

2023

WESTERFORD HS
HISTORY TOUR
A EUROPEAN ADVENTURE

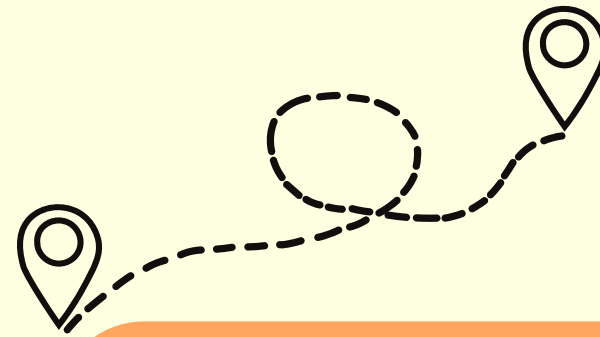
WITH A WW2, HOLOCAUST AND COLD WAR FOCUS

MEMORY
SCRAPBOOK

ITINERARY

WESTERFORD HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY TOUR 2023 TO CENTRAL EUROPE

IN PARTNERSHIP
WITH



LAND ARRANGEMENTS

CONFIRMED FLIGHTS TURKISH AIRLINES

Depart: Cape Town to ISTANBUL to BERLIN
Return: BUDAPEST to ISTANBUL to Cape Town

21 JUNE TK045

MEET AT THE AIRPORT AT 13:30

Depart Cape Town 17:05

22 JUNE TK1721

Arrive in Istanbul 04:35 (in transit)

Depart Istanbul 07:25

Arrive in Berlin 09:15

06 JULY TK1034

Depart Budapest 14:00

Arrive Istanbul 17:10

08 JULY TK044

Depart Istanbul 01:50

Arrive Cape Town 11:20



Germany, Berlin	2 nights	22 to 23 Jun
Czech Rep, Prague	2 nights	24 to 25 Jun
Germany, Nuremberg	2 nights	26 to 27 Jun
Germany, Munich	2 nights	28 to 29 Jun
Austria, Salzburg	2 nights	30 Jun to 01 Jul
Austria, Vienna	2 nights	02 Jul to 03 Jul
Hungary, Budapest	2 nights	04 Jul to 05 Jul
Turkey, Istanbul	1 night	06 Jul



FOLLOW

 polarsteps



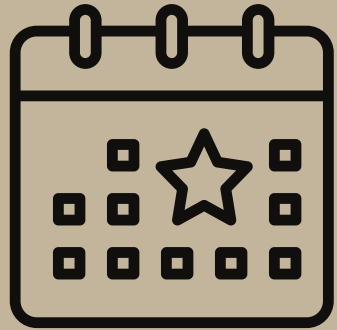
Suneen Laing

for updates and
other tours



21 381

**KILOMETERS
TRAVELLED**



18

DAYS



5

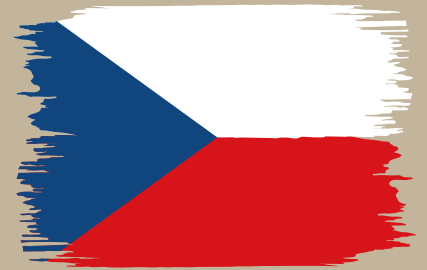
COUNTRIES

8

CITIES



**FLAGS
COLLECTED**



*Travel
Stats*

TRAVEL COMPANIONS

**ADVENTURE
AWAITS!**



TRAVEL COMPANIONS

TEACHERS:

Mr Gordon Brookbanks, Ms Suneen Laing, Ms Robyn Fisher & Ms Angelique Sinzihara

ACCOMPANYING ADULTS:

Mr Luke Rosslee, Mr Fredl Laing & Mrs Cecilia Laing

TRAVELLERS:

Nazia Allie, Jordan Arends, Anna Beckett, Gina Biccari, Sam Brand, Jude Cadman, Hanna Carew, Damon Carle, Kate Chamberlain, Rachel Cilliers, Alex Clark, Liam Coleman, Kylian Dabancourt, Tate Evans, Leila Ferreira, Llewellyn Ferriman, Leo Frater, Kolby Fredericks, Luke Giese, Olivia Goosen, Dani Gross, Tahra Heathcote-Marks, Ingrid Heyns, Roxy Hoekstra, Asher Hyde, Sophia Ilic, Finlay Mackaill, Liv MacKenzie, Kim Malinowski, Mihlali Mateta, Leyrah Naiker, Wandile Ncube, Zoe Nuttall, Darcy Ouwehand, Nikarlan Pillay, Geogria Ponton, Hannah Rademeyer, Mihir Ranjith, Sam Renard, Emma Rendall, Ben Rudolph, Emily Ruijsch van Dugteren, James Scarth, Tarek Schulzer, Kai Scott, Sabrina Stadler, Nina Starke, Taya Thornton, Ethan van Muylwyk, Jake van Veen, Kira Webb, Joseph Weeks & Jesse Wolff

WED 21 JUNE 2023

Day 1

Departure time!

*Travelling Turkish Airlines:
South Africa - Istanbul,
Istanbul - Berlin*



Departure Day has finally arrived!

With great excitement we arrived to a loooooong queue at Turkish Airlines. After a smooth check-in (with quick hugs to the parents) and a breeze through security, we have finally all boarded. Boarding was not without incident, of course. Finlay realised he lost his passport and boarding pass while we were busy boarding! Thankfully, after a mad scramble and lots of searching, it was found in the gift shop.

As soon as we took to the skies, we engaged in a bit of a puzzle-building exercise as all our travellers swapped seats to sit next to their bestie. After settling in for the long haul, we quickly realised an 11 hour flight feels as long as it sounds. Who knew the seats could feel like a pile of rocks after 3 hours! Apart from poor Liam suffering from a pretty bad case of motion sickness and spending the first 3 hours of the flight in the loo, the rest of the flight was mostly uneventful. We watched some movies, tried unsuccessfully to nap and made frequent visits to the loo just to get the blood flowing. We were really happy to see Istanbul getting closer and closer on the onboard electronic map!

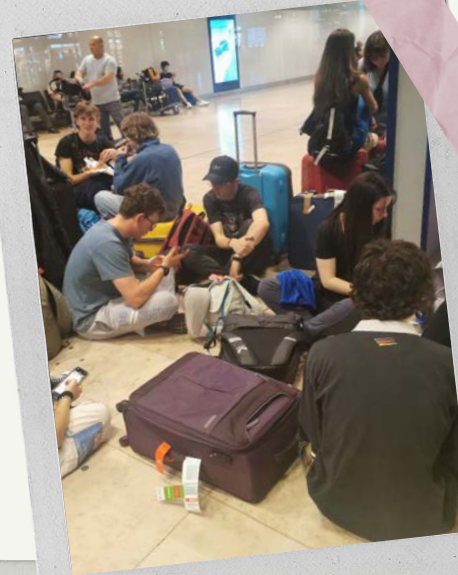
THU 22 JUNE 2023

Day 2

Berlin, Germany

*Experiencing Sachsenhausen
Concentration Camp en route to
our hostel*

We landed safely after a quick 2,5 hr flight from Istanbul to Berlin. The weather is sunny and warm: 29 degrees! Us South Africans can't believe our luck after leaving behind a freezing Cape Town. In typical Saffer style, we had to immediately consume food and dress appropriately for the heat - right there in the middle of the airport! If the Germans didn't realise it, they know it now: We have arrived!



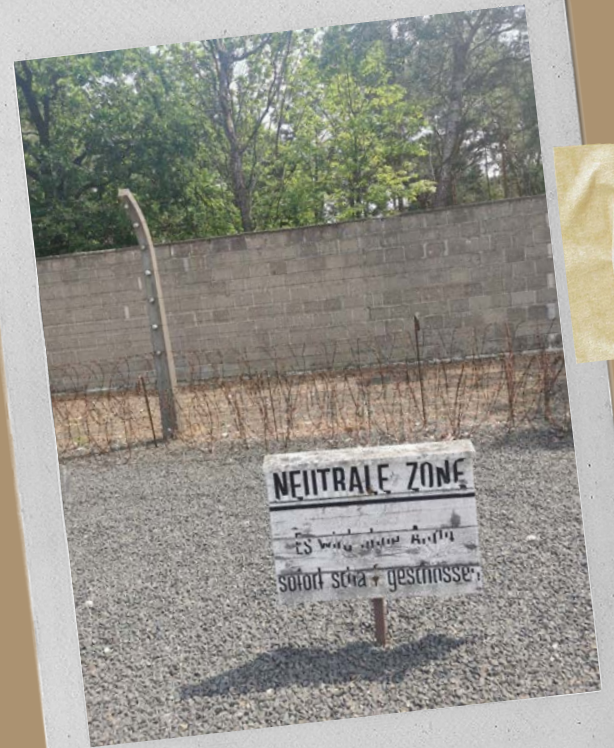
Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp outside Berlin



Straight from the airport, we hopped on our coach for the drive to Sachsenhausen, a large concentration camp 30-odd km outside Berlin. It struck us how green it is both inside and outside Berlin. Forests and trees everywhere! Another observation about Berlin itself is the graffiti that is everywhere. We wondered if it is a part of the heritage, culture and identity of the city, or whether the authorities have just given up on cleaning it. We later learnt that it is a legacy of resistance linked to the Berlin Wall, and therefore an important part of the city's heritage.

Sachsenhausen was one of the first concentration camps built, from 1933/34 already. Due to its close proximity to the capital, it was the administrative headquarters of the SS who ran the camp system, and served as a training camp for those who would be deployed to work at other camps. It mostly housed POWs during WW2, and some Jewish people who were sent there after Kristallnacht in 1938. While most camps with gas chambers for the purpose of genocide was located in Poland, Sachsenhausen is an exception. It had a fully operational gas chamber and crematorium. Ms Laing and Mr Brookbanks gave short talks on Holocaust history and the significance of Sachsenhausen. We spent most of the late morning and early afternoon exploring all the various parts of the camp.

Tired, hot, smelly and thirsty, we're keen to head to our hostel for some much-needed R&R.



Generator Hostel, Berlin



We've arrived at the Generator Hostel, Berlin, our accommodation for the next two nights. It is a massive blue and white building with 8 floors. 4 to 6 people share a room, which can only lead to loads of fun! It took us a while to sort out who sleeps where but now we can finally head to the shower we've been dreaming about since yesterday! A little bit of (useless) trivia: Berlin has images of bears everywhere. We wondered what the significance is (since we're in Berlin and not Russia, which is widely associated with the bear motif) and Google provided the answer: the German word for 'little bear' sounds similar to Berlin. As a result, the city adopted the bear as their mascot. Who knew? Our hostel has a huge multicoloured bear that greets guests upon arrival.

FRI 23 JUNE 2023

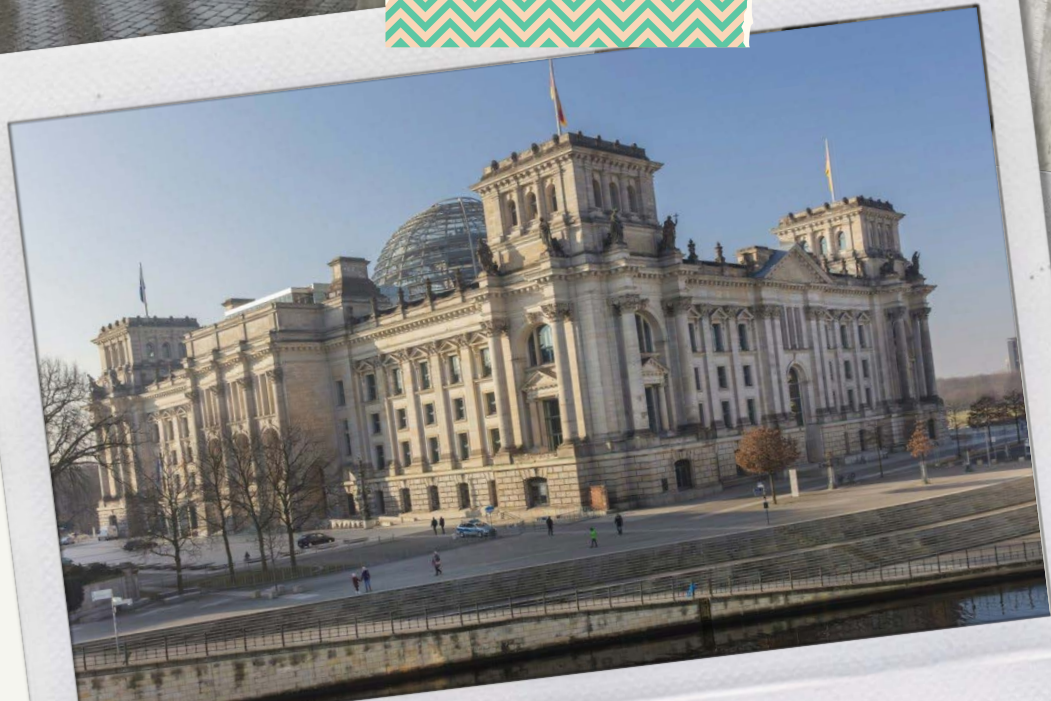
Day 3

Berlin:

Brandenburg Gate, Reichstag,
Holocaust Memorial, Checkpoint
Charlie, Topography of Terror,
Wannsee Villa, Berlin Wall

Brandenburg Gate & Reichstag

We started our day with an early breakfast at 7am and from there we navigated the Metro for the first time. A little nervous at first, we managed 3 stops and a line change in order to arrive safely in Central Berlin. The day was cold and rainy, a refreshing change after yesterday's heat and humidity. Armed with ponchos, caps and a good dollop of determination, we hit the ground running.



Our first point of interest was the Brandenburg Gate. As one of Berlin's most iconic sights, it symbolises Berlin's Cold War division into East and West, and since the fall of the Wall in 1989, a reunified Germany. The 26m high gate with its two rows of 6 columns was built in the late 1700s. The magnificent Quadriga statue at the top was stolen by Napoleon when his army took Berlin in 1806 but was returned by France in 1814 after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo.

Opposite the Gate is the parliamentary buildings, iconic Reichstag with its impressive dome. Mr Brookbanks and Miss Laing discussed with the group the importance of these buildings, as well as the story of the 1933 Reichstag fire which provided Hitler, then Chancellor of the Reichstag in a multi-party democratic Germany, with the opportunity

he needed to secure full power. He blamed the fire on communists, pushed the Enabling Acts through parliament (which granted him near unlimited power during this state of emergency) and banned all other political parties, all in the name of safety and security of the German State.



Berlin Holocaust Memorial



Our visit to the Holocaust Memorial is difficult to describe. The Memorial is something that needs to be experienced and felt, rather than just viewed. It is sad that it was raining quite hard at the time, which discouraged some of our travellers from fully immersing themselves in the experience.

The 2 711 granite blocks of varying heights and sizes cover 19 000 sqm. There is no particular pattern to the layout, and this was deliberate on the part of the designer. The blocks give the impression of a cemetery, and unmarked it represents the millions of those of the Jewish faith who perished in the Holocaust. As one moves through the memorial, it becomes quieter and quieter as one moves further and further away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Right at the centre, there is nothing but silence. One cannot help but feel a deep sadness for all the voices silenced during the Holocaust. It is a deeply moving experience, leaving one feeling haunted by the history memorialised here.

On leaving the Holocaust Memorial, we were reminded of the complex nature of memorialisation in Germany by being informed that the paint provided to protect all the blocks from graffiti had been manufactured by the very same company that manufactured the Zyklon B Cyanide used by the Nazis in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and other death camps from 1941 ... a startling and troubling apparent contradiction.

We took a brisk, wet 15 min walk to Checkpoint Charlie. There were several crossing points, or check points, along the Berlin Wall where those who had the correct GDR-issued visa could move between East and West Berlin. They were all named after letters in the military alphabet: Alpha, Bravo and then our very own, Charlie. We made full use of the photo opportunity despite the heavy rains.

Checkpoint Charlie

Fun sight: We walked past a number of the iconic Trabis, which were the only cars available in the GDR (East Berlin). We had to press pause (again!) for a few fun selfies.





Topography of Terror

How to create and ruthlessly rule a totalitarian state.



By now we looked and felt like drowned rats. Never mind, we soldiered on a few minutes down the road to the Topography of Terror. This information centre documents the "map" of the Nazi reign of terror in the Third Reich. We learnt how, through brutal efficiency and an extensive spy network, the SS, Gestapo and others under the leadership of one Reinhard Heydrich (try to remember this name!) and working at the Reich Security Headquarters ruled Germany through fear and terror.

The entire Headquarters was bombed into oblivion during WW2 but this information centre now occupies the site where it used to be. Parts of it is being slowly reconstructed.



Running alongside the site are parts of the original Berlin Wall, which we could look at and photograph. And it was under cover! We used it to both learn and hide from the rain.

Thankfully the Centre itself was also undercover and had WC (bathrooms) we could use free of charge. We're thankful for the small things!

Wannsee Villa

We quickly walked to Potsdam Plaza where we grabbed the S1 underground all the way to the far western suburb of Berlin, Wannsee. By now we felt like seasoned travellers and comfortably navigated our way on the trains.

We split into two groups. One group remained behind in the picturesque station area to enjoy some döner kebabs for lunch. And man, who knew a bunch of teenagers could be so hungry! They descended on the 3 restaurants like starving wolves who haven't seen a crumb of food for days! The other half of the group had to hold out for a while longer while they visited our next site of historical significance.



From the train station, the Wannsee Villa is a quick bus ride away. This beautiful villa with its lavish, expansive and beautifully manicured gardens situated next to an idyllic lake (complete with pirate ship and numerous yachts included), belies the horrors of its past. It is here where the Final Solution to the Jewish Question (being: How do we rid Europe of the Jewish problem?) was discussed and planned.

Our travellers were treated to a guided tour with the very knowledgeable Christina. We learnt how Reinhard Heydrich (remember him?) convened a meeting of 15 top Nazi officials on 20 January 1942 to discuss the logistical, economical and administrative plans for the already unfolding Final Solution. The meeting lasted 90 minutes, and was followed by a hearty breakfast. It was truly shocking to realise how the fates of millions were decided in a mere 90 minutes!



