

Craig Tansley follows his
heart and discovers ...

true romance in europe

Vienna, Wachau, Bratislava, Piran,
The Amalfi Coast, La Plagne – six of
Europe's most romantic destinations.



The strangest thing happened to me, waiting for a bus on Oxford Street in Sydney ... she'd only asked me for directions. I thought she was French, she thought I was shy. The next morning she was gone: home to Austria. Six days later I booked a flight to Vienna. I hadn't spent much time in Europe, but I was hoping to discover true romance ...

Vienna, Austria

Ever caught a 20 hour flight, then wished your plane wasn't landing? Well, consider what it's like to book a four week holiday to Europe to be with someone you spent a grand total of 24 hours with, four weeks previously. I shook as I walked through Arrivals at Vienna International Airport, my head filled with doubt ... would I even recognise her? But I shouldn't have fussed, this is Vienna after all, the home of romance, where spontaneity is living. My whirlwind trip might've made my friends, and my poor mother at home scratch their heads in wonder, but here, in Vienna, it somehow seemed kind of prosaic. Buskers wear tailored suits and play priceless antique double basses or violins on street corners. Buildings and people seem conjured up by magic, surely the old man smoking his pipe inside the café we have our first coffee in has been there since the days of Vienna's great residents: Mozart, Beethoven, Strauss and Schubert.

On that first day we found the city's heart and I was smitten. Vienna's centre, the First District, is formed by the world's largest boulevard of its kind, the Ring, a four kilometre long circle enclosing Vienna's oldest and most significant district (built by Franz Joseph in 1857). The First District is a myriad of baroque mansions, Italian Renaissance architecture and Greek classicism. Seeing it is almost overwhelming, it's impossible to try and remember the Hofburg Palace from the State Opera House or from Parliament or the Albertina or the Volksgarten from the Burggarten. In the end we sat and sunned ourselves with the students in the Museums Quarter and gave up altogether. Then we rode the rickety old red and white trams that circle the First District and stared out the window 'til we felt dizzy. It didn't feel like it was me, that tourist in his first four weeks in Vienna. It was so surreal, so old-worldly I had to return. Three weeks later I did, for 13 months.

There's so much to see here, all I do is walk. Most people spend two days here exploring, I've spent over 300 and I'm still finding new treasures, I'm still getting lost down forgotten alleyways. Buildings are so ancient, like St Stephan's cathedral in the dead heart of Vienna, a 900 year-old Gothic relic from the Middle Ages

that was for centuries the tallest building in Europe. I've never caught a tourist bus or taken a tour of any major building. In Vienna, you should just roam, past the wedding cake architecture, past ancient buildings of white, calico, pink and yellow with their cast iron balconies and sinister angel and demon statues. Nothing seems contrived, I like that about this city. People sit alone in the city's famous coffee houses reading poetry, men carry flowers unashamedly, couples embrace in the street and the parks ... well, you can imagine. I love summer here, the First District becomes a non-stop carnival of film festivals, music concerts, art shows and food fairs. On most evenings in summer, when the mercury never drops below 25 and the sun doesn't set till nearly midnight, we take the tram to the Rathausplatz to watch free films and drink Weissbier in the park. There are so many restaurants and cafes to choose from, all much cheaper than you'd expect. Most Sunday mornings we'd eat breakfast amongst the butterflies at Palmen Haus beside the Hofburg in the First District, while the cafes in the Museums Quarter also entice with their energy. But for sheer romance, go where Beethoven and Schubert ate before you, on a gorgeous square at Griechenbeisl or the cellar where Mozart first played, Zum Finsteren Stern, where in summer you can sit under the old trees, or take a sausage from a Wurstelstand into one of Vienna's glorious parks.

