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Austria's capital serves up delicious regional wines, sausages

By John Bordsen
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What's it like to live in a far-off place most of us see only on a vacation? Foreign Correspondence is an interview with someone who has lived in a spot you may want to visit.

Lorri Compton, 45, works for the Magazine Training Institute, a missionary publishing organization, in Vienna, Austria. She has lived there for nine years and grew up in New York State.

Q. Wien ("Veen") is German for "Vienna." Do people there eat wieners? What about those stubby, canned wieners we call Vienna sausages?

A. Wieners meaning hot dogs? Not really. There are all kinds of sausages here, and all have special names. There's something kind of like a hot dog: They take a torpedo roll and stuff a foot-long sausage into it, using a tube that puts a hole in the roll. I think it's called a "hot dog." It's not traditional here; it's a foreign food from America.

It's more common now to walk around eating food. In days gone by, people didn't eat with their hands and didn't eat on the street. In Austria, that's becoming more popular, especially in larger cities that are popular with tourists.

I've never seen Vienna sausages here.

Q. Do they have supermarkets? What are they like?

A. They're here and are really large now. People used to shop in tiny markets, and there are still many that just have groceries. Some have a bakery and prepared things, both frozen and fresh. Many have a deli because it's common to eat fresh meats and cheeses here.

Now we're getting larger supermarkets that have rows with cosmetics and stuff, and a lot more frozen foods they didn't have before.

Another thing they didn't have until a few years ago was celery. Now I can find most everything I need.

They have grocery carts, but you have to rent them, like at an Aldi's in America; you put a euro in to rent the cart. I have a little chip I use that's the same size as a euro: They sell you the chip and you reuse it.

You also have to bag your own groceries.

Q. Is food expensive?

A. The euro is strong now; groceries cost just a little more than in the States. But they're more expensive in nearby countries like Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

Q. The Vienna area is famed for pastries. What are those shops like?

A. Every town has one that sells pastries and coffee; it's a big thing to go to a cafe. There are no free coffee refills, though. Coffee costs about \$4, though you can find it cheaper.

You linger over it _ it's an occasion, as is dining out. You go to the cafe to spend some time.

Yes, the pastries are good. The cakes are amazing! And I never ate good bread until I had it here. There are many different kinds, many with whole grain and lots of seeds, including pumpkin, sunflower and bran. It's not Wonder Bread.

Q. Where do you live?

A. South about 40 minutes, in a suburb called Guntramsdorf. It's right in the middle of a grape-growing district, one of the more famous ones in Austria. There's winery after winery, field after field.

I come from a place in upstate New York where Taylor wines are made. These wines are similar.

I don't know how many vineyards there are in upstate New York, but here, they're everywhere. Wine may be cheaper here, and you can get a pretty decent bottle in a grocery store for the equivalent of \$3.50. Local wines are sold there sometimes.

Wine season is spring; the harvest is maybe in summer. Growers open little restaurants for a few weeks to advertise their wines.

Q. How are the wines?

A. I'm not a connoisseur, but I know many people come here to buy regional wines. There are some red wines I like. Some say there are wines here you can't get elsewhere. They try to make one variety from frozen grapes. It's a difficult process and not always successful, but when it does succeed, it's a very sweet, delicious and expensive wine.

Q. Best time to visit?

A. September or the beginning of October. Most tourists are gone by then, but the weather is still warm and things are still open.

We have four seasons, like the northeast United States.

Q. What's late winter like?

A. It's really icky right now. Cold. Sometimes it snows. If it snows a lot, there's no good way to get rid of it. The streets are narrow and many people didn't have cars until recently. Now there are more cars and the cars are bigger. So there are big piles of snow and no places to park.

Q. What do kids there do in the snow? Do they have sleds and saucers?

A. Kids learn to ski when they're young. Every year around now, they have Energy Week, when you take the week off, supposedly to save energy. It's when many take a family vacation.

Q. Are you near any ski resorts?

A. Probably within an hour's drive of different ones. I haven't been to many, but we're close to the mountains. The resorts have chalet-type balconies and indoor swimming pools. And there are saunas.

Q. Where in Vienna do you find the ultimate Kodak moment?

A. I have a favorite place _ St. Stephen's Cathedral. It's big, beautiful and in the center of Vienna. There's always a lot of activity there. ... Guys dressed up like Mozart trying to sell concert tickets, street entertainers, people selling ice cream and balloons. It's always festive.