By the end of the guided tour, Group 2 had arrived, content with now full bellies, and Group 1 could head back to the station and, much more importantly, the restaurants. We had to wait a few minutes for the bus to arrive and can confirm that the average Berlin bus shelter is in fact large enough keep 30 bodies dry!



Berlin Wall



Can you spot us up there?

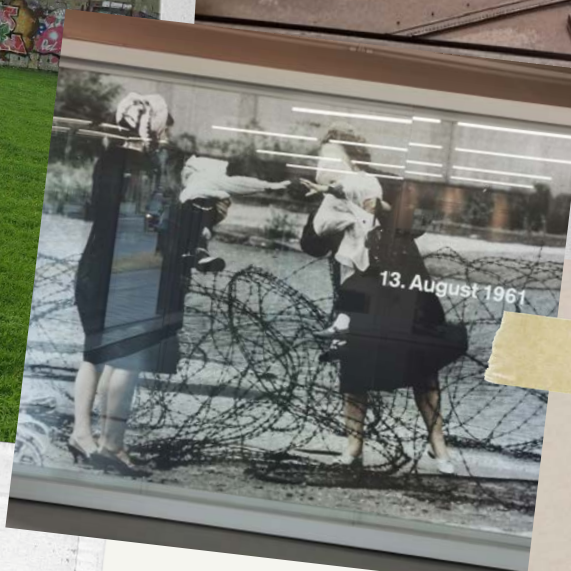


The rain gods have heard our pleas and finally gave us a break, just in time for our last stop for the day: the much-anticipated Berlin Wall Memorial. We visited the information centre first, where we learnt about the political complexities surrounding the wall built to segregate West Berlin from the rest of the GDR, from its literally overnight rise as a fence in 1948/1949, which later became a concrete, steel-enforced wall by 1961, until its destruction in 1989. Large, haunting photographs of the desperate actions of those wanting to get to the other side fill the spaces between the information panels.

The Centre has a rooftop viewing platform accessible via a loooooong flight of stairs - but well worth the effort. We were rewarded with a great view of the city as well as the second part of the Memorial: the park. It has large sections of original wall, graffiti included, and

sections of the steel rods that reinforced the wall, all surrounded by a beautiful park where many Berliners walk their dogs. Of course we took a photo-moment before going back down for a stroll through the park.

By now it was after 6pm, and we were ready to head back to the hostel, a hot shower and some supper after a gruelling 12 hour day.



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SAT 24 JUNE 2023

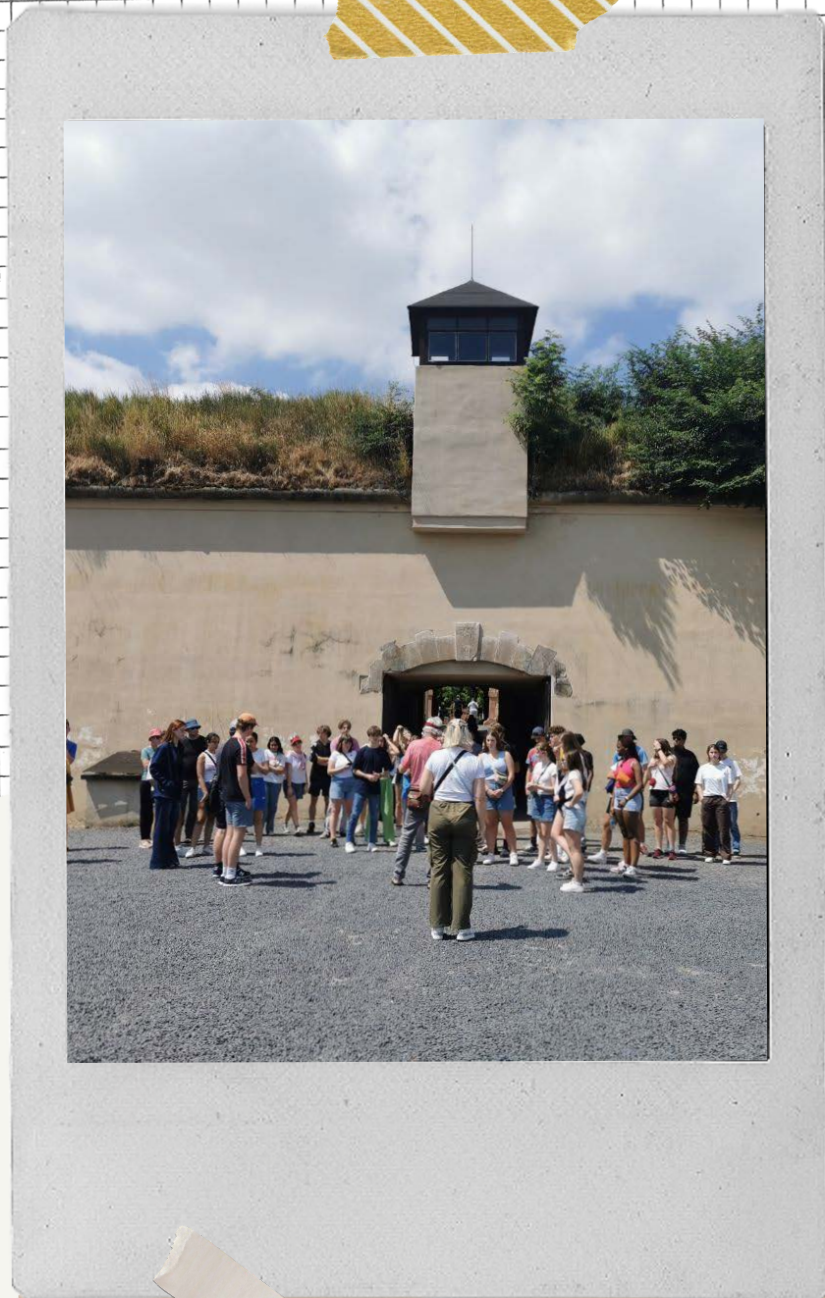
Day 4

*Travelling to
Prague, Czech
Republic.*

*Visiting Terezin Small Fortress,
Terezin Ghetto and Lidice en
route*



Terezin Small Fortress





The day started with a 6:30 early bird breakfast in order to hit the road at 7am. A few travellers tried to sleep in and nearly missed breakfast. They had to grab theirs to go. Adventure waits for no-one, and neither do we! We had a full day ahead, including travelling to Prague, Czech Republic. Unfortunately our travels came to a grinding halt about 20 minutes later when our coach was pulled over by the police for scratching the side mirror of another bus. After about 30 minutes of explanations and phone calls to the office, our driver had it all sorted and we hit finally the road. For real this time.

The 320km journey to Terezin took us about 4 hours. Many travellers made the most of the down time by catching some shut-eye - with the exception of Jake and Finlay who serenaded the girls with hits from years gone by. Until Miss Fisher growled at them, that is. The rest of the journey was spent in relative peace and quiet.

Our first sight of the beautiful medieval town of Terezin did not disappoint. The 1700s town is surrounded by a massive moat and an impressively high wall. Looks like something straight out of a King Arthur movie! We proceeded to the Small Fortress.

The Terezin Small Fortress has served as a prison fortress during the Habsburg Monarchy's reign in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Gavrilo Princip, who was a member of the Black Hand Serbian separatist movement which assassinated the Arch-Duke Ferdinand of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the act that served as the spark that started WWI, was arrested and imprisoned in the Small Fortress. This was one of the many single small cells we explored.

During WW2 the Small Fortress was used as a police prison by the Prague Gestapo for opponents of the Nazi Regime. On arrival Mr Brookbanks briefed us on the National Cemetery which was founded in Aug 1945. In its individual and mass graves 10 000 victims of the Gestapo prison, the Terezin Ghetto and nearby concentration camps lay buried.

At the prison we walked to the Commandant's house which is adjacent to the Officials' swimming pool, complex cinema and ... shockingly, the area where prisoners were executed either by firing squad or by hanging. Talk about

contradictions and contrasts! Our explorations of the various parts of the prison also included walking the 500m long narrow, dark tunnel that runs inside the wall of the town. Creepy and claustrophobic for some, very cool for others!



Terezin Ghetto

From the exhibition:

Poem written by Franta Bass
(born on 4 September 1930,
deported to Terezin on 2
December 1941, and died in
Auschwitz on 28 October
1944, at the age of 14):

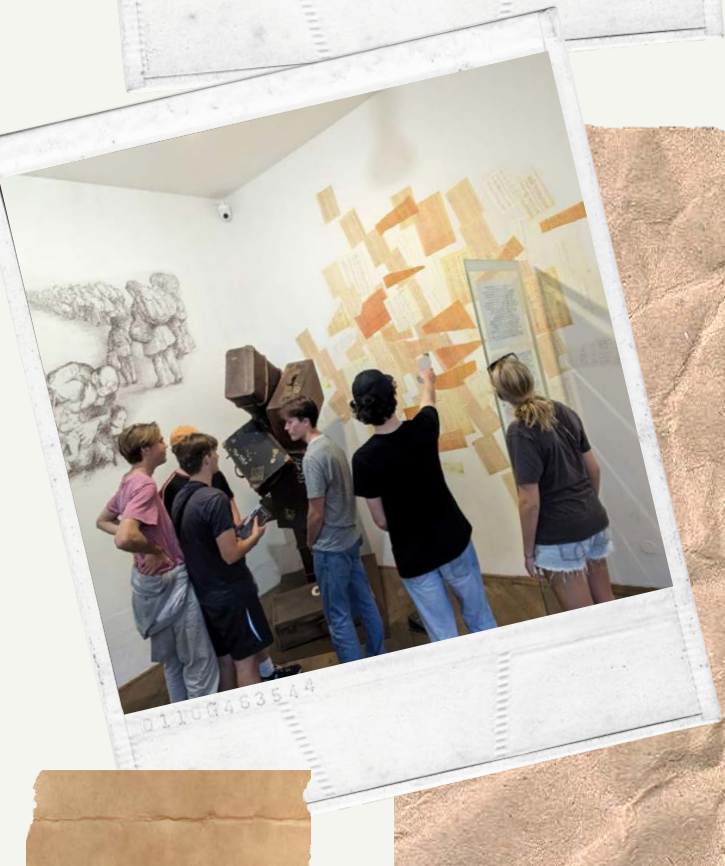
A little garden,
Fragrant and full of roses.
The path is narrow
And a little boy walks along
it.

A little boy, a sweet boy,
Like that growing blossom.
When the blossom comes to
bloom,
The little boy
will be no more.





Soon after the invasion of the Soviet Union during WW2, the villagers of Terezin were expelled and the town was turned into a Jewish transit ghetto by the SS. A transit camp or ghetto is, simply put, a holding area for those designated to die at one of the death camps. The thousands of Jews who were deported to Terezen were nearly all killed at Auschwitz. Of those, over 10 000 were small children, too little to be of any use to the Third Reich.



Our visit to the Ghetto Museum was heart wrenching, to say the least. We were confronted with the poems and art of the children who were encouraged to temporarily escape their terrible circumstances by creating art representing their memories and dreams. There are no words to describe what one feels. Many of us had to leave the museum before finishing the tour. It was just too much.



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Among the prisoners who were sent to the camp at Terezin, were over ten and a half thousand children, while the rest mostly found themselves on the deportation transports to extermination camps in the East, where over 7500 of these youngest victims of the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" died.

To our present knowledge, only 245 children returned from the transports to the East. We also do not know the names of all the dead from the evacuation transports which arrived in Terezin at the end of the war.

This room is devoted to the memory of the murdered children, and records the names of these, the most defenceless victims, whose lives were ended at their very beginning.

All this was murdered together with them.

Each name hides a boy or girl who had their dreams, hopes and childish loves. The message of their fates still speaks to us today, and must never be forgotten.

Research into the fates of the Terezin children still goes on and those whose names have not yet been discovered in the future will be added to the memorial list of victims here.



Lidice



A narrow winding road (with some uncomfortably tight bus turns) took us to Lidice, our last stop before Prague. Lidice used to be a bustling little village about 30 km outside Prague. In 1942 that would all come to an end and they would all be erased as if they never existed.

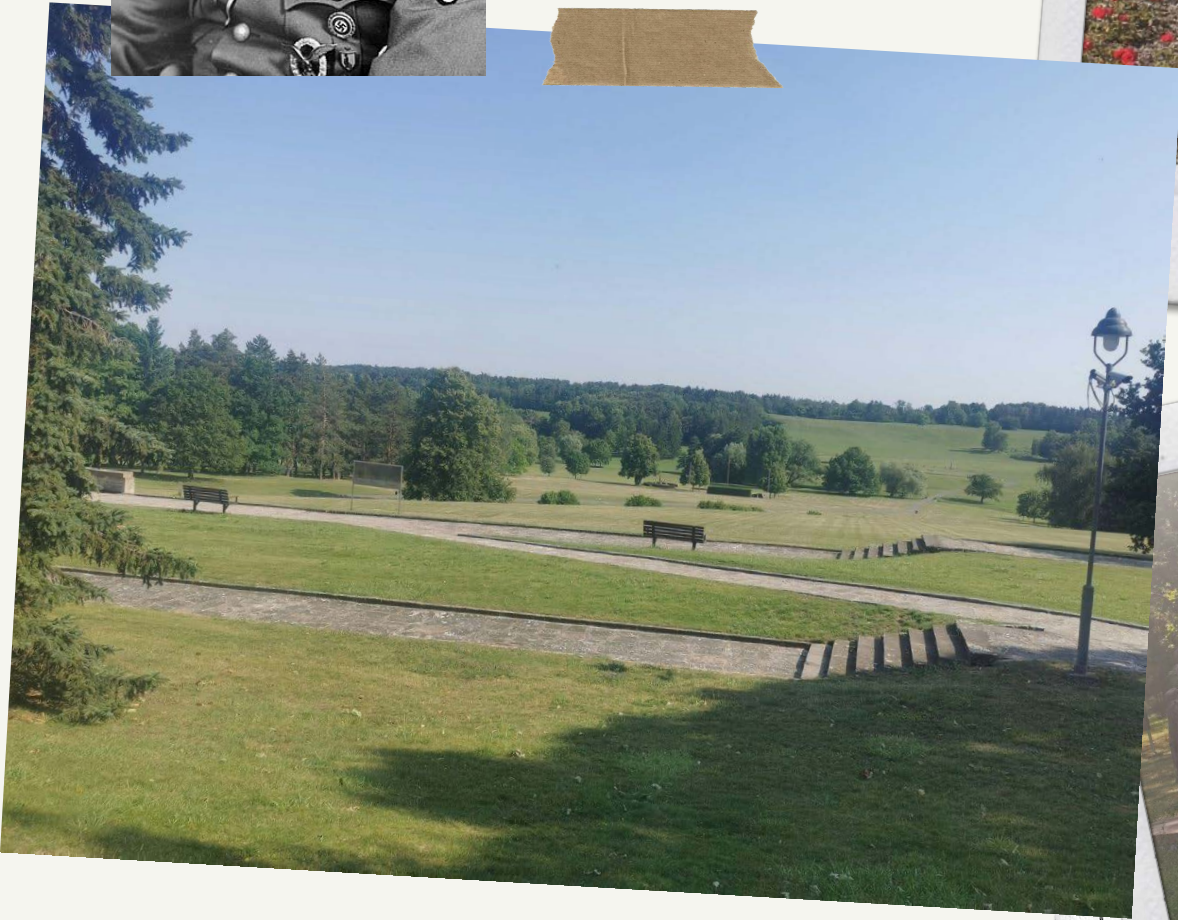
It starts with the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich (Remember him? The 'architect' of the Final Solution who organised the Wannsee Conference? And the man in charge of Reich Security in Berlin?) in Prague in 1942. He moved there shortly after the Conference to oversee the implementation the Final Solution in Czechoslovakia. Those responsible were three Czech citizens who were trained British paratroopers. (They were only found much later and committed suicide rather than to face the Nazi's special brand of justice.) Hitler, in turn, demanded retribution for the death of his most loyal lieutenant: the lives of 10 000 Jews. The SS delivered by linking a family from Lidice to another member of the British paratroopers (but not involved in the assassination), declaring that the people of Lidice must be collectively punished. We don't always understand the reasoning or logic of the Nazis. In this case, the villagers were not Jewish - they were just ordinary Czech citizens. Nevertheless, the SS stormed the village, rounded up and shot all the men, and sent the women and children to the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp where most perished. The village itself was burned to the ground. Today, nothing but foundations peek out from under the grass.

An interesting side-story is that, after the revolutions within the Soviet Satellite States, and their breakaway from the Soviet Union in the 1980s, the bronze from all the Soviet statues within Czechoslovakia were melted and from that, a local artist, using photographs, created a beautiful life-size and true-to-life memorial of the children of Lidice who died. Today it stands at the empty green field where Lidice used to be as a stark reminder of Nazi brutality and their total disregard for human life.

We spent a few moments at the park taking in the serenity that so completely contradicts its violent past before eagerly hopping back on the coach for the final leg of our journey to Prague.



Reinhard
Heydrich



We thought the Generator in Berlin is a huge hotel. We were wrong. It dwarfs in comparison to the Olympik with its 19 floors. With great excitement we checked in and rushed off to explore our new lodgings. Wow!! We're sleeping 3 in a room and we're not complaining. The rooms are spacious and even has aircon - an unexpected treat. Then, of course, the highlight of any young adult's day: supper! We were treated to a eat-as-much-as-you-can buffet with several different meats, salads, veggies, soups, breads and a pudding table. I repeat: an entire table dedicated to desserts!! This is the stuff heaven is made of!



After supper we hopped on the Metro to go explore the Prague Old Town. With its iconic buildings, Astronomical Clock, interesting museums and coffee shops abound, we were spoilt for choice. We had the evening free to explore and had a great time. Most reluctantly we had to return to our hotel at 11:15pm since Prague's Metro closes at midnight.

