own retail shop. Or you can order on-line: stift-klosterneuburg.at. Welcome to the 21st century.

THE BACHER IN MAUTERN

As you travel west along the Danube you will come to the small town of Mautern which was originally founded by the Romans during the first century AD. Mautern has become well-known among European food lovers because it is home to the restaurant Land-haus Bacher, which is rated as one of the great restaurants of Austria.

The reason for its outstanding reputation is Lisl Wagner-Bacher who took over the restaurant from her father in the early 80s. She is a self-taught chef who does the shopping and most of the cooking.



When we arrived at the restaurant, Lisl and her family were planning their seasonal menu. Her daughters, Susanne and Christina and Christina's 10 day old baby Amelie were involved in the process. So was her husband Klaus and her soon to be son-in-law and kitchen chef Thomas Dorfer.

We started with her signature appetizer. An egg is soft boiled for three minutes—peeled—dipped in flour—dipped in egg wash—coated with breadcrumbs and deep fried for about 90 seconds. A little sour cream goes on a dish. A puree of potatoes. The egg. And a heaping tablespoon of caviar.



Main course was sliced loin of venison and three kinds of celery.

And for dessert she made a cheese soufflé.

Lisl's husband Klaus is also in charge of the wine cellar which houses an extensive collection of great Austrian wines.

Continue down river from the town of Mautern and you will pass the ruins of the castle at Durnstein. During the Third Crusade to the Holy Land, which took place at the end of the 12th century, Richard the Lionhearted insulted Duke Leopold V by taking down Leopold's banner during an attack.

In the course of Richard's return trip to England he had to pass through Leopold's neighborhood. In order to avoid being discovered by his new enemy he disguised himself, but neglected to take off his royal ring. He was spotted, captured and held in Durnstein castle until he was ransomed.

MELK ABBEY

A little further down river and you arrive at Melk, one of the world's most extraordinary abbeys. The



town of Melk was founded as a Roman garrison at the point where the Melk River joins up with the Danube about 50 miles west of Vienna. In the

year 976 the Emperor of Germany chose the Babenberg family to rule the neighborhood which they did from a series of fortified castles. The castle at Melk was their most important stronghold and became the cradle of Austrian history.

The Babenbergs decided to bury their ancestors at Melk and to make sure that the family burial site

was cared for properly they set up a monastery inside the castle. The Babenbergs ruled for just over 100 years, at which point the castle and the surrounding lands were turned into a Benedictine Abbey and Benedictine monks have lived and worked here ever since.

For centuries Melk was able to support itself with taxes from the local peasants and a profitable agricultural program on its own land. These days, however, the major source of income is tourism.

An abbey is a church or a cathedral under the direction of an abbot or an abbess who is elected to the post. The abbey is actually one of a complex of buildings that serve the needs of a self-contained religious community—a monastery or a convent.

THE RULES OF ST. BENEDICT

Melk is a Benedictine Abby and follows the rules of St. Benedict. Benedict founded the earliest European abbey in

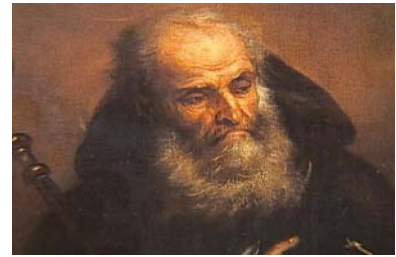


529 in Italy. His ideas on how a monastery should be set up and operated have become the basis for western monastic life.

His writings are called The Rules of St. Benedict and so great was their influence on the Christianization of Europe that in 1964, Pope Paul VI proclaimed him the Patron Saint of Europe.

St. Benedict had a clear appreciation of human nature and how to balance intellectual activities with physical work, communal prayers and private reading. He stressed the importance of

understanding that everyone was different and that the strengths and weaknesses of each individual must be recognized and appreciated. St. Benedict also believed that it was important to always work in the same area—to be in a fixed location. He totally rejected the idea of the movable monk.



Even though his “rules” were important, from time to time they had to be balanced by love and there is a legend of how St. Benedict learned this lesson. He had a twin sister named Scholastica and as she grew close to her death he left his monastery to visit her. As nightfall approached he decided to return to his monastery because his rules required that monks must not spend the night outside of their abbey. Scholastica begged him to stay, but he said the rules would not allow it. Then Scholastica asked God for help and he responded with a huge storm that prevented St. Benedict from leaving. Benedict got the point.

St. Benedict also believed that it was essential for his monks to be able to read and write and to teach reading and writing to others. Shortly after Melk Abbey was founded a school was established. The abbey still operates a school with over 1,000 students who come here from all over the world.

PRAY, WORK AND READ

During the 14th century Melk Abbey was enlarged and fortified and during the 1700s it was rebuilt and turned into one of the finest Baroque structures in Europe.



WHERE TO EAT



LAND-HAUS BACHER RESTAURANT

A-3512 Mautern / Wachau
Südtirolerplatz 2, Austria
TEL: +43 (0) 27 32 82.937
WWW.LANDHAUS-BACHER.AT

St. Benedict's motto was pray, work and read and the physical structure of Melk is designed to serve these functions.

