Winter wonderland
Griechengasse, in Vienna’s inner city, is the Greek quarter
VIENNA: SECRETS OF THE WINTER CITY

Christmas looks a little different this year. WILL HIDE explores the contemporary side of a Viennese winter

今年的聖誕節來與別不同，就讓Will Hide帶領大家探索維也納冬日的現代風貌

PHOTOGRAPHY: ULRICH SPERL
There are certain cities where a blanket of fog actually enhances the character of the place. So it is with Vienna in winter. In the Austrian capital, walk down a damp, cobbled street as the darkness of night starts to envelop, and you are the star of your own film noir, a modern-day Third Man.

I thought this as I passed the next shopfront of Scher’s at number 4 Brünnerstrasse, where both German kaisers and Austro-Hungarian emperors had their boots made more than a century ago. You can still get a pair of shoes made today by the seventh generation of the family: prices start at €5,000 (HK$33,000). Onwards, I ambled behind the tail spire of St. Stephen’s Cathedral, adjusting my umbrella to stop the rain running down my trousers, then turned left down Brandstätte, towards Café Korb.

The Austrian capital is one imbued with tradition: how could the capital of a former empire not be? But at this time of year, delve a little deeper and there’s an alternative side: more to see than picture-postcard Christmas markets, mugs of steaming mulled wine, formal white-jacketed waiters, women in dirndls (traditional dresses), baroque churches and grand boulevards.

That’s true in Café Korb, owned by actress, performance artist and ‘cosmopolitan’ – both noun and adjective – Susanne Wid. Every second Saturday she hosts a gathering of local philosophers and every second Wednesday psychoanalysts discuss current issues. Sigmund Freud used to frequent the café back in his day. The last time I was here, I brought my mother. I know, I know...

There are some very grand, imposing cafés in Vienna, but truthfully Café Korb isn’t one of them, although that’s certainly not to say it doesn’t have bags of character: if Mad Men were ever to shoot an episode in Vienna, it would be here. I swam out with an order of melange, a local take on strong but milky coffee, and a generous slice of apfelstrudel, which comes swimming in hot, deliciously yellow vanilla sauce. Perfect for a cold afternoon. And good to eat while I sit and think you should visit Vienna over say, Berlin or Prague at this time of year.

Because of Vienna’s seamless blend of the traditional and the contemporary, bunched up in a relatively compact area. There is a lot to do but you don’t have to go far.

Vienna is made up of districts and after my dessert I make my way to the trendy restaurants and boutiques of the 7th. Is this the Brooklyn of Austria? I wonder to New York expat and fashion stylist Lucie Lamster-Thury, who moved for love 12 years ago and on the way became smitten with her adopted home, too. She now offers bespoke shopping tours, concentrating on local designers who fly under the radar.

‘You could say that,’ she replies, laughing. ‘There’s a concentration of designers here, some great quality and what I really like is they’re super eco-conscious.

‘For example, there are two sisters who have a shop called Werksprung. One makes leather products; the other, the silver. And the shop is their atelier – you can see them at work there as well as buy.

‘And there’s a cool store called Local. The designer works there but she also hosts others from central Europe. The stuff is avant garde but wearable. You could wear it in the office then go straight out in the evening.’ She reals off other favourites but you’ll have to join her tour to learn more. ☺

Some cities in the mist of fog seem hyped up to depict some special individuality, or some thing else is lurking in the fog. In Vienna, old and new is interwoven – the former imperial capital, the former capital of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the former capital of the empire.

So I walked the streets of Vienna, the streets of the old town, the streets of the new town, the streets of the old city, the streets of the new city. And I thought of Vienna, the city of music, the city of art, the city of beauty. A city where old and new coexist, a city where tradition and modernity mix.

Café Korb is the heart of the city. It is a place where the old and the new come together. It is a place where tradition and modernity mix. It is a place where history and culture come together. And it is a place where the spirit of Vienna comes alive. ☺