The evening was not all moonshine and roses for everyone, though. Poor Roxy and Liam spent 7 hours at the hospital this evening: Liam for his upset tummy that is simply refusing to settle down and Roxy for a twisted ankle that has become very painful. Liam got some meds and is going to miss out on all the fab Olympik food (only dry bread and tea without milk for his tummy) and Roxy has a cast just begging to be signed and decorated, along with crutches to allow her to get around without putting weight on her foot. Shame!!



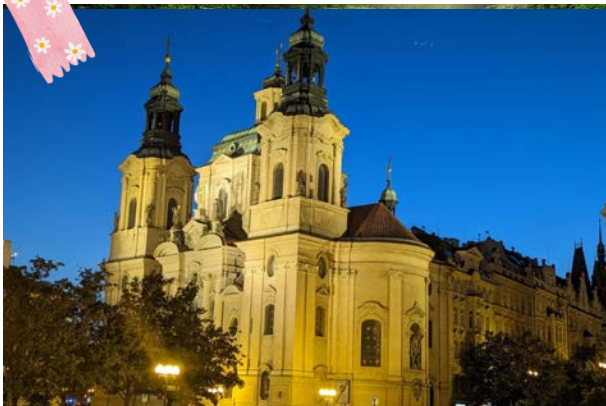
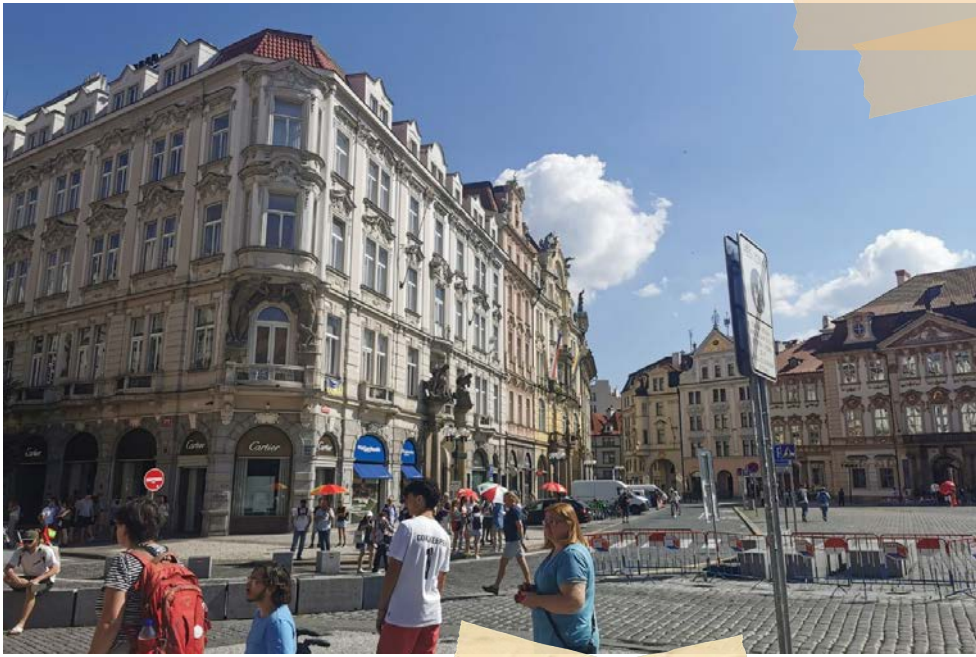
Olympik Hostel,
Prague



Liam at the
hospital



Daxy showing off
her cast



SUN 25 JUNE 2023

Day 5

Prague:

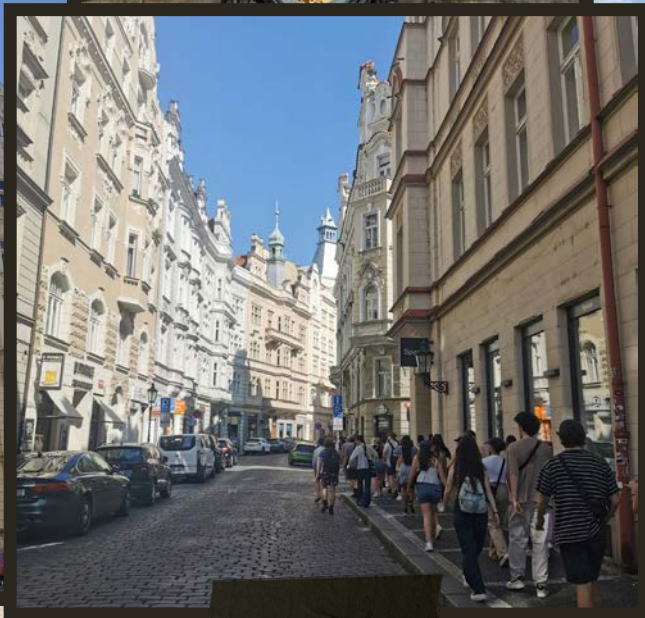
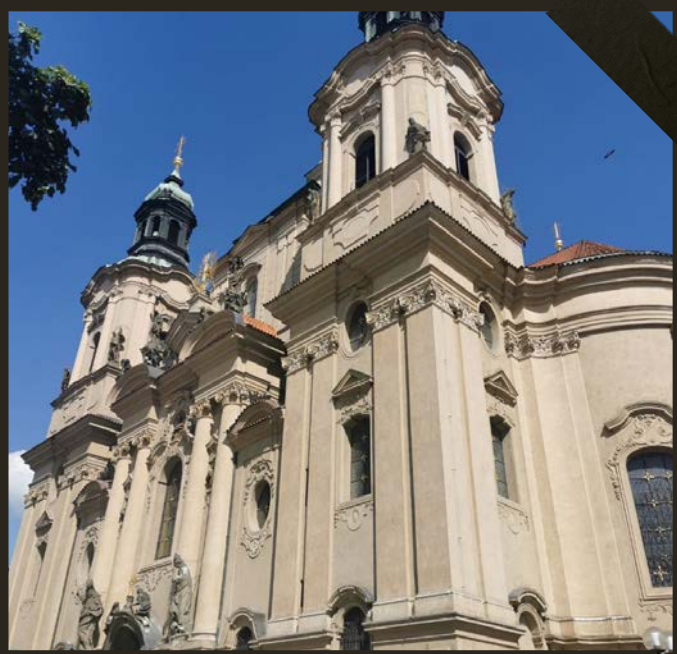
*Jewish Quarter and
Old Town*

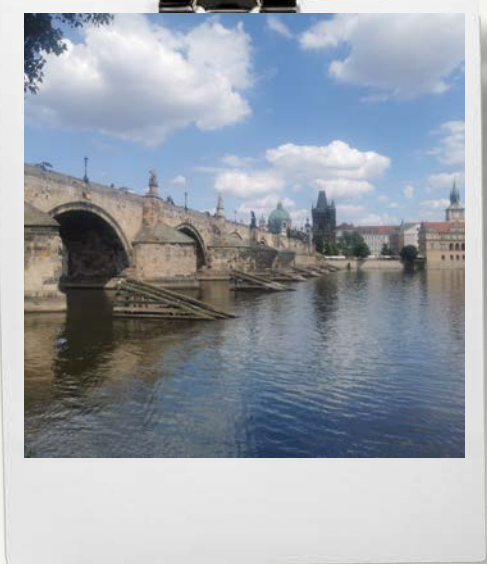
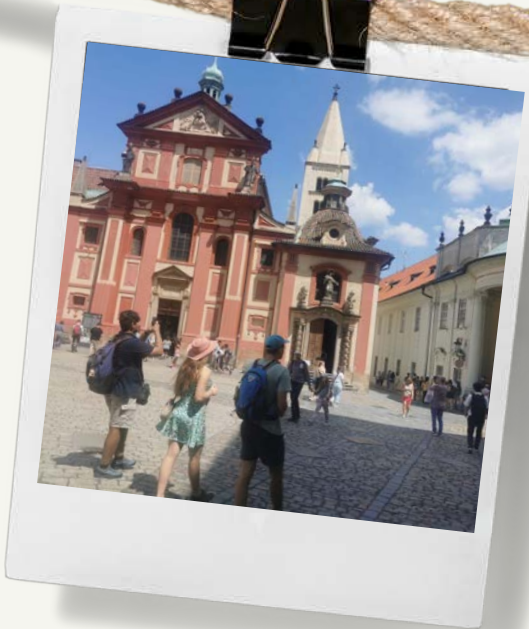
Prague
Old Town





*What!
a view!*





We were finally, for the first time, allowed to sleep in. This is worth a mention because, man, we needed it! After the most incredible breakfast (think buffet with just about any and every kind of breakfast ingredient ever created), we hopped on the Metro to head back to the Prague Old Town.

We took a few moments to appreciate Prague's beautiful bustling streets, and then headed to the Jewish Quarter. We passed a number of old synagogues and stopped outside the Jewish cemetery dating back to the Middle Ages. We noticed the outside wall has the appearance of a series of tombstones. There was a lovely shady spot and we took a moment to discuss Jewish resistance and those who risked their lives to assist Jews during the Holocaust, raising Oscar Schindler's story as an example we learnt about back in Grade 9. Back to the cemetery: we learnt that the design of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial is based on this very cemetery. Sadly, this is one of the very few old cemeteries still left. The Nazis destroyed most of them and used the tombstones to pave the roads leading into many concentration camps (!!!).

We entered the Pinkas Synagogue, which serves as a memorial to all Czech Jewish people who perished in Holocaust, and includes all their names in a haunting facade that covers every available wall.

Later we walked through the previously mentioned Jewish cemetery. The similarities in layout between the cemetery and the Berlin Holocaust Memorial were startling.

From there we walked back to Old Town for lunch. Interested travellers were issued with tickets to a number of synagogues and museums. Lunch was extended to free exploration time until 4pm. In their own time, travellers were encouraged to visit the Prague Castle (free entry) and the absolutely breath-taking St Vitus Cathedral next door. Travellers were cautioned to take a particular route to avoid the steep climb of 200+ steps. Imagine what we would've looked and felt like after that!

As a side note: our 4 groups have finally confirmed their names. We must emphasise that these names were chosen by the travellers themselves, no parental judgement is allowed! They are: Angler's Angels (based on Ms Fisher's TikTok pseudonym), Laing's Laaities, Banks's B*tches and Sinzihara's Skollies. The competition amongst the 4 groups are fierce with Laing's Laaities currently in the lead.



Medieval
Jewish
Synagogue
and
Cemetery



MON 26 JUNE 2023

Day 6

*I travel to
Nuremberg,
Germany.*

Visit Trial Memoriam and Old Town

A&O Hostel, Nuremberg

After a lazy late morning, we got on the bus at about 09:30, destination: Nuremberg. Aside from multiple bathroom stops (most unfortunate that our bladders are not synchronised), the journey was fairly uneventful. We saw some gorgeous forests and a surprising number of solar farms. We dropped our bags off at the A&O Hostel. It's not nearly as large as our previous accommodations, but that's not a complaint at all. We're chuffed with the spacious rooms, en suite bathrooms and a working lift (bags get really heavy after the second flight of stairs!). The hostel is also very conveniently located, being about 100m from the underground and, in the other direction, about 100m from the entrance to the Old Town. It was drop and go, however, because we had places to go and courts to see! Next stop: the Nuremberg Trials Memoriam.



The Nuremberg Trials where in 1945 - 1946, for the first time in history, representatives of a state had to answer for war crimes and crimes against humanity, made Court Room 600 in the Nuremberg Palace of Justice a location of world history.

Upon arrival, we were divided into 3 groups and issued with audio guides to assist us in understanding the comprehensive information panels and photographs on display, allowing for a deep understanding of the justice process that followed WW2 and the Holocaust. It still boggles the mind that, of all the perpetrators, only 12 received sentences of death by hanging, 3 were given life sentences and 4 long term prison sentences. Thereafter, prosecution was transferred to the International Criminal Court at The Hague, Netherlands. We spent about an hour and 15 minutes at the Memoriam where after we returned to our hostel for supper.

After a lovely, filling buffet-style dinner (the travellers were delighted about the large selection of fresh salad ingredients, including lettuce - not something I particularly missed, but to each his own), we walked down to Old Town to explore and immerse ourselves in the sights, sounds and tastes of Old Nürnberg.

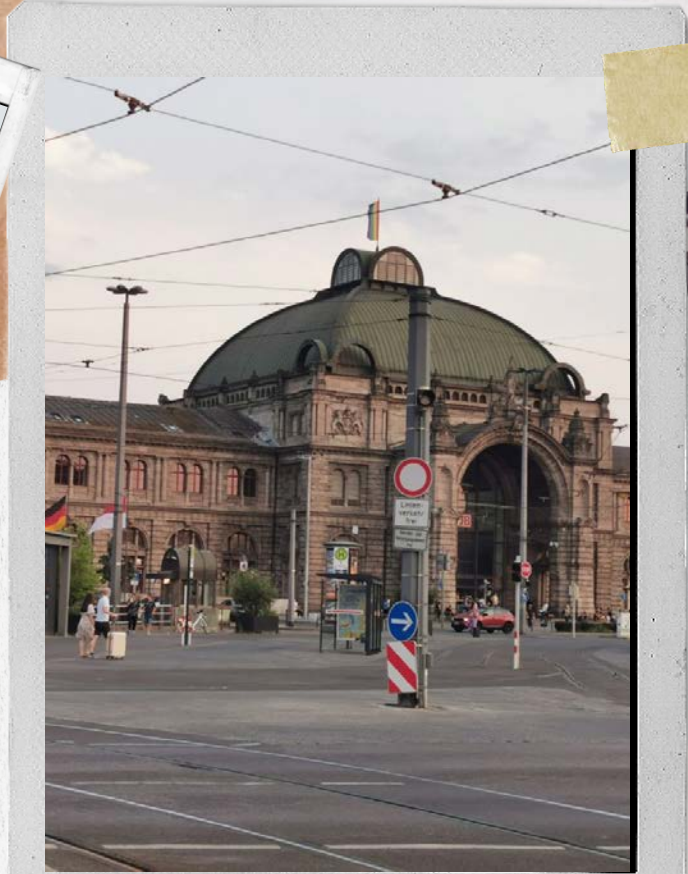
Side note: Turns out Team Angler's Angels is not that angelic after all. They are still, 6 days into the tour, struggling to learn the skill of head counting. I mean, we're not talking rocket science here. Somehow remembering the number assigned to you and yelling it out at the appropriate time, is beyond this very special group of young people. After numerous explanations and countless attempts, Ms Fisher, out of sheer desperation, had to make an explanatory TikTok video in the hopes of them finally getting it right.

Update: We are horrified. At the Nuremberg Trials Memorium, Angler's Angels failed their head count. Again. Without naming any names, rumour has it they get stuck on numbers 3 and 6... We're out of ideas and open to suggestions.

Nuremberg
Trials Memoriam







Nuremberg
Old Town



*Sebaldus Church,
dating back to the
Middle Ages*

TUE 27 JUNE 2023

Day 7

*Nuremberg:
Rally Grounds and Old Town*

We had a glorious late start this morning, only gathering at 11am for a family meeting before heading out.

Some travellers took advantage of the time off to head into Old Town for a coffee like good and proper tourists! The teachers used the time to source a

wheelchair for Roxy who was not coping well on the

crutches. Issued with a brand-new Maserati and eager pit crew to assist, Roxy was a new person, big smile included. Travellers were also excited to receive their second cash Euros handout to cover lunches for the next 4 days.



We hopped on the S2 train and 3 stops later, excited close to the Nuremberg Rally Grounds. How best to describe its historical significance? It is here where the Nazis put up displays of power, showing off their military and the Hitler Youth in parades and rallies. Walking through the imposing archway and looking around the massive theatre-like grounds, it is not difficult to imagine thousands of people chanting Hitler's name and glorifying the Nazi Party. We used the handy audio guides in the Congress Hall to learn more about the information panels and photographs on display.

Nuremberg itself was of particular significance to the Nazis. An industrial city of mostly working class people back in the 1920s, it provided a mighty power base for the Nazis who always saw themselves as the saviours of the struggling working class.

It would turn into an important venue for large party conferences and multiple parades and rallies. The Nazi regime used the rallies as a form of political "event marketing" to pursue key social and political aims. The rallies were designed to deliver a message of national unity: "One Volk, one Reich, one Führer" (one people, one country, one leader). Hermann Göring also proclaimed the Nuremberg Laws on 15 September during the 1935 rally - the laws that declared Judaism a race, denied all Jews German citizenship and made sexual relations and marriage between Jews and Germans illegal. These would turn out to be the first step of the legally endorsed persecution of Jews, Sinti and Roma (the Systematic Legal Campaign), which was to culminate in their mass murder.

Interesting fact: The granite used to build the massive facade was quarried at the Flössenburg Concentration Camp using Jewish slave labour. We passed Flössenburg on our way here from Prague.

We walked down to the Zippen Field with its iconic Grand Stand visible in so many Nazi propaganda films showing Hitler addressing adoring rally crowds thousands strong. We stopped next to the gorgeous lake for some street food with a view before heading back to our hostel. The rest of the afternoon and evening is free time. Some of our travellers are really tired and would love a nap / early night while the energiser bunnies will undoubtedly head back out to paint the Old Town red.



*At Zippen Field with
the Grand Stand in
the background*





Back to Old Town



Nuremberg Old Town has a legit Medieval Village, a ginormous Castle (serious uphill climb, I may add, but well worth the visit), some really breath-taking churches and cathedrals, and lots of Bavarian-type architecture. Really beautiful.

Side note: We can report that Angler's Angels finally managed a successful headcount. We're all celebrating this long-awaited achievement tonight.

Tomorrow morning early we take the train to Munich. Looking forward to some great scenery, comfy seats with decent legroom and free bathrooms.

WED 28 JUNE 2023

Day 8

*I travelling to
Munich, Germany
with a visit to Dachau
Concentration Camp*



Fun and games as we travelled from Nuremberg to Munich via train! Of course we had a few stragglers who thought it a good idea to sleep in. They realised the error of their ways soon enough as they had to grab their breakfast to go (with some not-so-gentle encouragement from the teachers). Just as we were heading out the door, Leyrah realised that, while she made it down to reception, her suitcase did not. Mad scramble to find the bag waiting patiently for her by her room door! By 08:30 we were trooping down the road to the train station, half an hour behind schedule.