The Rule of St. Benedict requires that nothing be more important than the worship service and the Melk Abbey church clearly reflects that instruction. Work on the church began at the beginning of the 1700s, under the direction of Abbot Berthold Dietmayr. Dietmayr decided that the subject matter of the artwork should be based on the idea that "Without a just battle there is no victory." And that theme is reflected throughout the interior.

St. Peter and St. Paul in a farewell handshake as they set off to meet their deaths—their final battle. Christ crowned with thorns, battles through suffering to glory. A panel shows the woman of the Apocalypse who battled the dragon. The entire area around the altar presents one idea—God's people battling on the road to salvation. The design reaches its peak in the dome. We see the heavenly Jerusalem—the great victory that follows



a just battle.

The abbey library is one of the world's finest with over 100,000 books including many ancient handwritten and illuminated manuscripts. By the early 1200s Melk had its own writing room which produced hundred of colorfully illustrated books and was probably the inspiration for Umberto Eco's medieval murder mystery—"The Name of the Rose".

THE MELK ABBEY MUSEUM

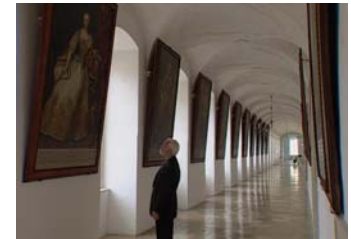
In 2001 the Melk Monastery Museum was built to illustrate the history of the abbey and help visitors understand the forces that shaped its past.

The most precious treasure and the holiest relic in the monastery is the Melk Cross. It contains a fingernail-size piece of the cross of Christ that was given to the abbey in 1040. The gold screws that hold the two sides of the cross together are the oldest known screws with a right-hand thread which is now the norm.

There is also the lower jaw of St. Coloman. Coloman was the son of an Irish king who was martyred near Vienna in 1012. He was on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but because of his strange language and clothing he was suspected of being a spy. He was imprisoned, tortured and hung. Almost immediately a series of miracles began taking place and the local population began to view Coloman as a saint. For openers the dead elder tree from which he was hung suddenly came to life.

The Babenbergs heard about these miracles and had Coloman's body brought to the castle for a ceremonial funeral. The Babenbergs knew that having the body of a saint in their castle would be considered as divine confirmation of their authority as rulers. Coloman became Austria's first Patron Saint.

In the next room is a painting — St. Benedict with the Cup of Poison. It illustrates one of the most famous stories about him. Before Benedict founded his own monastery he had been elected head of an existing community of monks.



However, his strict approach was more than the other monks had bargained for and a few of them decided to poison Benedict, but as Benedict blessed the wine in the cup, the cup exploded and his life was saved.



The museum represents all the periods in the history of Melk—the good, the bad and the bizarre. Some of the more bizarre stuff came in during the second half of the 1700s when everything was being subjected to what, at the time, was considered to be logical behavior.

In 1784, Emperor Joseph II reached a rational high point or low point depending on your view point when he announced that all coffins were to be reusable. His logical mind concluded that the Lord intended human bodies to return to the earth—dust to dust and ashes to ashes, and a coffin only stood in the way of the process. He also didn't like the idea of perfectly good wood being allowed to rot uselessly.

Once the reusable coffin was lowered into the grave a pulley opened a trap door in the bottom and the body remained in the earth while the coffin was pulled up to be used again.

As much as Joseph loved his reusable coffin, in the end he decided that it wasn't quite right for Emperors. You see there weren't that many Emperors so in his case it would be an inefficient piece of equipment.

THE TEACHERS ART

The Melk Abbey museum also contains some of the greatest religious art of the late middle ages. These paintings were produced as works that could teach the bible to people who could not read, which was the case for the majority of the population.

An excellent example is the painting of "The Twelve-Year-Old Christ in the Temple". Mary and



Joseph are looking for him and find him with the scribes. Jesus is sitting on a "teacher's chair" on the same level as the highest teacher symbolizing that what Jesus says is as important as what the scribe has to say. In addition, the scribe is using a book. Jesus needs no book—he is saying what God has taught him. In the lower right hand corner is a scribe who has closed his book. All the scribe needs now is the wisdom of Jesus. Paintings like these were explained to the viewers and thereafter each time they were seen, the message was remembered and understood.

The abbeys of lower Austria are still teaching tools. They can remind a visitor that for thousands of years people have struggled to lead a more meaningful life and their belief in a superior being or higher force has been an essential part of that struggle.



TO LEARN MORE . . .

AUSTRIA TOURIST BOARD

TEL: 212.944.6880

FAX: 212.730.4568

EMAIL: TRAVEL@AUSTRIA.INFO

WWW.AUSTRIA-TOURISM.AT

MELK ABBEY

BENEDIKTINERSTIFT MELK

KULTUR - TOURISMUS

ABT BERTHOLD DIETMAYR STRASSE 1

A - 3390 MELK, AUSTRIA

TEL: +43 (0) 2752.55.225

WWW.STIFTMELK.AT/ENGLISH

DDSG BLUE DANUBE RIVER CRUISES

WWW.DDSG-BLUE-DANUBE.AT

KLOSTERNEUBURG ABBEY

STIFTSPLATZ 1

A-3400 KLOSTERNEUBURG, AUSTRIA

TEL: +43 (0) 2243.411.0

WWW.STIFT-KLOSTERNEUBURG.AT/ENGLISH/