

INNSBRUCK – THE ERSTWHILE CENTRE OF AUSTRIAN EMPIRE

Innsbruck in Austria is one of the most beautiful cities of Europe that is completely surrounded by the majestic Alps

WORDS NISHA JHA & R VASUDEVAN

INNSBRUCK, THE FIFTH LARGEST city in Austria, is the capital of the heavenly Tyrol region and has been one of the wealthiest cities during its prime in the medieval period and even now the old town bears evidence of its imperial history.

It was almost the beginning of autumn and a few leaves here and there had started changing colour. Mornings were chilly but we decided it was perhaps the best time

to visit the scenic Innsbruck as the higher reaches of the mountains had a fresh coat of snow.

We always find it exhilarating to explore any city that boasts of many centuries of history, by walking through the old quarters and Innsbruck was no exception. It helps us to imbibe the ambience and the character. Following are some of the must visit places in the historic old town of Innsbruck. Many houses here are over 500 years old.



THE GOLDEN ROOF OR GOLDENES DACHL

Innsbruck literally means bridge over the river Inn and this bridge has been a major connection for trade and communication between the north and the south, even during the fifth century Roman empire. This bridge has been on the coat-of-arms of the city for the last 800 years or so.

However, Innsbruck, began to flourish only when Maximilian I, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, set up his base here in the late 15th century. He built the Golden Roof as a symbol of his power and wealth and also to mark his wedding to his second wife. It soon became the talk of this part of Europe and is now one of the famous icons of the city.

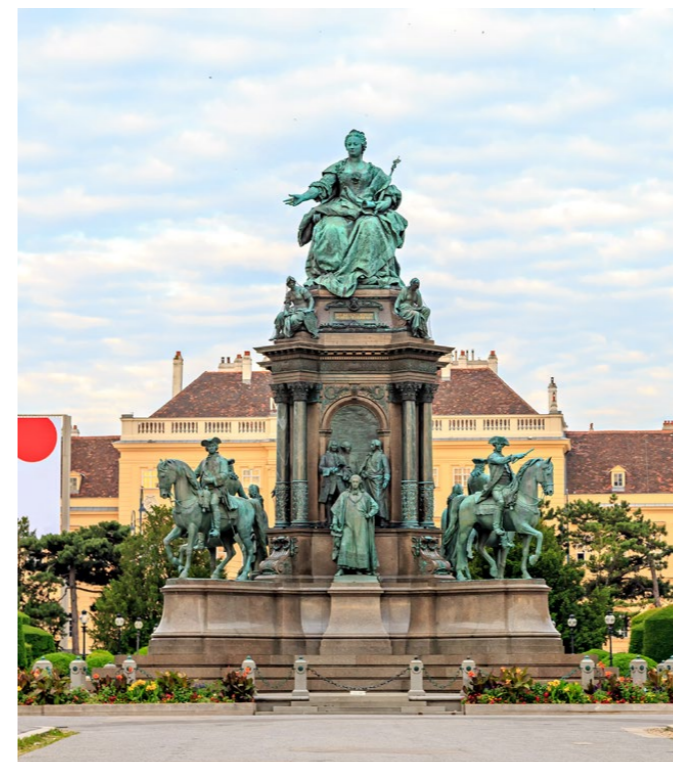
Golden roof is actually a canopy over the balcony of this house meant for the royalty and the roof is decorated with more than 2,657 glittering gilded copper shingles. The balcony served as the royal box to sit and enjoy festivities, tournaments and entertainment on the streets. The facade is decorated with engraved coat-of-arms of the various regions of the empire and also many beautifully and intricately painted frescoes depicting tournaments, court jesters, dancing, acrobatics and other forms of entertainment.

IMPERIAL PALACE, THE HOFBURG

The Imperial Palace of Innsbruck is the only palace of cultural significance which is not located in Vienna. The original structure was built in the 15th century and has undergone several changes. The current structure is about 250 years old.

It now houses five themed museums. Maria Theresa's rooms, Empress Elisabeth's apartment from the 19th century, Imperial furniture museum, ancestral gallery and a painting gallery. This gives a glimpse of how the royalty lived in their heyday.

The palace also has impressive courtyards, a couple of chapels and a beautifully manicured garden just outside.



EMPTY TOMB OF EMPEROR MAXIMILIAN

Towards the end of his life, he had a morbid fear of death, probably after an accident while riding a horse. So much so that during his last few years, Maximilian instructed his entourage to carry his coffin wherever he went. He had also minutely planned the elaborate design of his tomb too. However, when death arrived, he was buried in his family castle in Wiener Neustadt as per his wish. Unfortunately, there was not enough space to build the elaborate tomb as conceived by the emperor.

So a cenotaph was built in the Hofkirche (Court Church), as per the original plan in Innsbruck. In fact the whole purpose of this church was to house the huge memorial for the emperor. In fact, the cenotaph occupies the center of the nave. The memorial includes a larger-than-life black marble statue of the emperor kneeling with folded hands, as if to ask to be forgiven, set on a high pedestal. The hall is lined with 28 huge bronze statues of past kings, queens and heroes watching over the empty tomb. There is one of King Arthur too!

GIRLS' SCHOOL BY MARIA THERESA

A few generations down the line came the famous Maria Theresa, Queen of Austria, Hungary, Bohemia, Croatia and above all, a visionary! She brought about several reforms in many fields including education all over Austria.

We were with our Austrian friend, on a side street, who suddenly opened a nondescript door and ducked into it and beckoned us to do the same. We were inside a beautiful wooden building, many floors high. This was the school built by Maria Theresa only for girls. This was in the 18th century. In those times it was quite unheard of to have a public school for girls. It was perhaps the first girls' school anywhere in the world.