It was interesting to watch our travellers manage their bags and themselves at the large, busy stations (we had to change lines several times), navigating stairs and escalators, finding the elevator for Roxy and her Maserati, getting a little lost and then unlost, all while keeping up with Mr Brookbanks's brisk pace (those long legs take enormous steps!).

We made it safe and sound (well, mostly, we did have one broken suitcase wheel) to the A&O, Munich. It has the same look and feel as our lodgings in Nuremberg, and we're sleeping 3 - 4 in a fairly spacious room. We were pleasantly surprised to see the hostel offers laundry facilities. We might just pinch off an hour or two to deal with some dusty tour clothes. And, even cooler: it has a pizza vending machine!!! A quick half an hour to drop off our bags later, we hit the road again to travel the 15 km to Dachau Concentration Camp.



We hopped on the S2 train, and then a bus, to bring us to the gates of Dachau, about 15 km outside Munich. We found a nice shady spot and Ms Laing discussed its history with the group.

Dachau was one of the first concentration camps built (1933), and served as a prototype and SS training centre. Its rectangular shape and layout of barracks, offices, housing, crematoria and other facilities was replicated at concentration camps all over the occupied territories.

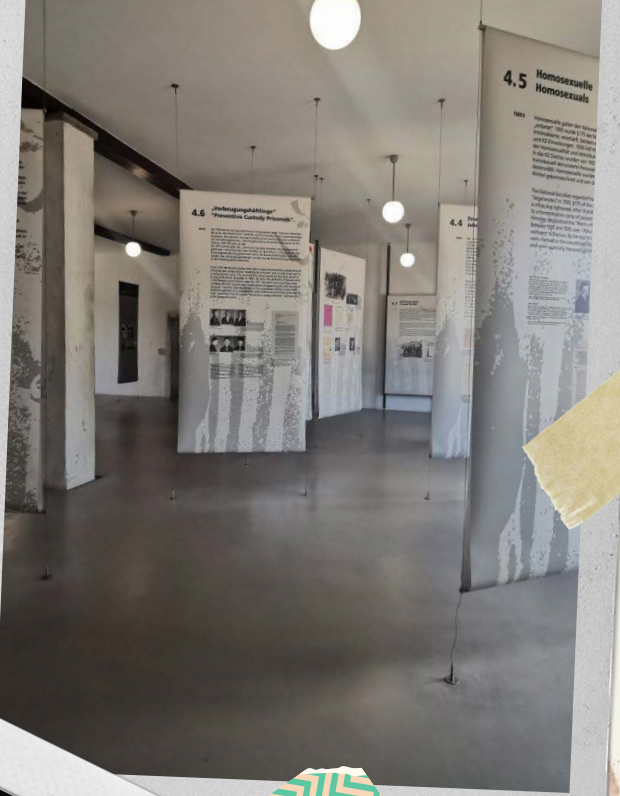
Its first inmates were political enemies of the state, most notably communists who were arrested soon after the Reichstag fire when Hitler consolidated his power, pushed the Enabling Acts through parliament and declared all other political parties illegal. By 1938, after Kristallnacht, the first Jews, arrested for being Jewish, arrived.

Dachau was fully operational for 12 years. While it had a gas chamber, it was not used for mass killings but rather for the training of those SS officers who would be deployed to the death camps in Poland. Executions at Dachau were by bullet or by, as the Nazis called it, "natural causes" - starvation, disease and exhaustion. By 1944 Dachau received many of the survivors of the death marches, those marched back to Germany when they started evacuating the occupied territories and its concentration camps due to the threat of the Red and Allied armies. When the US Army liberated Dachau on 29 April 1945, they found 30 000 inmates still alive, and thousands of bodies the SS were unable to burn in time.

The travellers were given two hours to explore the camp and the information centre. Of course they made a beeline for the cafeteria to grab lunch first, and descended on the place like a pack of hungry wolves.

An observation: our travellers seem to have only two settings: 'raring to go' and 'unable to proceed due to hunger'. Bear in mind, they eat a large, filling breakfast and supper every day, pack extra rolls to snack on and have 5 Euros lunch money every day. I honestly don't know where they put it all. A stomach is only so big!





Dachau



THU 29 JUNE 2023

Day 9

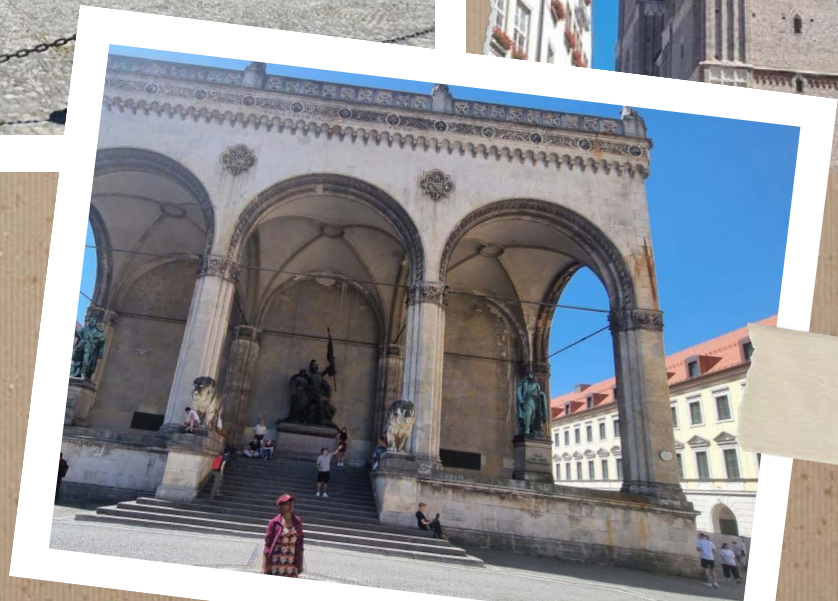
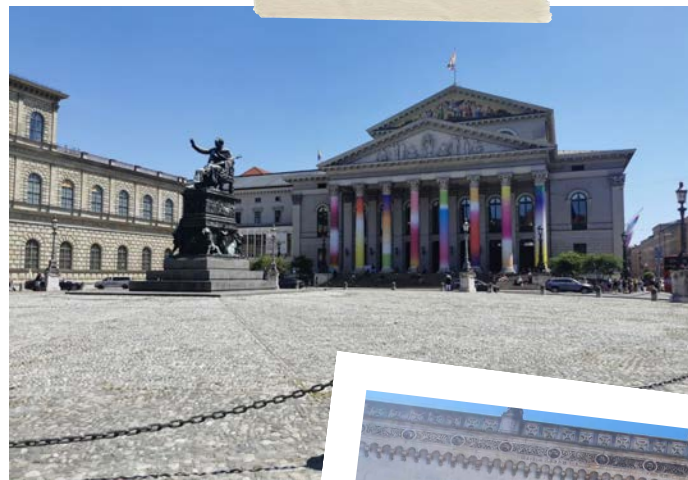
*Munich,
Germany:*

*Taking a self-guided tour through
Old Town using a paper map and
guidebook instructions*



The day started with a late(r) breakfast. We were delighted to discover the A&O had a crumpet-making machine! Our travellers managed to clean out the entire batch of batter and then asked for it to be refilled!

Breakfast was followed by a family meeting at 9am. We had a bit of a Geography lesson learning how to read an actual paper map - for some of our travellers an entirely new skill (life without WiFi is hárd!). Reason: we're going on a self-guided tour of the sights of München. We shared pictures of the route we will all take, with specific places of interest clearly indicated and numbered, including a bit of information on the historical significance of each for some context. Armed with maps and great excitement to put our new skills to practice, we set off down the road.

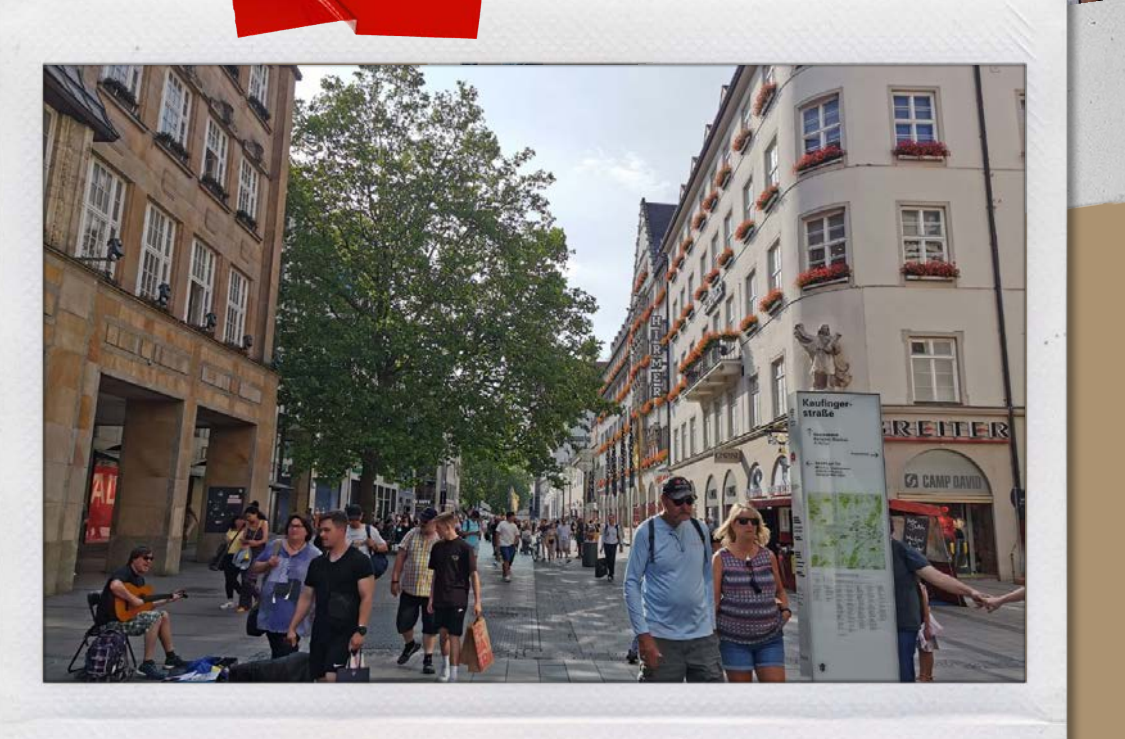


Old Town is magnificent! And very different than the other Old Towns we've seen. It's amazing how each city has a decidedly different look and feel. Munich is much busier than Nuremberg, but not quite as wild as Prague. Despite its busyness, its people has a much more laid-back attitude and refer to their city as 'Millionedorf': 'Village of a Million People'. Bicycles are big here and if you value your life, you'll stay out of the bicycle lane. They ring their bells once and will plow right through you if you don't get out of their way fast enough! The architecture is less Bavarian than Nuremberg even though Munich sits at the heart of the old Bavaria and serves as the regional capital. It has red flowers in most window boxes and the beer-drinking culture is obvious with beer sold everywhere, including supermarkets, coffee shops and cafes. I'm a little relieved we're not here during Oktoberfest. It must be absolute madness!

Small street markets and open-air coffee shops surprise you around every corner. The churches and cathedrals are gorgeous with St Peter's being a really exceptional example with its incredible painted ceilings. We lit a candle for our families at home, so blessings are flowing your way.

Whilst meandering through the streets of Old Town, a familiar sight caught our eye: an H&M with a 50% off sale! Hallelujah! Finally the possibility of something affordable to take home. We popped in for a quick look-see only to find half of Westerford already there bargain-hunting! Tonight our travellers can decide where they want to go. They have proven that they can manage themselves responsibly during the day; let's see how they fare in the evening.





FRI 30 JUNE 2023

Day 10

*I travelling to
Salzburg,
Austria
and exploring the home town of
Mozart*



When we got up this morning, Munich was wet. Luckily nothing compared to a decent Cape Town storm, only a drizzle. It did complicate our morning, however, since we had to travel quite a bit down the road to the metro, bags in tow, which in and of itself is challenging. Having to do it while dodging the rain - you can imagine the potential chaos. But despite our initial reservations, we managed absolutely fine and even arrived with nearly an hour to spare before the train to Salzburg arrived. There was time to get a coffee and apelstrüdel from the station mall before leaving Germany in our rear view mirror. Next stop: Salzburg, Austria!

We have arrived safely! It is a lovely cool day in Salzburg. We're grateful the rain did not cross the border (yet). Salzburg is comparatively small, a large town really. We love the idea that we've left busy city life behind for the more relaxed pace of the Austrian Alps. Like before, we're 4-6 per room with an en suite bathroom. Finding our rooms was a fun challenge. We discovered stairs leading to nowhere, lifts not going up to all the floors and a quite confusing layout for those of us that are directionally challenged (Ms Laing, mostly!). But we take it in our stride; it's all part of the countless things that have made this trip so memorable! The A&O is very centrally located; the city centre and Old Town is a quick 20 minute walk down the road. We will take full advantage of this!



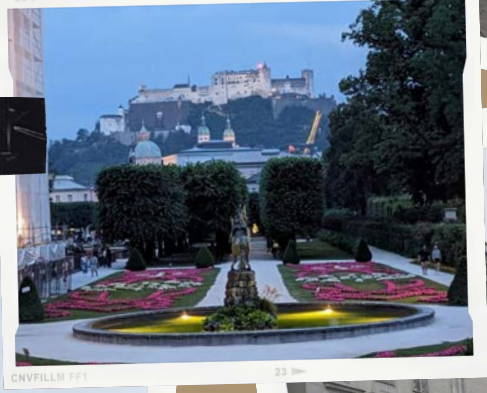
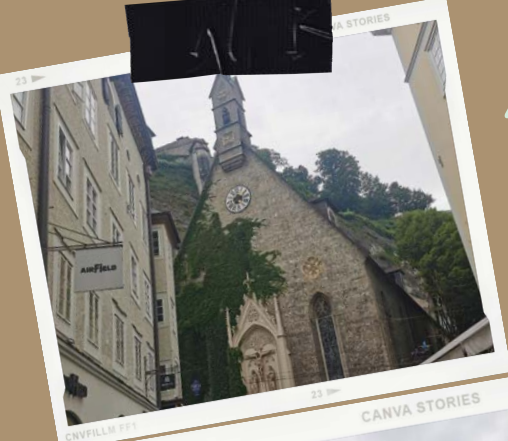
Salzburg
Old Town



We organised a late supper at 7:30 pm so that we can make the most of the afternoon. We headed out the door and down the road to explore Salzburg on foot. Murphy's Law, we were 5 minutes down the road when the heavens opened. Totally unprepared, we frantically searched for a Plan B when a Chinese store presented the solution: cheap umbrellas and ponchos. About 20 Westerfordians crammed into the tiny store to buy most of the stock on display; the owner must've thought Christmas came early!

Since 1997, the historic centre of the town of Salzburg has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The three reasons for this are the merging of Italian, German and Austrian culture, the historical buildings from different eras and Salzburg's importance as a town of music and the hometown of Mozart. The Salzburg Cathedral is a real treasure, truly breath-taking. The Mirabell Palace was built in 1606 by Archbishop Wolf Dietrich von Raitenau for his family. Today it houses the offices of the municipal government and its marble hall is considered the "most romantic wedding hall in Europe". The Pegasus Fountain, the aviary and the baroque dwarf garden are really cool. We did not have enough time to walk / climb up to the Hohensalzburg Fortress guarding Salzburg from above. It is quite a hike. We will leave it on the itinerary for tomorrow.

That Salzburg is a cultural town is evident everywhere. We saw numerous street musicians, artists and even a circus act! The vibe is so festive! Tired and hungry we made our way back to the hostel. We were blessed with Sam playing the piano during supper. How fitting since we're in Mozart's birth town! Because our hostel is so conveniently close to the city centre and Old Town, we're pretty sure the travellers will head back out this evening. The Music Tour also arrived here this afternoon, so Salzburg beware, Westerford will be taking over this town!