> Best romantic option (no budget)

Hotel Rathaus Wine and Design suites start at 398 Euro per night www.hotel-rathaus-wien.at/en-rathaus-rathaus.shtml

> Best under \$300

Check out the gorgeously Austrian Pension Suzanne suites start at 117 Euro on www.pension-suzanne.at/english/index_2.htm

ABOVE L-R: Michaelertor, Hofburg - *photo courtesy Austrian National Tourist Office*; Belvedere Palace, Vienna OPPOSITE PAGE: Vienna Museum of Natural History and Volksgarten Park - *photo courtesy Austrian National Tourist Office*



Wachau, Austria

The biggest surprise about Europe is how beautiful even areas you'd never heard mentioned actually are. We had a friend who lived in a region called the Wachau, just a one hour train trip from Vienna. He invited us out for a weekend. Before I knew it I was sipping his Gruner Veltliner from his family's vineyard (Bergdistel), a vineyard they'd owned since the 16th century in a house and cellar built in the 12th-century. He took us for a drive around his property as the summer twilight painted crimsons and pinks on the sky and all I could see for miles was the Danube snaking its way through acres of vineyards, past medieval villages with cobbled streets, between valleys of forest and beside a castle, a mile or so from his property, that once housed Richard the Lion-Heart (Richard I), imprisoned here in 1192. I fell in love with the Wachau, and we soon started coming here once a month. Sometimes I couldn't wait, I'd catch the train out during the week and ride my bike through the vineyards and spend my afternoons speaking broken English/German with Martin and his wine making friends. Krems, the region's focal point, is one of the oldest towns in Austria whose origins date back to 995. As such, UNESCO designated the area a world-heritage listed zone.

It has one of the tiny country's most beautiful and lively pedestrian areas, home to open-air cafes, taverns and restaurants and home to the Kremser Kunstmeile – the art mile – the established centre for arts and culture in Austria (home to Austria's biggest art gallery). We liked to walk around the region's steep rising hills and quaint baroque villages and ancient monuments (the Durnstein monastery and Benedictine Abbey in Melk are incredible) and take it easy. The Schloss Durnstein is the best hotel to take in the unique setting amongst the grapes (there's over 50 wineries here) on one of Europe's biggest rivers. At night the area is famous for its romantic dinners (try Restaurant Gozzoburg for unbeatable Austrian cuisine and ambience), but with Krems being a university town it's also home to a bustling nightlife, try the Kuhstall Bar if you're game.

➤ Best romantic option (no budget)

Check out the Schloss Durnstein at www.schloss.at deluxe rooms start at 338 Euro

➤ Best under \$300

Try the gorgeous but cheap Barock Landhof Burkhardt at www.burkhardt.at, rooms start at just 55 Euro

Bratislava, Slovakia

The Viennese laughed when we suggested a trip to nearby Bratislava. "Austrians don't go to Slovakia," they said. For many Europeans, Slovakia still has to mend its reputation as a former Communist stronghold. It did, after all, only shake its eastern ways 18 years ago. But we're the lucky ones for it. Bratislava is one of the most romantic cities in Europe, an old town with a colourful history, an incomparable nightlife in the summer and prices so cheap we literally couldn't spend the few hundred Euros we'd converted to Slovak Korunas. We ended up spending a weekend a month here, especially in the spring and summer months when the Old Town of Bratislava becomes a manic centre of alfresco dining in huge town squares lined with 1200-year-old buildings and cobbled streets, overlooked by the Carpathian Mountains which plummet to earth here, into the Danube, thousands of miles from their origins in Romania. Bratislava Castle is perched above the Old Town, offering views forever, while the Devin Castle, only a few kilometres out of town is one of the most fascinating castles in all of Europe, it being the former playground of 9th-century warlord, Prince Rastislav.

Night-time is when Bratislava comes alive as you walk its brightly lit cobbled streets, listening to street performers, many with harps and violins and every shop offers local beers and wines, cheap meals and a bustling energy you can't pay for. You can't go past Modra Gula for its rooftop restaurant overlooking the city lights but try any restaurant advertising itself as Slovenska Restauracia for a wholesome, cheap, energetic dining experience. Sleep on-board the Danube at Botel Marina, with its cosy, romantic cabins and deckside terraces, or feel like Bogey and Bacall at Hotel Marrols with its impossibly perfect attention to 40s silver screen elegance (also try the Romanesque Spa).

The train ride here from Vienna takes just 50 minutes (and costs 14 Euros) and takes you through vineyards, mountains and ancient farms, or spend 25 Euros for an hour-and-a-half odyssey down the Danube from Vienna (there's also an international airport here).