GOLDENER ADLER GASTHOF (GOLDEN EAGLE INN)

How about staying in a hotel in which Mozart once stayed with his father? Golden Eagle Inn is said to be the oldest surviving hotel of Innsbruck and is 630 years old. It was so popular that anyone who was rich and famous stayed here when in Innsbruck. The room in which Mozart stayed is available for booking too!

Its customers include Jean Paul Sartre, Goethe, Maria Von Trapp (Sound of Music fame), several kings, dukes and barons.

Now it's a luxury hotel with all modern amenities and is just a stone's throw from the Golden Roof.



STADTTURM OR THE CITY TOWER

The 51-metre high city tower has been serving as the watchtower or guard tower since the 16th century. This manned watchtower was used to alert people and the King of any impending danger from enemies, fire or weather.

It is older than Golden Roof by a few decades. The lookout gallery offers a 360-degree panoramic view of the old city of Innsbruck, with most of the building maintaining their antiquity. You might see 4 wrought iron gargoyles just under the observation gallery. During the initial days the lower part also doubled up as a prison.

It is said that this was manned till, as recently as, 1960 and the tower warden used to stay under the cupola.

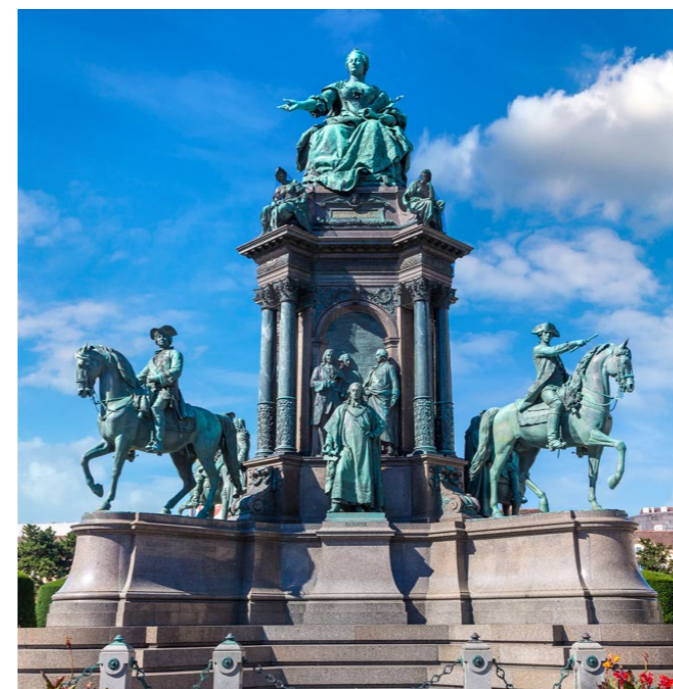
SWAROVSKI STORE

After seeing some of the architectural and historic gems of old town Innsbruck, it is time to shop for some real gems and jewelry! Who has not heard of Swarovski?

A Swarovski Jewelry store is close to the Golden Roof and is very well stocked. There is no one to match their crystal glassware, chandeliers, luminaires, jewels and accessories. They also make glasses for telescopes binoculars. Their collection of crystal animals are world famous. If you have time then a half day visit to Wattens Crystal World is a must. This is where Swarovski's factory and museum is located and the experience is absolutely fantastic. There is a bigger store there and believe me, Indians love this place!

TRIUMPHFORTE OR THE TRIUMPHAL ARCH

There are several old gorgeous buildings along the Maria Thersa Street. A couple of notable ones are the Helbling House that looks like a well decorated cake and a building called hospital church.



DON'T FORGET TO PICK UP SOME TYROLEAN HONEY AND A BOTTLE OF SCHNAPPS, A FRUITY ALCOHOL. INNSBRUCK HAS SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE AND IS A DESTINATION FOR ALL SEASONS

The Victory Arch is located at the other end of the street. For a minute it did remind us of Paris, somehow!

It has a happy and a sad occasion attached to it all in a span of a few days. Maria Theresa built this on the occasion of the marriage of her son, who would later be the Emperor Leopold II. The Arch has bas-relief of all the family members including the bride, the Spanish princess. However, during multi-day celebrations Maria's husband, Francis Stephen died which completely shattered Maria Theresa and it is said she was never the same again.

GRASSMAYR BELL FOUNDRY

Grassmayr has been making bells for over 400 years and they still do. It is also the oldest family run business of Austria which is still in business.

The museum offers a peep into the history of bell making craftsmanship and skills required for producing high quality bells. Now they are selling bells to as far as Philippines and Japan in the East and North and South America in the West. In short, their bells are sought after worldwide.

Some of their notable bells that are still being used are, the oldest bell in Italy cast in 1635, the 6 bells of Romanian Salvation Cathedrals bells, the largest of which is about 3 metres high and 3 metres in diameter weighing 25 tonnes with a thickness of 27 cms! This is probably world's largest free swinging church bell.

World's largest tubular bell is in Aarhus, Denmark. A large bell to commemorate Pope Francis visit to the Philippines. Most bells in this region is a product of Grassmayrs foundry.

CONCLUSION

What this article has shown you is just the historical aspect of the old town area. Innsbruck is known as the city of maximum number of ski resorts. There are 9 of them and there is a free bus that takes the skiers to the cable cars or funiculars.

Innsbruck also boasts of the best ski jump slope at Bergisel. They have hosted several world ski jump championships. There are also gardens, a zoo dedicated to alpine animals, a cable railway museum and so on. Don't forget to pick up some Tyrolean honey and a bottle of Schnapps, a fruity alcohol. Innsbruck has something for everyone and is a destination for all seasons. 🇦🇹