SAT 1 JULY 2023

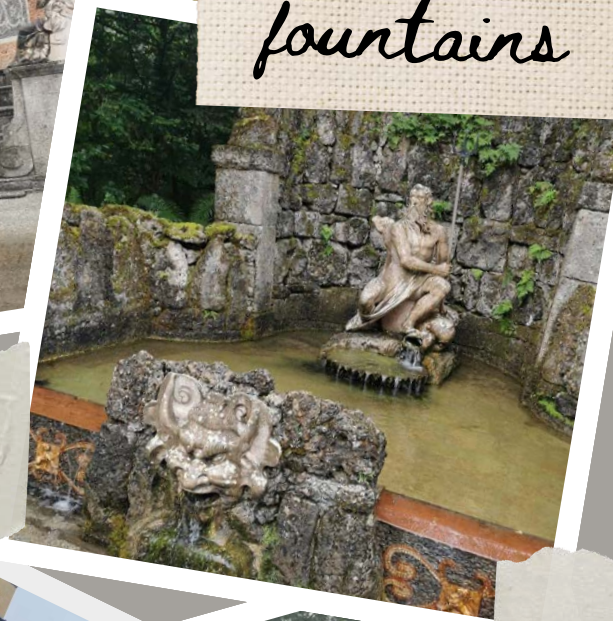
Day 11

Salzburg:

*Schloss Hellbrunn with trick
fountains and Fortress
Hohensalzburg*



Schloss
Hellbrunn
with trick
fountains

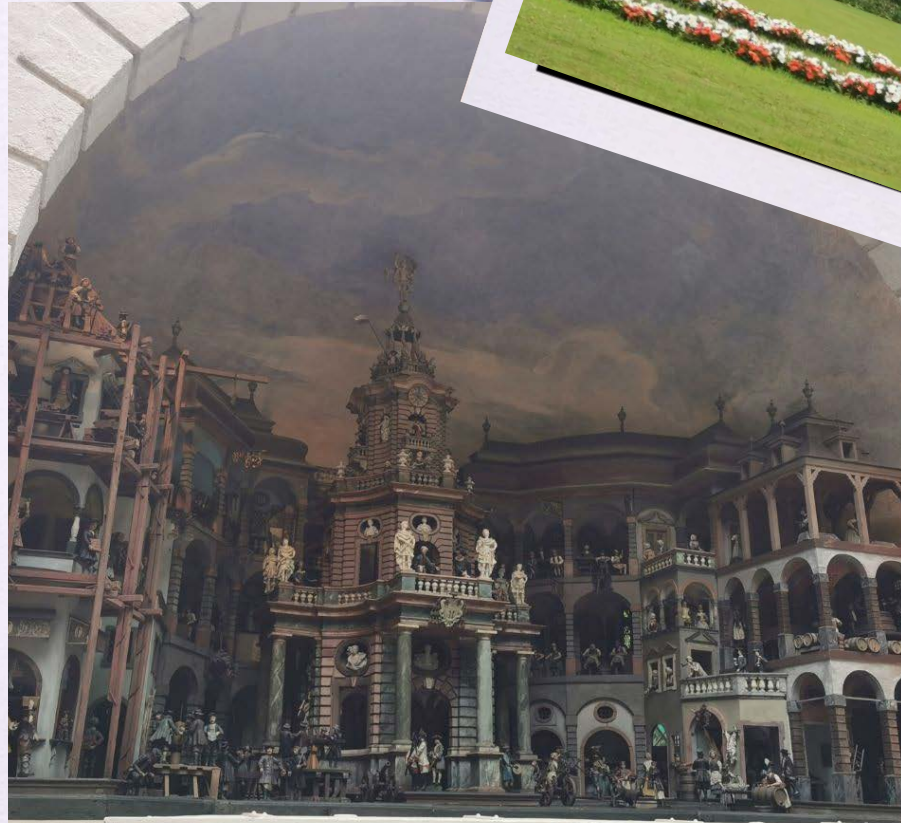


We set out this morning to visit the Schloss Hellbrunn about 20 minutes away by bus. We learn from our mistakes and made sure we're prepared for the cool, wet weather this time with ponchos and umbrellas.

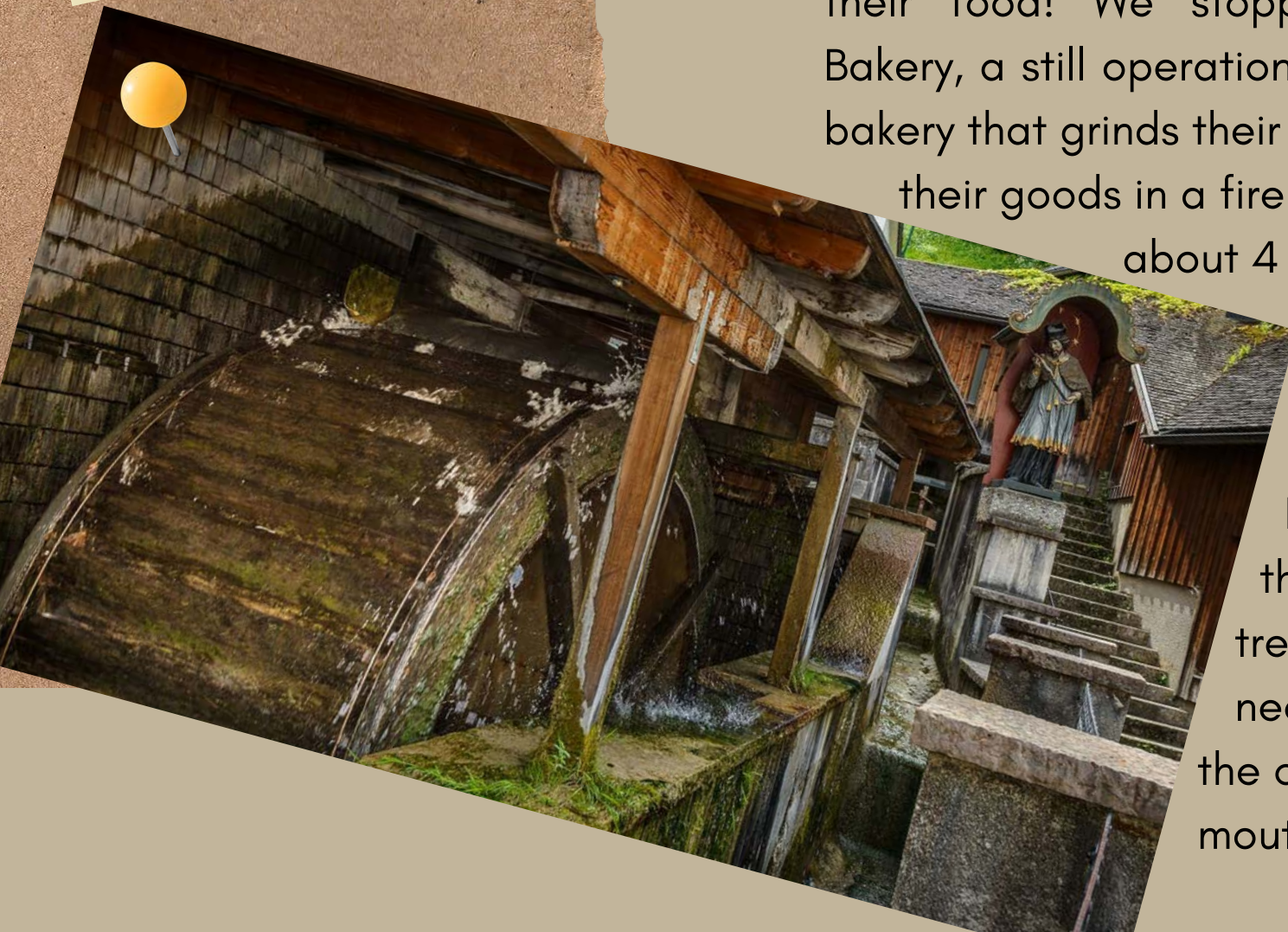
The Schloss Hellbrunn is unlike anything we've ever seen. A prince-archbishop with a wicked sense of humour, Markus Sittikus, built Schloss Hellbrunn in the early 17th century as a summer palace and an escape from his functions at the Residenz. The Italianate villa became a beloved retreat for rulers of state, who flocked here to eat, drink and make merry. It is a Garden of Eden with its exotic fauna, citrus trees and trick fountains - designed to sober up the clergy without dampening their spirits.

Hidden fountains spray water without warning - to our great delight - in the mock Roman theatre, the shell-clad Neptune Grotto and the twittering Bird Grotto. No statue here is quite as it seems with a surprise around every corner. The audio-tour issued to us at the start were hugely informative and made sure we are now fairly well versed in Greek mythology, aspects of which are depicted in every nook and cranny (thanks to Markus Sittikus's obsession). The tour ended with the 18th-century water-powered Mechanical Theatre, where 200 limewood figurines depict life in a baroque city.

Studded with ponds, sculptures and leafy avenues, the palace gardens are truly a sight to behold. What a memorable morning!



Lunch at the Monastery Bakery



By about midday, the skies had cleared, providing us with the most perfect sightseeing weather. And we decided to take full advantage of it by heading to Old Town for the rest of the day. By now it was lunch time and we all know how our travellers feel about their food! We stopped by the Monastery Bakery, a still operational centuries-old mill and bakery that grinds their own flour and bakes

their goods in a fire oven. The water wheel, about 4 meters in diameter, is

considered to be part of the oldest canal system in Central Europe, dating back to the 8th century. What a treat! The buns do not even need butter. Straight from the oven it just melts in your mouth!

*The view from fortress Hohensalzburg
- a photo does not do it justice*





With almost 1000 years of history, Hohensalzburg Fortress is the most striking of Salzburg's sights. After filling our tummies, those interested could visit the Fortress. Thank the Pope for the funicular (cable car type elevator) that takes you to the top - the alternative being a 3 hour hike up the really steep mountain! The Fortress has, in all its existence, never fallen to an enemy. And we understand why. They would've all collapsed from exhaustion on the way up!



The Hohensalzburg Fortress is one of the largest castles of Europe and the largest preserved fortress of central Europe. It houses a number of museums: the castle museum provides insights into the fortress's past and the lives lived in and around it, the puppet museum features many exhibits from the famous Salzburg Marionette Theatre and the Rainer Regiment museum illustrates the past of the former Salzburg infantry regiment. The more morbidly inclined can visit the crypts and catacombs in the bowels of the Fortress (delightfully creepy!) and the visit concludes with a climb up one of the towers which offers a striking panoramic view of the Alps and the city. A camera cannot capture those views! It was truly magnificent.





*Just
wow!*



Inside
the
Fortress



HISTORISCHE MARIONETTE



SUN 2 JULY 2023

Day 12

Off to Vienna,
Austria!

And, as soon as we arrive,
embarking on a guided WW2
walking tour with a special focus on
Adolf Hitler's life in Vienna.



Our lodging in Vienna



In the lounge area

We were super excited to discover the limousine of busses parked outside the hostel to take us on our 3 hour drive to Vienna: a magnificent double-decker beast with WiFi, charging points, toilet, tables and soft comfy chairs. What a treat! Weather-wise it was a bit drippy in Salzburg but slowly cleared up as we inched closer and closer to Vienna.

We passed the most beautiful scenery of farmlands, forests and the odd village dotting the countryside, all the while being guarded by the imposing Alps visible in the distance.

We finally made it to our destination and stopped in front of the St Christopher's Hostel in Vienna, Austria.

The usual razzmatazz ensued with checking in and sorting out who sleeps where. We were unable to access all our rooms since we arrived too early. We just did a bag dump and will now head out for a two hour guided historical walking tour of Vienna, with a special focus on Hitler and WW2.

Using the S1 Bahn, we made our way to the city centre where we met up with Dieter Unrath, a retired History teacher and incredibly knowledgeable and informative guide. He took us on a 2 hour walk and talk, visiting a number of historically significant sites while narrating Austria and Vienna's WW2 and Holocaust history.

Hitler, an Austrian by birth, moved to Vienna when he was in his early 20s, having never completed his schooling. At first he tried to make a living by selling painted postcards to tourists. We visited the Art Academy where he applied twice to pursue a career as a professional artist but was not accepted. Dieter showed us pictures of some of Hitler's artworks. Contrary to popular belief, his art really wasn't half bad. The reason for rejection was that his portfolio was not diverse enough.

Hitler annexed Austria in 1938 (the Austrian Anschluss) and actually won control of the country by referendum. The intimidation factor was present: with his army on the border, Austrians voted for the bloodless option rather than going to war with Germany. This was Hitler's first step towards his plan of world domination (sounds dramatic, but this really was his long game all along).

Vienna remained fairly unscathed during WW2 and it was only from 12 April 1945, when the Soviet Army marched on the city, that the air raids started. These damaged many buildings and the contrast between pre- and post-war buildings are quite stark. Dieter pointed out the newer buildings which are in a much more modern

(bland? ugly?) style. The allied victors (USA, France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union) took collective control of the city after the Battle of Vienna.

We visited the square in front of the Albertina Museum which memorialises the tragic deaths of 400 Viennese who hid in an underground bomb shelter during the air raids. The entire square was bombed and their bodies could not be recovered. The memorial and square now serve as their mass grave.

We walked past Cafe Central, a coffee shop frequented by Hitler, Stalin and Leo Trotzki (founder of the Red Army and one of the Russian Revolutionary leaders), all in 1912. Imagine those 3 men having a coffee at the same shop at the same time!

At the Judenplatz we visited the Holocaust Memorial dedicated to the Viennese Jews that died during WW2. Vienna was home to 200 000 Jews. 130 000 managed to escape to other countries. The rest were arrested and most died in Nazi concentration camps. The memorial looks like a library made up of books - all untitled - and big doors without handles. The doors cannot be opened and the books cannot be read. The meaning is clear: the memorial stands in memory of those whose stories will never be told.

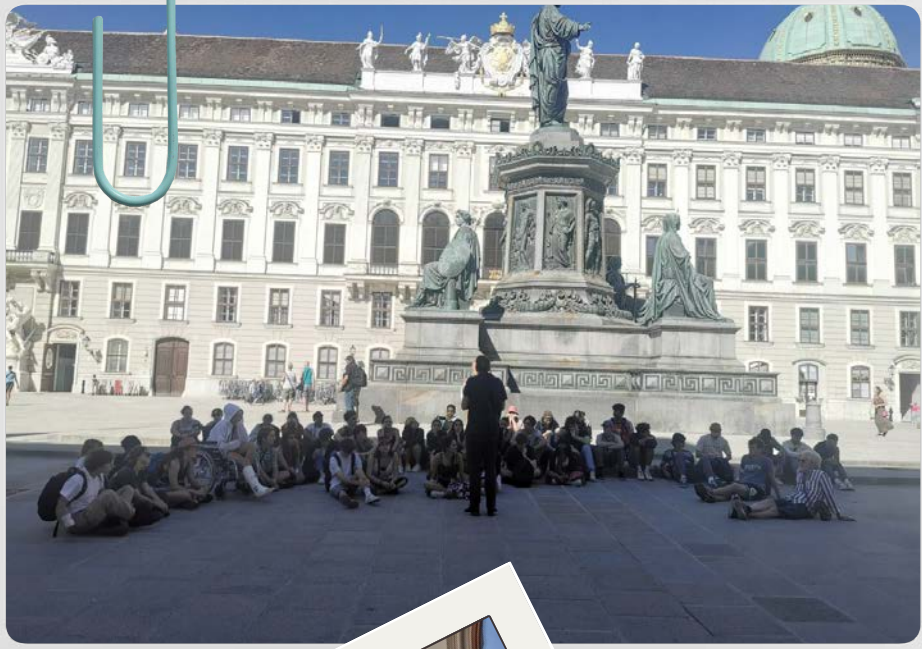
Walking past the incredible Winter Palace we discussed resistance against Nazi rule. Austrian resistance organisations were largely unsuccessful due to not uniting and

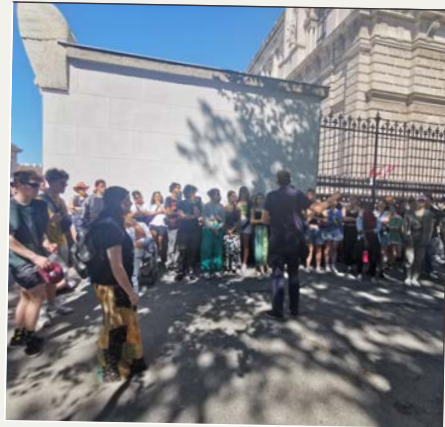
working together, and also due to the ruthless consequences if found (immediate execution or a slow death in a concentration camp).

The walk was a great introduction to Austria and Vienna's WW2 and Holocaust history. We really appreciated having Dieter there to talk us through it.

We left for our hostel soon after to enjoy a delicious meal of chicken wings, Viennese schnitzel, chips and salad. Really yummy! And no visit to Vienna is complete without having a taste of the world-famous Viennese schnitzel!







MON 3 JULY 2023

Day 13

*A super fun day
in Vienna:*

*Visiting the Resistance
Documentation Centre, heading down
to the Danube for a morning at the
beach, then off to the Prater and
ending the day with exploring the
city on foot*



At the Resistance Documentation Centre



We had an absolutely delightful morning! At about 9am we hopped on the train and headed back to Swedenplatz where we undertook a walk together through the area. We stopped off at the Resistance Documentation Centre and Archives to gain a deeper understanding of the various resistance actions undertaken by Austrians. The centre is quite small, and the reason is clear: there's not a hallova lot to say on the topic. This is a part of their history Austrians still need to get to grips with. While there are a number of examples of resistance, the majority of Austrians appear to have been complicit in many of the Nazi crimes, or at the very least, silent bystanders. Considering the grave consequences for resistance (execution or deportation to a concentration camp), one can try to understand why. We continued walking and took the time to appreciate the architecture, shops, art and general beauty of the city. Mr Brookbanks's son, Darren, joined us as a 'local' who has been living and working in Vienna for a while. He was able to advise on all the off-the-beaten-track places to visit.

And then the real fun started! We headed down to the Danube for a bit of swimming and sunbathing at Vienna's version of the beach - imported beach sand and all. What a jol! Everyone had their cozzies on, frolicked in the water and caught a bit of sun. We grabbed lunch at one of the many beach bars dotted all along the Danube and just took an hour or two to unwind.



At the Viennese
beach on the
Danube!





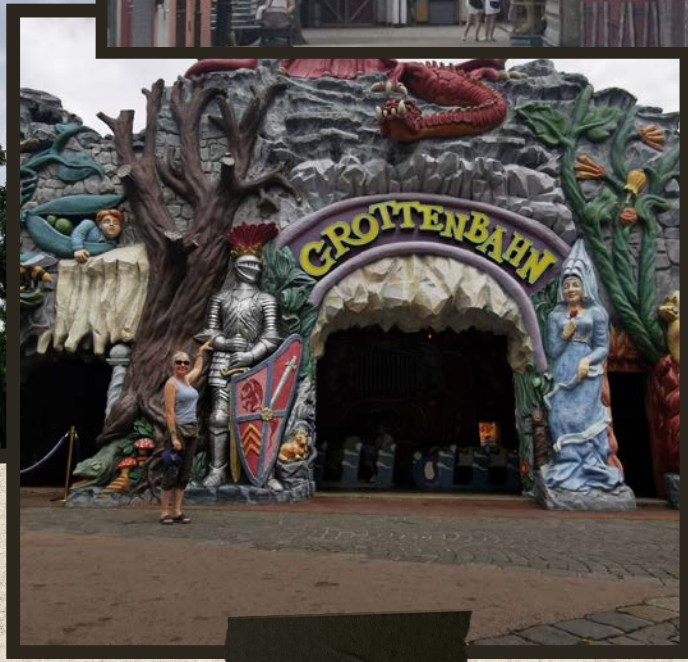
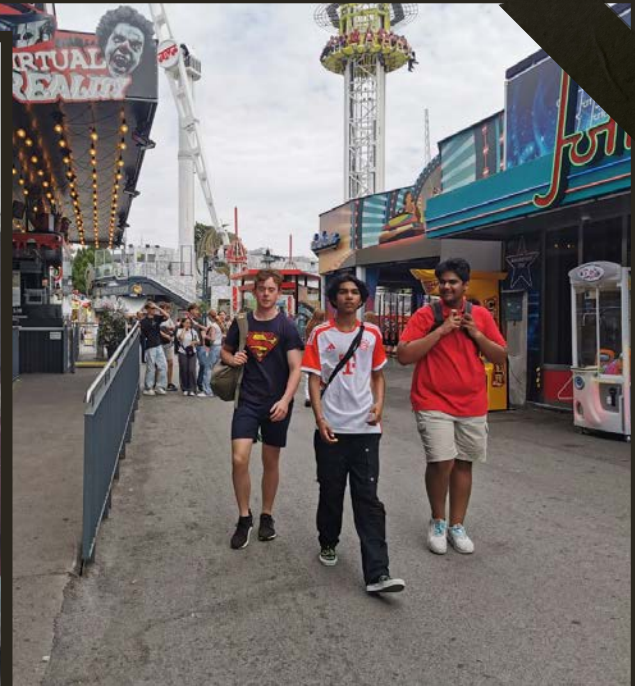
Next stop: the Prater, the oldest amusement park in Europe!