➤ Best romantic option (no budget)

Check out the old world charm of Hotel Marrols at www.hotelmarrols.sk – stay a weekend for 424 Euro

➤ Best under \$300

Sleep on the Danube at Botel Marina, go to www.botelmarina.sk, apartments start at 108 Euro per night

ABOVE TOP TO BOTTOM: Bratislava - *photo courtesy Bratislava Tourism*; Christmas market on the Main Square - *photo courtesy City Hall of Bratislava* OPPOSITE PAGE: Melk Abbey - *photo courtesy Albratross Travel*





Piran, Slovenia

Perhaps the best thing about this romantic gem is the fact no-one's heard of it. Slovenia doesn't conjure up images of Italian romance. Truth be told, I hadn't heard of Piran myself, but a last minute SOS to a well-read friend in Australia asking for suggestions for a warm, romantic destination close to Vienna to escape a chilly autumn had us on a plane and bus to a city we discovered they call "mini-Venice". The nickname is justified: the architecture is stunning and thousands of years old, colourful flowers are on every balcony, washing is hung up and beaten by old women, it drips on you as you walk past, old waiters in tuxedos forget your orders while narrow, dark cobbled alleyways open straight onto the Med. We were sceptical at first, it was cold and wet in the capital, Ljubljana, when we flew in. But a two hour bus ride later we found paradise: grapes were blackening on their vines, sunflowers were blooming, old men sat smoking cigars and drinking fortified wine, olive trees ripened and a narrow coast road whisked us past ancient seaside cottages, yachts and old fishing boats bobbing on the Mediterranean Sea. And it was warm, warm enough to swim all day, even in October. In all my years of travel, I've never been as surprised as this. Piran was first settled by the ancient Greeks 3000 years ago. However, its influence today is all Italian, Piran was part of the Venetian Republic for 500 years until Napoleon's rule in 1797. Because of its unique geography it's possible to watch the sun rise over Italy and set over Croatia. You must stay at the Hotel Piran, surely the cheapest romantic seaside hotel on the Med. At dawn, you can almost smell the fishermen as they chug past you on old boats in their ancient quest to feed their families. It's unbelievably romantic in Piran. During the day we liked to swim, then eat plates of incredibly cheap seafood at old, rustic cafés metres from the sea, The Riveria Adriatic was our favourite, mostly for its mussels. Washed down with bottles of white wine, a meal for two would cost only \$40. In the afternoon we'd walk for miles, past ancient stone cottages, while young people sat in cafes like the Punta Bar drinking beer and playing chess, artists sat and painted the scene and the ancient Church of St George kept a watch over everyone. Sunsets were my favourite time, often we'd just lie about, on a beach, watching the sun set into Croatia. At night, medieval bars on cobbled streets or in open market squares served out more seafood and wine. But we'd often like to retire early to our room with its views over the Med and watch the moon rise over Italy.

> Best romantic option (no budget)

You can't go past the incredible Hotel Piran, check out www.hoteli-piran.si/en, a superior room with breakfast will cost 134 Euro

> Best under \$300

Apart from Hotel Piran, try the Hotel Tartini on www.hotel-tartini-piran.com, expect to pay 92 Euro for a double room

The Amalfi Coast, Italy

With my girlfriend off-work for a week, we took the chance to visit the epicentre of summer romance: the Amalfi Coast, flying into nearby Naples. Note: everything you ever heard about the Amalfi Coast, BELIEVE IT! It is romance personified. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie stayed here during the filming of Mr and Mrs Smith (you can stay in their room at the Hotel Santa Caterina, the grandest and oldest of the Amalfi mansions, where you can stay in a garden suite perched high above the sea). Jude Law and Gwyneth Paltrow lit up the screens here in *The Talented Mr Ripley*, Garbo stayed here, as did Sophia Loren. We hired a convertible and drove the hair-raising, vertigo-inducing Amalfi Drive past cliffside palazzos where celebs hid, past ancient fishing villages, some like the Vallone di Furore just an enclave of old fishing huts cut into mountain sides teasing the Thyrranian Sea below. This is the world's best drive, it literally twists and tunnels its way through the world's most picturesque vistas, but drivers can't allow themselves to take their eyes off the road for a second. The town of Amalfi itself is a faded ninth-century village which gets overrun in summer. We liked to escape some of that by chartering boats to the islands of Capri, or the more modest island of Ischia, while the 33-foot deep, crystal clear waters of the Grotta dello Smeraldo which give it its Emerald Cove moniker is the most romantic summer destination on earth. There's stacks of shopping, eating, drinking and star gazing to be done in Positano, the best known hot-spot on the coast, but we preferred hightailing it through the narrow Dragon Valley to the small peaceful town of Ravello, where we sat and drank *Lacryma Christi* (Christ's Tears – a famous local white wine) and gaped at the views. Eating is heavenly here, seafood is obviously the ticket, but it's also the birthplace of pizza, marinara and mozzarella. Try Eolo in Amalfi for its lobster risotto and views or for the grandest of dining, sample the two-Michelin starred Rosellini's in Ravello. You could also never leave your hotel, perched as they are along the clifftops. While the Hotel Santa Caterina is heavenly, the Hotel Villa San Michele for a fraction of the price is also incredibly romantic, nestled among gardens of lemon trees and bougainvillea high on the cliffs between Amalfi and Ravello with a winding staircase carved into rock to your very own beach.

> Best romantic option (no budget)

Forget the budget, splash out on heaven at Hotel Santa Caterina, go to www.hotelsantacaterina.it, a double superior room in peak season will cost 535 Euro

> Best under \$300

The Hotel Villa San Michele is exceptional, go to www.hotel-villasanmichele.it/eng/ristorante.htm, expect to pay 140 Euro

ABOVE TOP TO BOTTOM: Piran; Piran promenade; Amalfi - *photo courtesy Santa Caterina*
OPPOSITE PAGE: Amalfi - *photo Danilo Ascione*





La Plagne, French Alps

While summer may be the season where Europeans exit from their slumbers like butterflies enjoying the sunshine, could there really be anything more romantic than drinking red wine beside a roaring fireplace in the French Alps? But where to go? There are household names, like Val d'Isere or Chamonix. But prior experience had warned me at peak time these resorts were crammed full of English skiers on holiday. The best place we discovered to avoid the crowds turned out to be the laid-back oasis of La Plagne, only an hour's drive away from Val d'Isere. Here, charming old Savoyard villages nestle beside massive mountains and alpine forests. Baroque chapels toll through the day and night, while the skiing was some of the best I've sampled anywhere in Europe with the elevation rising from 1250 metres to over 3200 metres, on glaciers. La Plagne is actually technically the largest single ski resort in Europe, but it recently linked its trail system with Les Arcs via Plan Peisey to form Paradiski - 425 kilometres of ski trails and 142 ski lifts and four cable cars - a mega-resort that doesn't lose its old world charm. We liked to walk through the ancient villages here and sample *vin chaud* (mulled wine). But the solitude was the best part, skiing entirely by ourselves was romantic in that last-people-left-on-earth sort of way. Every morning we loved the view from our resort balcony as the first sun hit the rocky top of Mt Blanc, the tallest mountain in Europe. We found the Club Med at La Plagne 2100 was actually very romantic, catering for couples with stylish bars and restaurants, and being located 20 metres from the nearest chairlift (what's more, drinks are included, which, when you consider a standard beer often costs you upwards of seven Euros each, can be a comforting factor!). You could also rent your own chalet for total privacy. For romantic dining on the snow it's hard to go past La Mine with its elegant dining room and open fireplace (mains are about 32 Euros), although our favourite was Au Bon Vieux Temps set in a gorgeous old chalet on the snow.

> Best romantic option (no budget)

Club Med Aime Le Plagne offers fantastic value and style, go to www.clubmed.com.au and search by map for Le Plagne, \$1995 for seven nights

> Best under \$300






Stay close to the action at Hotel Terra Nova, check out www.hotel-terranova.com, prices start at 130 Euro

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TOP TO BOTTOM: La Plagne; Mount Blanc - photo courtesy Alexandre C



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