Mr Brookbanks was initially not convinced that this was a necessary part of the History Tour but with some pleading and serious arm-twisting, and a few subtle threats from Ms Laing, he finally caved. And how glad we are he did!

What a sensory overload! Food, music, colours and crazy rides ... Our travellers had a blast! From crazy swings and mind-blowing rollercoasters to scary ghost rides and bumper cars. Nothing we have ever experienced in SA compares to this! We enjoyed some street food and wandered around taking it all in while the bravest among us tried some of the death-defying rides. Rumour has it that Liam passed out, not once but three times, while riding the insane swing!

Next stop: the Prater!



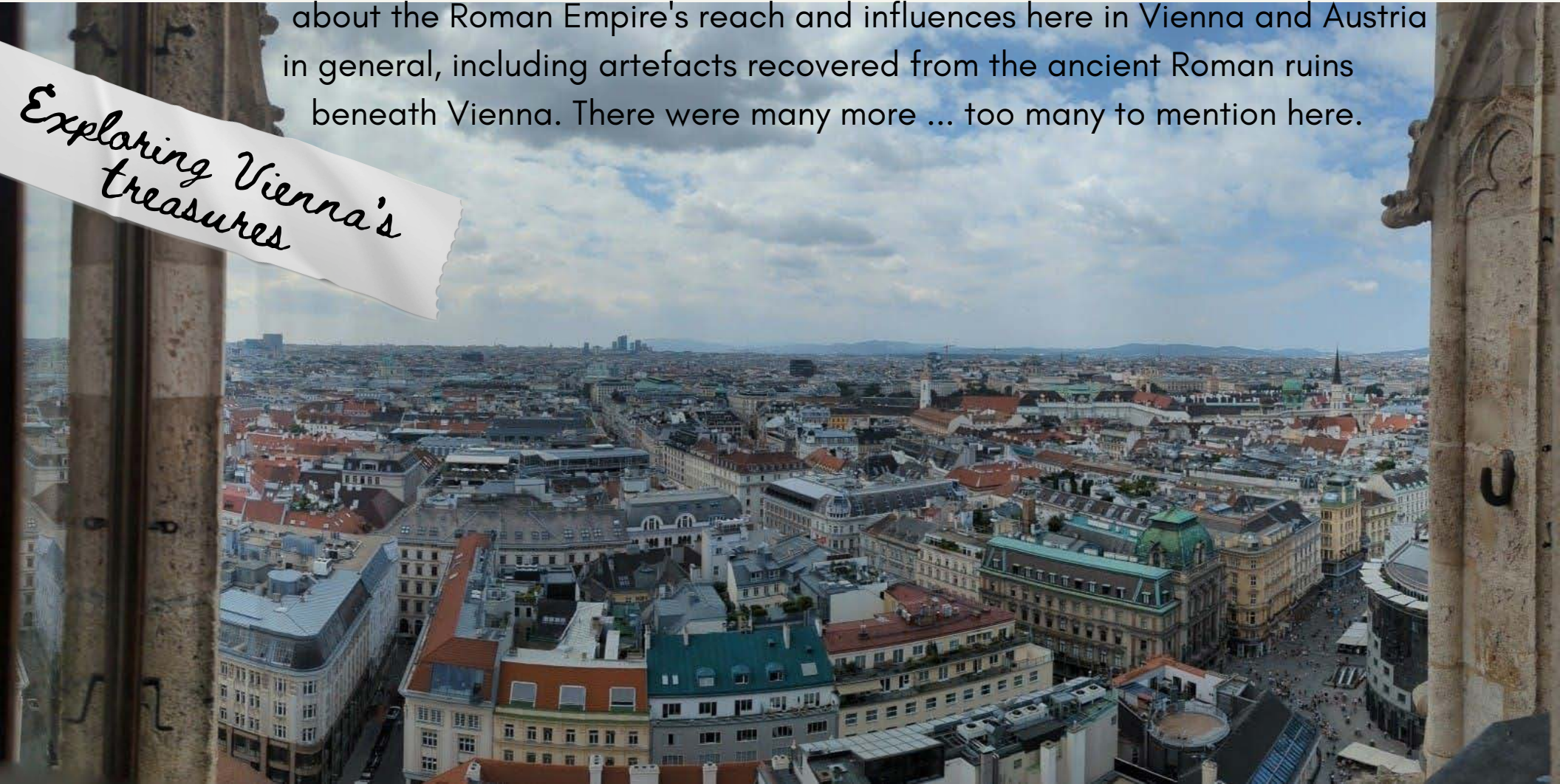


After the excitement of the Prater, the travellers could decide whether they wanted to head back into town to visit some art galleries, museums and shops, or whether they needed to go back to the hostel for a nap after the adrenaline rush. Most opted for the former to make the most of their time in magical Vienna.

Our travellers reported they visited the famous Belvedere Palace, home to an incredible collection of art, including Picasso, Monet and Klimt. Some were intrigued by the displays at the Military Museum, seeing the development of the military from the 1600s until WW2. Real armour, swords, guns and tanks to see up close and personal. The Roman History Museum informed

about the Roman Empire's reach and influences here in Vienna and Austria in general, including artefacts recovered from the ancient Roman ruins beneath Vienna. There were many more ... too many to mention here.

*Exploring Vienna's
treasures*

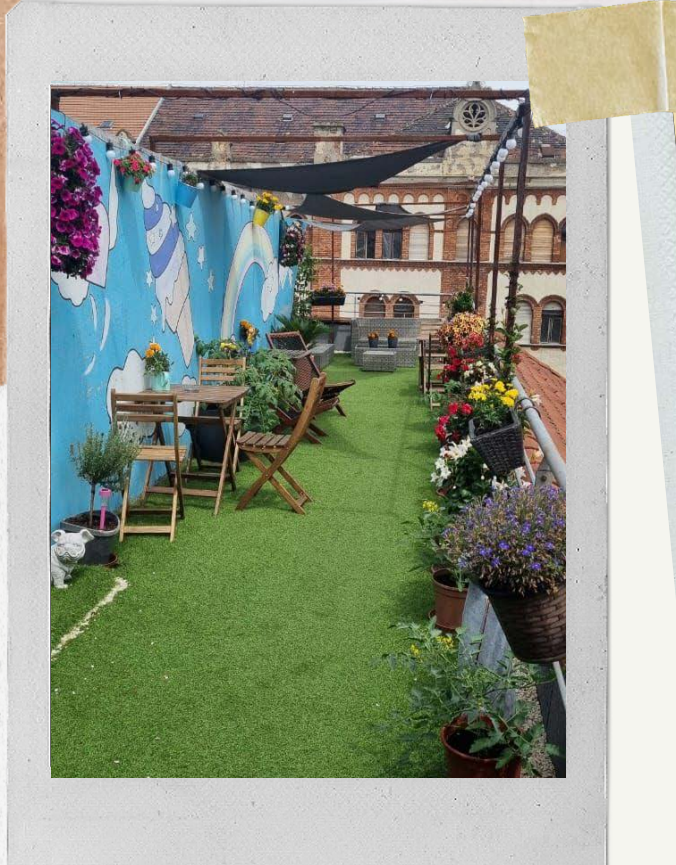




TUE 4 JULY 2023

Day 14

Moving on to
Budapest,
Hungary
and taking a look at Budapest's
Jewish Quarter



Maverick Urban Lodge

Just a bag dump...
we're heading
straight out the
door again.



Budapest Jewish Quarter Walking Tour

We split into two groups and followed our tour guides on a brisk walk down the road towards the Jewish Quarter. Our first stop was the lovely gardens by the National Museum where we learnt about the general history of Hungary. This allowed us to put its tragic WW1 and WW2 history into context.



We stopped at the Heroes Temple with its visually stunning Weeping Willow Tree of Life. Its leaves are filled with the names of those Hungarians who lost their lives in WW1, and names are still being added today as people uncover their Hungarian roots.

Next stop was the famous landmark, the Great Synagogue. Because Jews were not permitted to study certain courses like architecture, the Synagogue was designed by a Christian, Ludwig Forster. This explains its interesting and unusual design with an organ (usually not found in a synagogue), the bimah, where the Torah is read, is at the bottom end of the building instead of the middle, and men and women are separated.

In 1944 a large number of people fled into the Great Synagogue for protection against Arrow Cross gangs and died there from starvation. They were buried in the synagogue garden. This is therefore the only synagogue in the world with a cemetery on its grounds instead of adjacent to it.

We stopped at two other synagogues, one more orthodox with the traditional architecture and layout. Here we learnt about the Arrow Cross Party who took control of Hungary in 1944. They are described as 'Hungarian Nazis' who were mostly responsible for the killing of approximately 600 000 of the 800 000 Jews who lived in Hungary at the time - within a short 2 month period. The victims were either executed by shooting or deported to Auschwitz. A large proportion of Jews who were gassed at Auschwitz were, as a result, Hungarian.



Our guides pointed out some really cool street art while we were walking. It appears that street art, like in Berlin, is a big deal here. We saw some really great pieces.

Our tour ended with a walk through the night life area of Budapest, situated at the heart of the Jewish Quarter. This area used to be very run-down due to its history as a ghetto. Gentrification breathed new life into it and it is now a series of bars and courtyards, and the place of choice where Hungarians and tourists quench their thirst, dance and have fun, offering a blend of artistic ambiance, live music, and a lively atmosphere. It got its nickname, 'ruin bars', because of the dilapidated, ramshackle state of the buildings, as well as the second-hand or donated decor. The locals also call it 'green bars' due to the area overflowing with hanging and potted plants.

We returned to the hostel for a delicious supper of spaghetti, schnitzel, veggies and salad. And the cherry on top: pancakes with ice cream and chocolate sauce! Life doesn't get better than this (except maybe for chimney cakes, which we consumed in scandalous quantities in Prague, only to learn it actually originated in Hungary! We will simply have to have a few more here to compare...).

This evening we will head down to the Danube for the famous night time views of Buda across the river, or to the green bars / ruin bars to see what all the fuss is about.



The Danube in
Budapest, early
evening ...
absolute magic!



WED 5 JULY 2023

Day 15

Budapest:

Marvelling at the Fisherman's
Bastion, Matthias Church,
Parliamentary Buildings, St
Stephen's Basilica, and
reflecting at the Holocaust
Memorial Centre and the Shoes
on the Danube

Fisherman's Bastion & Matthias Church



It is cooking in Budapest! Literally and figuratively. We're having a great time while trying hard not to faint from heat stroke.

As we approached the Fisherman's Bastion, its intricate architecture stood tall and proud against the Budapest skyline. The sight itself was enough to make you feel like a character straight out of a fairy tale!

Legend has it that the bastion was built by fishermen to honor the memory of the fishermen's guild that protected the city during medieval times.

Ascending the stairs (quite the climb but strangely more heavy breathing were heard from the travellers' side than the teachers'...), you can't help but be mesmerized by the insane panoramic view of the Danube and her bridges.

The bastion itself is a masterpiece of neo-Gothic and neo-Romanesque architecture, with its gleaming white walls, turrets, archways and seven storybook towers. Each tower represents one of the seven chieftains who founded Hungary.

The Fisherman's Bastion also houses the Matthias Church, a marvel in its own right. Its colourful tiled roof, intricate details and magnificent stained glass windows turns it into a living work of art.

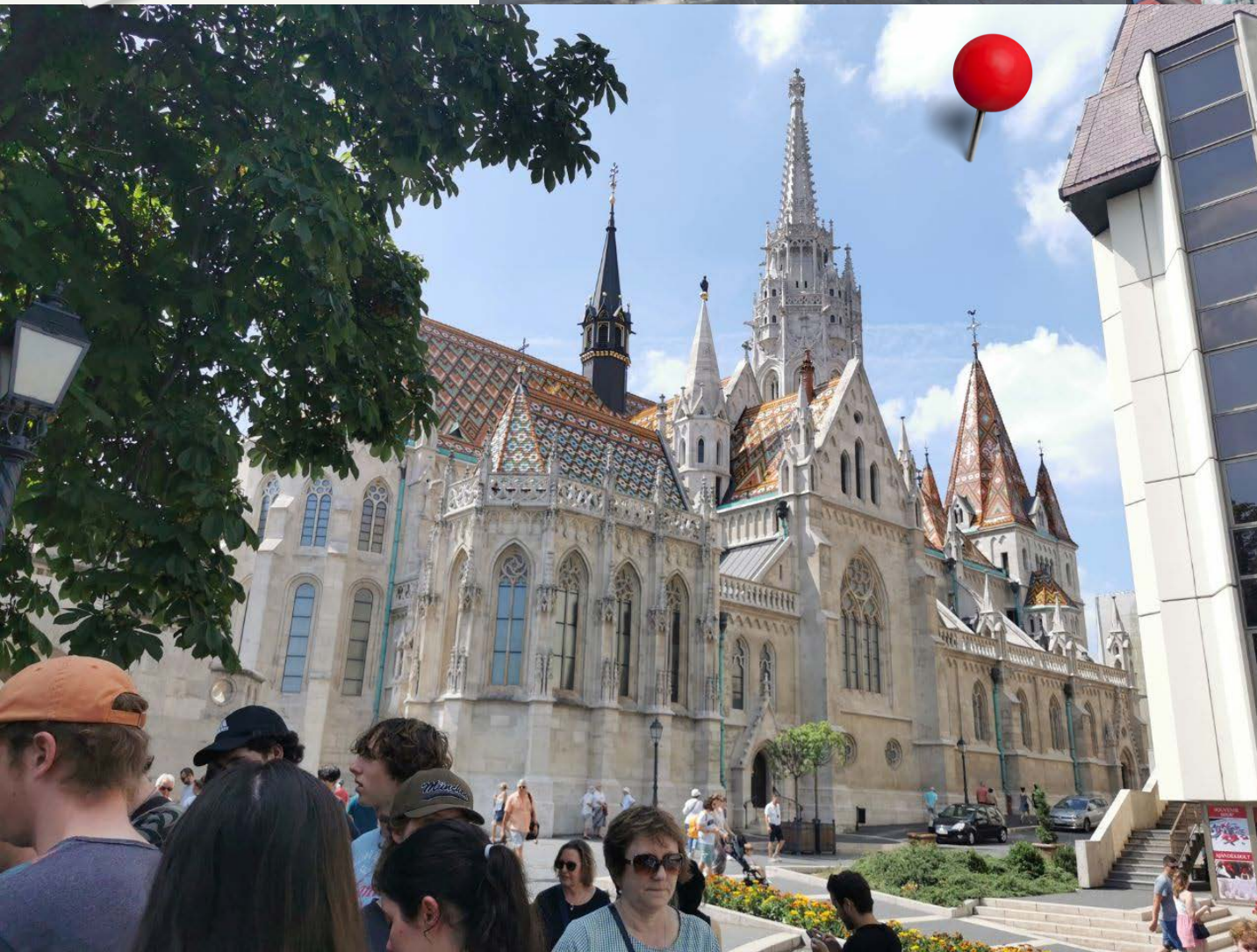
Mihir held high the name of Westerford's chess team. He challenged a gentleman to a game at one of the many benches that adorns the central square, and was in the lead when he had to tap out because we were heading back to the tram.



Fisherman's Bastion



Mattias Church



View from
the top

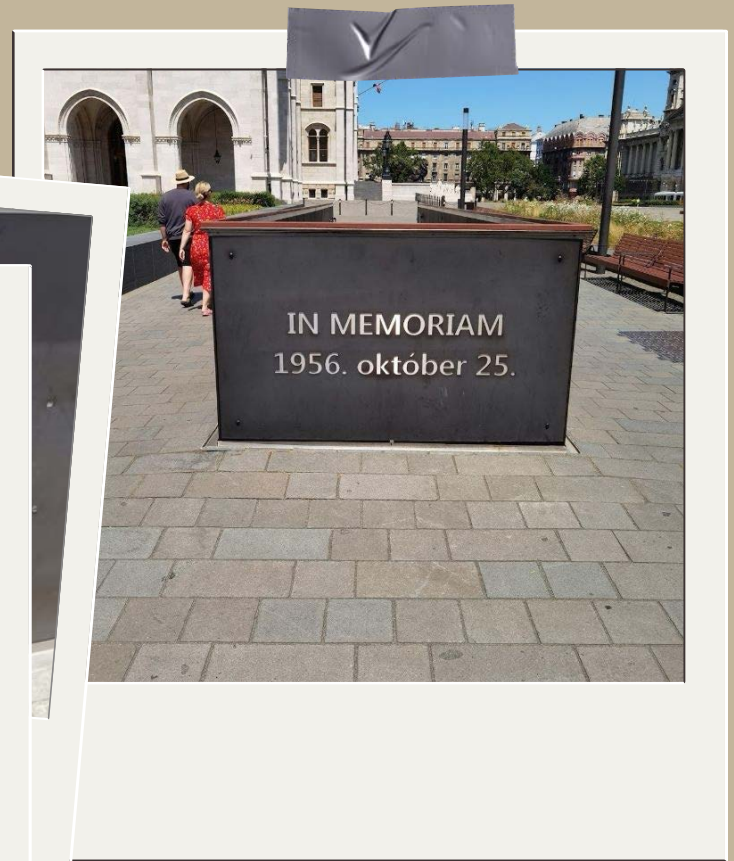


Parliamentary Buildings

Our next stop for the day was the awe-inspiring Parliamentary Buildings, an architectural masterpiece that stands proudly on the banks of the Danube River. We spent some time admiring it from all angles. We were feeling somewhat drained from the heat when we noticed the best invention since sliced bread: mist sprayers in the middle of the square! The travellers ran to joyfully frolic in the water. It was quite extraordinary that they proved they could indeed move faster than the pace of a glacier - which has become the standard speed at which they seem to move between sights. The teachers have evolved into expert sheep dogs herding everyone along. We were really quite astounded that a sprinkle of mist seem to be the motivator we were looking for to get them moving.

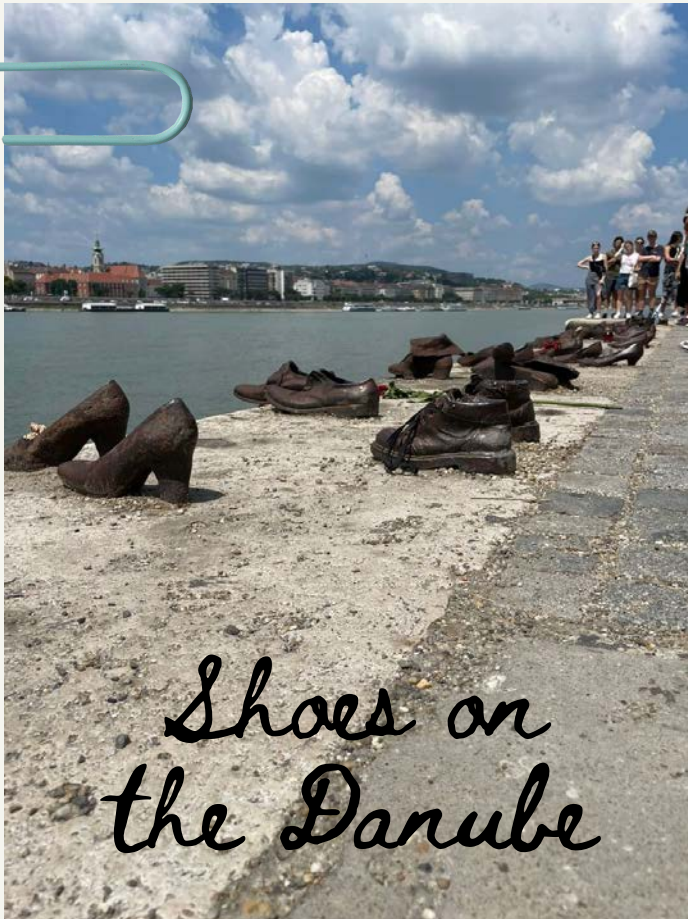


1956
Revolution
Memorial



Now blissfully cool(er), we ambled on to our next stop. En route, we walked past the 'In Memoriam: 1956 Revolution' which examines the events of 'Bloody Thursday', 25 October 1956, when soldiers from the Red Army, in order to quell the attempted revolution, opened fire on a peaceful crowd on the square here, killing hundreds of people. A metal construction full of bullet holes leads the way to an underground documentation and information centre. While quite simple in design, it very effectively communicates its message.

We made our way down to the banks of the Danube to experience the poignant art work and memorial known as the Shoes on the Danube. The sixty pairs of iron shoes mark the tragic site where, during the two months of the 'Arrow Cross Terror' (Dec 1944 - Jan 1945), fascist Arrow Cross militiamen shot 3 500 people, most of them Jews, after asking them to remove their shoes, and threw their bodies into the river to be washed away downstream. The memorial's sombre atmosphere evoked a deep sense of reflection. We took a few minutes to discuss the importance of memorialisation and remembrance.





St Stephen's
Basilica

Our last stop before lunch was St. Stephen's Basilica, a beautiful religious sanctuary named after Hungary's first king. It is said that his right hand is housed in the reliquary (eeeeek!). The towering dome of the basilica which dominates the city skyline is a sight to behold. Unfortunately the entrance fee is quite steep, so we could only view it from the outside. And then it was finally time for (a very late) lunch. As our travellers headed back to the hostel, they grabbed some street food on the way.





As we stepped into the Centre, we felt a mix of anticipation and solemnity, knowing that we were about to embark on a deeply impactful journey of remembrance. The Holocaust Memorial Centre is housed in a former synagogue, beautifully restored to honour both its historical significance and the lives lost. The exhibition, titled 'From

Depravation of Rights to Genocide' takes you on a chronological journey, starting with the pre-war Jewish community in Hungary and the rise of anti-Semitism. Each step unveils the chilling progression towards the ultimate horror of the Holocaust. We were divided into two groups and expertly guided through the exhibit. We started our tour in the Memorial Garden, a serene space dedicated to honouring the victims. The names of thousands of Hungarian Holocaust victims are etched onto the stone walls and serves as a powerful reminder of the magnitude of the tragedy.

Once inside, we were confronted with the unsanitised truth of the Holocaust, with a particular focus on Auschwitz where most of Hungary's Jewish population died. The haunting photographs, heart-wrenching personal stories and real video footage of what the Red Army soldiers found when they liberated Auschwitz cannot be described in words. We were left horrified, almost nauseated, with the levels of depravity at history's biggest death factory. It was a deeply moving experience that left an indelible mark on the soul. It serves as a stark reminder of the potential consequences of hatred, discrimination, prejudice, othering and indifference. One cannot help but feel a sense of renewed commitment to stand against injustice and to ensure that the lessons of the past are never forgotten. We concluded our tour with a visit to the Synagogue where we appreciated the opportunity to sit in silence to come to terms with what we have just seen.



In a debrief outside, we reflected on the journey we have been on these past 15 days, what we have learnt and witnessed and experienced, and how we have changed. The Holocaust Memorial Centre was a very fitting last (curriculum -based) stop on what has been an extraordinary History Tour.

Back at Maverick Lodge, we devoured our supper of Hungarian Gulash (so good!) and fruit salad, and travellers look forward to an evening of kareoke fun at the hostel. Tomorrow late morning: Istanbul, grab on to your seat belt, here we come!



THU 6 JULY 2023

Day 16

Off to Istanbul!

*With some extra airport and
hotel drama on the side*

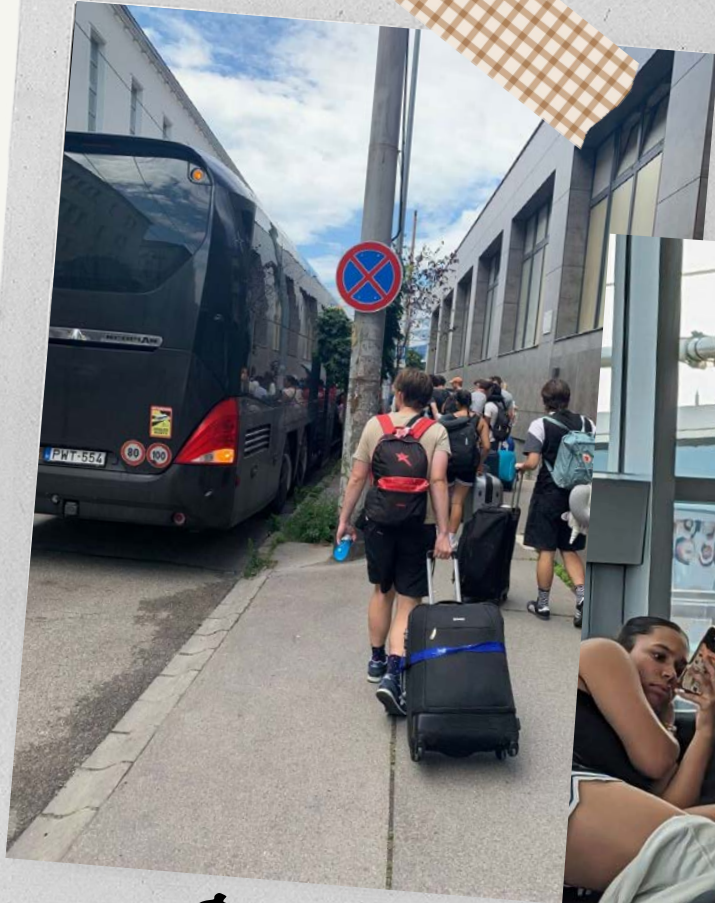
Our bus arrived at 11am to pick us up for our flight to Istanbul at 1:20 pm. Since the bus was illegally parked, it was a tight squeeze and a mad scramble to all get in, suitcases included. The irate public bus driver behind us who could not pass, gave us loud hoots, frowns and furious gestures. Some finger signs are universal, apparently. We got the message and hit the road in under 10 minutes.

Upon arrival at the airport, the seriously efficient Turkish Airlines personnel were eagerly waiting for us (while the poor people behind our group of 60 in the queue was not impressed). We got Roxy and her Maserati sorted in no time and everyone checked in without a hitch.

We had an hour to kill before boarding. Some of us grabbed a coffee while others hit up the duty-free shopping section. We had to spend all our leftover Euro coins here since those cannot be exchanged for Turkish Lira, only notes can. Being a Rooibos tea drinker, I was super impressed to see it on the menu. Wow! Of course I had to have it. Great excitement as we were making our way to Gate B09 for boarding: security has sealed off a section between the A and B gates due to a suspect bag ...half of our group was on the A side, and the others on the B side! Luckily the bomb disposal personnel determined fairly quickly that we have nothing to fret about and reopened the area after about 20 minutes.

We were happily reunited with the rest of the gang. ... Only to find out our plane was delayed by 2 hours. Cue Rooibos tea no 2 while we waited. Sam and Kai helped us beat the boredom by playing some pretty tunes on the piano. We finally boarded (you probably heard the sigh of relief all the way in Cape Town!) and will be taking flight soon. Roxy struck it lucky: emergency exit seat (more leg room) and 2 free seats next to her so she can put her feet up.

Excellent service from Turkish Airlines. Istanbul, here we come!




Exiting
Budapest



Waiting and waiting
for our plane



The now usual
checking-in chaos



We have finally arrived in Istanbul! We thought all our airport dramas were behind us. Little did we know... Having cleared immigration with all the travellers, Ms Sinzihara was stopped and not permitted to enter Turkey! Apparently her SA passport is a specific category as a refugee, and so needed a different type of Turkish visa, which we were not aware of. An experienced international traveller herself, having travelled to Europe and the US in recent years, she's never had a problem before. It is most unfortunate that she is therefore having to spend the time in transit at the airport until we get there tomorrow night.

Our two busses were waiting for us outside and whisked us off to a nice chicken, rice and salad restaurant supper with juicy watermelon for desert. Even though it was late evening, Istanbul was still a hot box measuring 31 degrees. Our guide warned us tomorrow will be a scorcher, with an expected temperature of 34 degrees. Wowzers!

But wait ... there's more drama to follow!



Proof of life!



We arrived at the hotel Mercure (very fancy glass sky scraper in the airport district) at about 22:30, only to find that the Turkish Airlines voucher provided to the hotel was for a group of 48, and not for our entire group. Of the 48, they had allocated



two people arbitrarily to a room - not according to gender, which is a non-negotiable for us. We then had to unscramble the omelette, debate for more rooms for our group, and by 23:45 we finally had everyone allocated to rooms.

Exhausted and a little irritated, we trudged off to our rooms to collapse into bed. And we will need the rest. Tomorrow will be a

long day with our flight back to CT only departing at 01:20. There is a bright light at the end of this tunnel, however. We are super excited to experience some of what Istanbul has to offer: a cruise on the Bosphorus, the Blue Mosque, the Hagia Sophia, the Basilica Cistern and the Grand Bazaar. Bring it on!

FRI 7 JULY 2023

Day 11

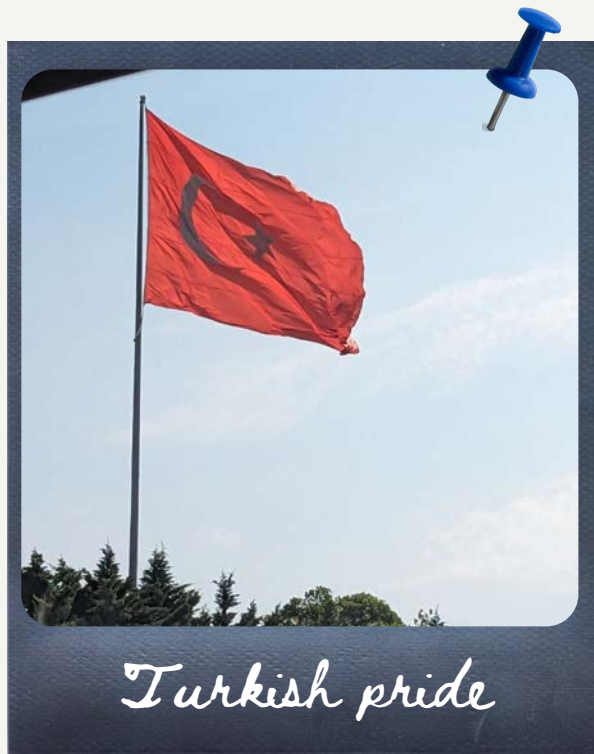
*Istanbul,
Turkey*

*Including a cruise on the
Bosphorus, and visits to the
Blue Mosque, Hagia Sophia,
Basilica Cistern and the Grand
Bazaar*

After a massive breakfast straight off the tables of the gods, we buckled up to embark on a whirlwind tour of the mesmerizing city of Istanbul where East and West collides, ancient charm meets modern allure, and where centuries of history and culture pulsates through every cobblestone.

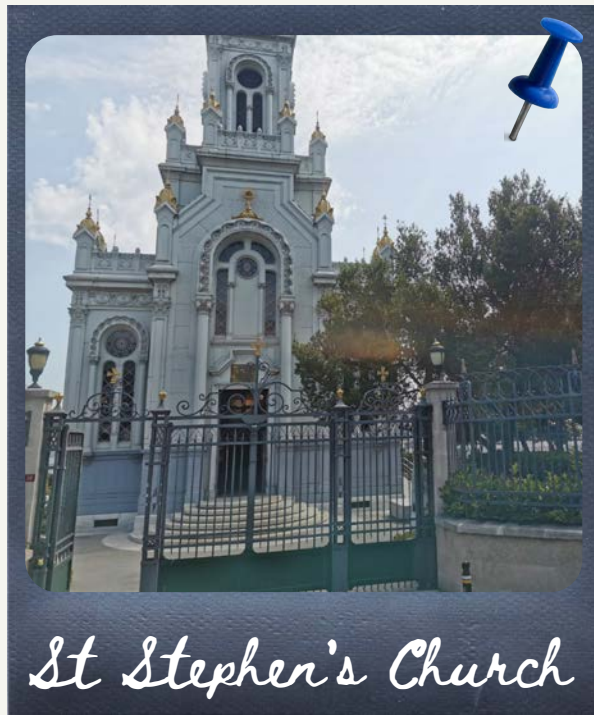
*Istanbul viewed from
the Bosphorus*





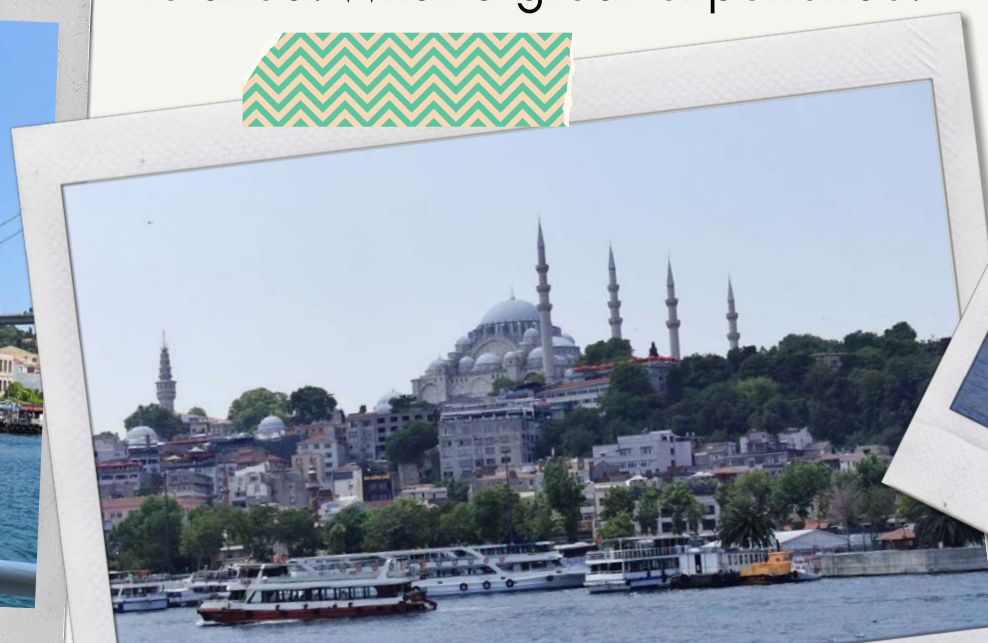
En route to our first destination, our two 30-seater busses, each with our very own city guide, passed ruins of the old city left from the month-long battle of Constantinople when the Ottoman empire captured the city in 1453.

We also passed St Stephen's Church, a unique church made from metal! Designed and built in Vienna, it was shipped to Istanbul with bells imported from Russia. While certainly unique, we can't help but question its practicality. I mean, it is not even high summer yet and we're topping 34 degrees! Was metal really the best choice?



*Cruisin' the
Bosphorus*

Then our adventure officially began with a cruise along the legendary Bosphorus, or the Istanbul Straight as the locals call it, the waterway that separates Europe and Asia. The Bosphorus has been an important trade route for centuries. It has witnessed the rise and fall of empires, serving as a vital lifeline. Istanbul spans both sides, and therefore stands with one foot on each continent. We marvelled at the iconic landmarks that line the shores, each one bearing witness to the city's rich history. Several incredible palaces in various styles and built at different times during Istanbul's long existence dot the banks. The skyline, too, is interesting: the ancient mosques and palaces with their domes and minarets rubs shoulders with the modern skyscrapers, treatments to its thriving present. We gazed, put up our feet and relaxed. What a great experience!





Good Times

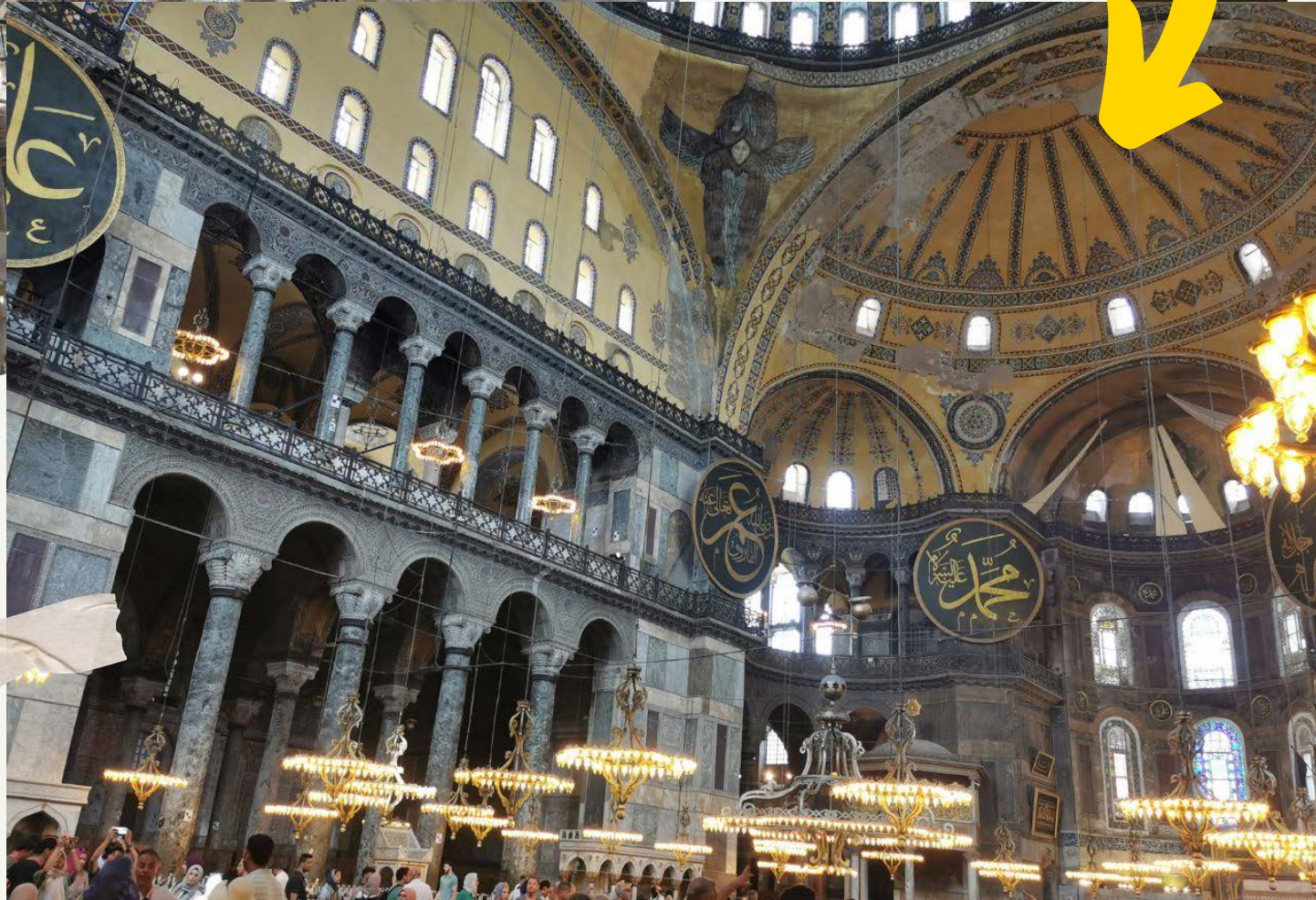


Great Vibes



Blue Mosque

Hagia
Sophia



Once back on land, we crawled our way through the terrible Istanbul traffic (Capetonians really have nothing to complain about!) towards the Sultanahmet district, or Old Town, where the two architectural wonders awaited.

First, we arrived at the awe-inspiring Blue Mosque, officially known as the Sultan Ahmed Mosque. This masterpiece of Ottoman architecture boasts domes, minarets, and intricate mosaics that adorn its interior. It was constructed during the early 17th century and earned its nickname from the 20,000 shimmering blue Iznik tiles adorning its interior. Truly a sight to behold!

Out of respect for this old place of worship, women have to wear head scarves and everyone's shoulders and knees have to be covered. We we're grateful for the free scarves handed out to tourists upon entry. The atmosphere inside feels almost hallowed, and one senses you are in the presence of something extraordinary.



Just a stone's throw away stands the grand and iconic Hagia Sophia, a time capsule where Byzantine and Ottoman influences converge. This architectural marvel was originally constructed as a Byzantine cathedral in the 6th century, it later became an imperial mosque, then a museum and has as recently as two years ago been converted back to a fully functioning mosque. We gazed in awe at the majestic dome, adorned with mesmerizing mosaics and intricate calligraphy, which tell stories of the city's vibrant past.

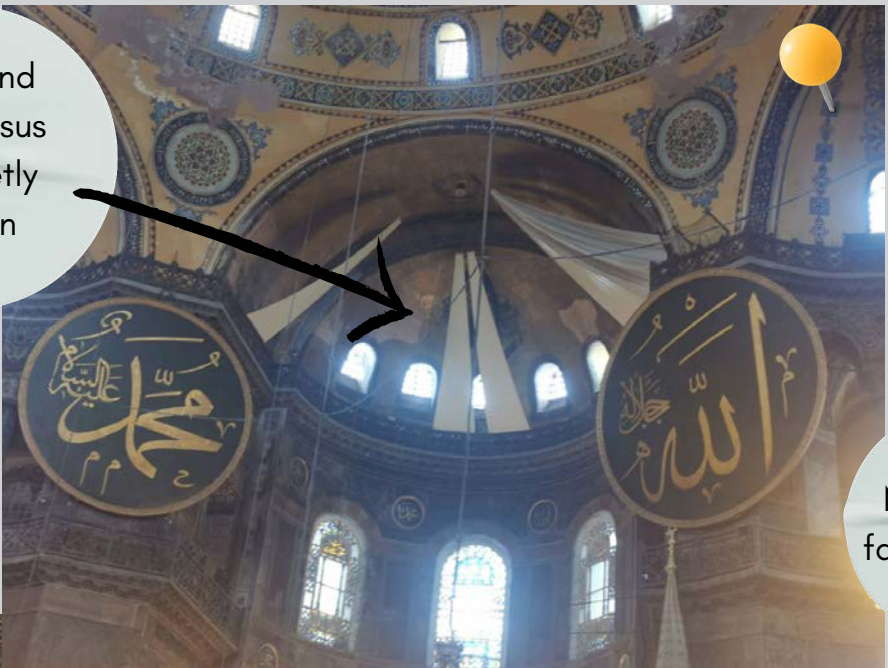


It was so interesting to see the convergence of two faiths in one building. In one corner, a prominent cross, in another the names of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad, then a mosaic scene of the birth of Jesus and in another the Islamic symbols. We asked an in-house guide how this works now that the Hagia is a mosque again. The answer surprised us with its tolerance and acceptance: only one Christian artwork, a mosaic of Mother Mary holding Baby Jesus, has been discreetly covered in cloth, and then only because it is right in the centre of the direction to Mecca which the worshippers face every day when they come to pray.

The Hagia Sophia embodies Istanbul's unique blend of history and cultural heritage, an eternal symbol of harmony between different eras and civilizations.

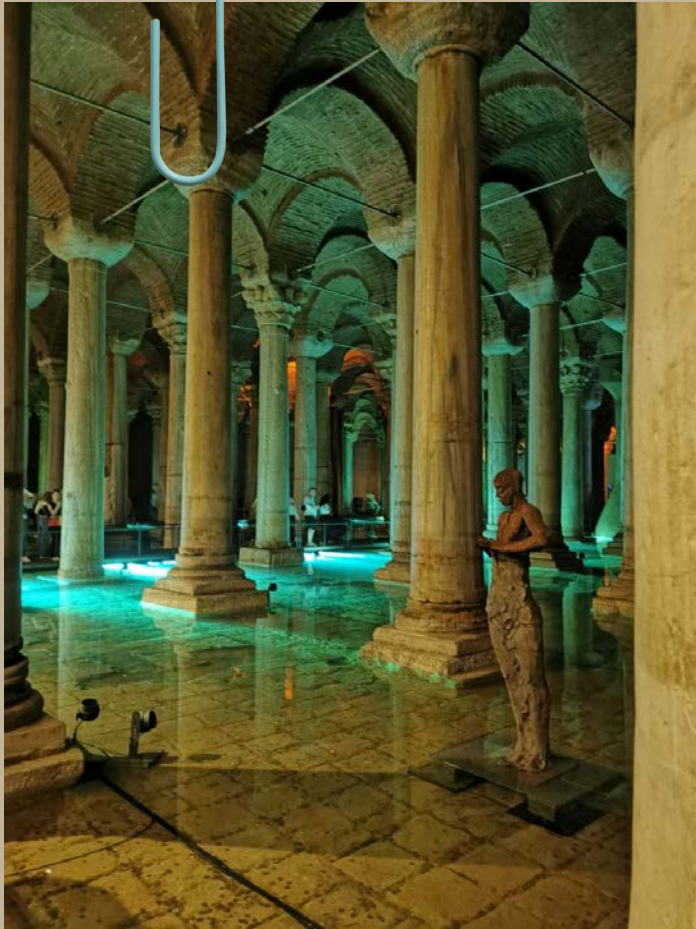


Mary and Baby Jesus discreetly hidden



Notice the faded cross?





Next on our journey, we descended into the mystical depths of the Basilica Cistern, a hidden gem beneath the bustling city streets. Imagine a vast underground chamber with dimly lit pathways that led us through a forest of towering ancient Roman columns. Two of them are famously adorned with the visage of Medusa, the mythical Gorgon whose gaze could turn onlookers to stone. Local lore suggests that these columns were positioned upside down to neutralize Medusa's powers. This subterranean marvel once served as a reservoir, providing water to the palaces and gardens above. Today, it offers a glimpse into the ingenuity and architectural prowess of Byzantine engineering. As we wandered along the walkways, the sound of trickling water and distant echoes added an atmosphere of mystery, and transported us back to the days of ancient Constantinople. We did not mind in the least that it was refrigerator-cold; a most welcome momentary reprieve from the searing heat above.







Finally! The part our travellers have been looking forward to for days! Eager to indulge in Istanbul's vibrant market scene, and buy some souvenirs and gifts for our loved ones back home, we set our sights on the illustrious Grand Bazaar. Entering this labyrinthine marketplace was like stepping into an Arabian Nights tale, with bustling streets lined with shops offering an array of treasures. The vibrant colours, huge selection and dizzying sounds of bartering were an assault on the senses in the best possible way. The Grand Bazaar is a testament to Istanbul's history as a major trading hub and a vibrant centre of commerce. We noticed a few travellers struggling to walk under the weight of their purchases - not sure how that is going to play out at the airport baggage weigh-in ... but why concern ourselves now with later's problems?!

*Finally!
Grand Bazaar*

SAT 8 JULY 2023

Day 18

*Homeward
bound!*

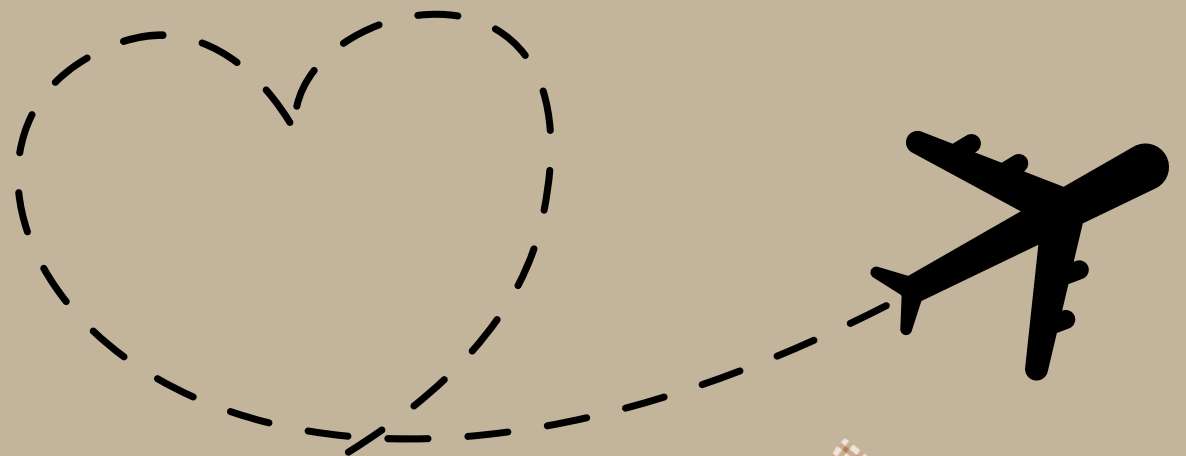
*Flying Turkish Airlines back to
the Mother City*

And before we knew it, it was time to wave all the magic goodbye and make our way to the airport for our 2am flight back to CT. No airport dramas this time and our plane will depart on time. What a refreshing change!

We arrived about 4 hours before departure so had ample time for supper and some even managed a nap.

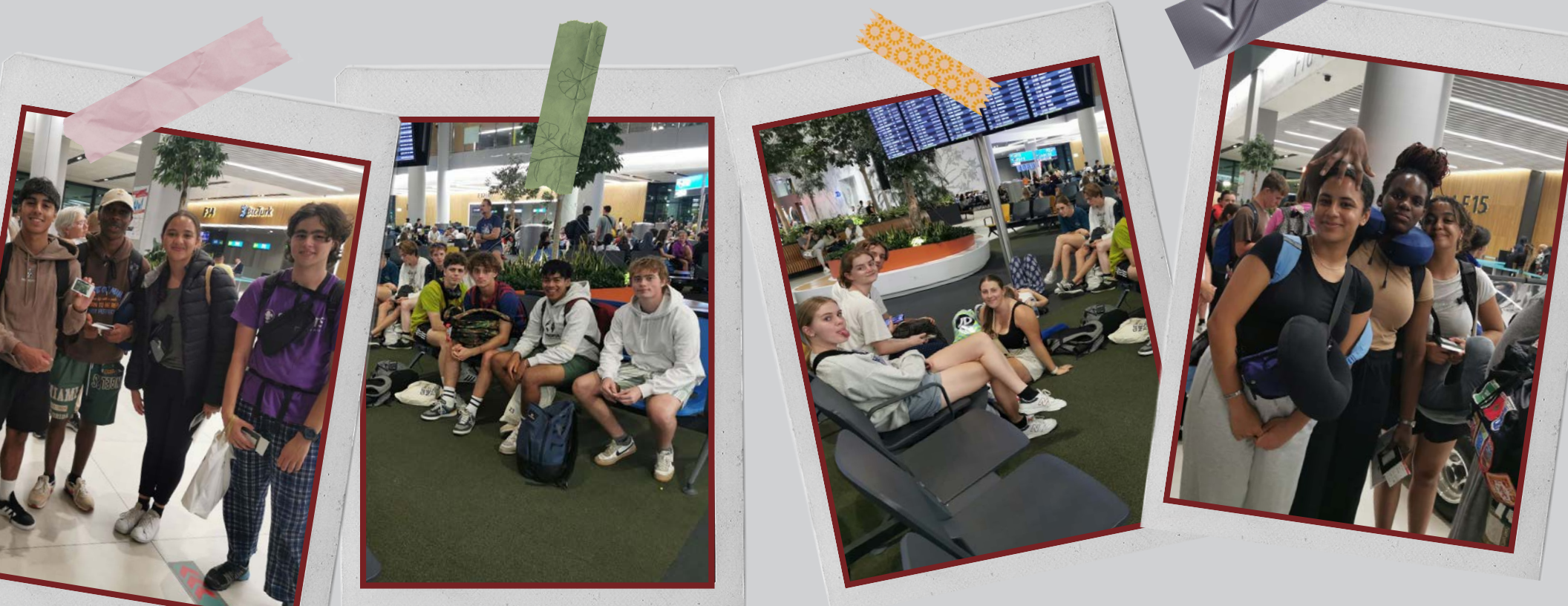
Poor Ms Sinzihara made it through a very boring 24 hours in transit and was ecstatic to see us. She was, in fact, the first person in line to board!

See you soon at noon in CT!



After a long 11,5 hours of flying, mostly spent watching movies, pretending to sleep and walking back and forth to the bathroom to keep the blood flowing, we have made it safely back to the Mother City. We left Istanbul in 34 degrees and arrived here in 12 degrees. I'm not sure we're fully prepared for braving the CT winter! We will find novel ways to show off our Europe tan, I'm sure.

We had a truly extraordinary tour, filled with incredible experiences. Our travellers have learnt so much, and have grown in so many different ways. I'm sure these changes will become more apparent to our parents as they observe their children in the weeks ahead. For now, as all good things have to come to an end, it is over and out as we hand our travellers back to their parents.





Thank you FOR GREAT MEMORIES