

WACHAU VALLEY DESTINATION GUIDE



DÜRNSTEIN & MELK

The Wachau Valley, Lower Austria

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DÜRNSTEIN

OVERVIEW AND HISTORY

Dürnstein takes its name from the ruined castle that still looks down over the town — from the German *duerr/dürr* (“dry”) and *Stein* (“stone”), since the fortress sat high and dry on its rocky hill above the damp banks of the Danube. The modern town has grown up in the narrow strip of land between that castle and the river.

The earliest historical records of the settlement date to the late 12th century, and it was the castle above the town that put Dürnstein on the map. In 1192, King Richard I of England — Richard the Lionheart — was returning from the Third Crusade when he was captured and held prisoner here by Leopold V, Duke of Austria. Richard had offended Leopold by casting down his standard at the Battle of Acre, and the duke also suspected the English king of ordering the murder of his cousin, Conrad of Montferrat, in Jerusalem. Pope Celestine III excommunicated Leopold for capturing a fellow crusader, and the duke eventually handed Richard over to Henry VI, Holy Roman Emperor, who imprisoned him at Trifels Castle.



The castle itself didn't survive the centuries unscathed: it was almost completely destroyed in 1645 by Swedish troops under Field Marshal Lennart Torstenson during the Thirty Years' War. Today only ruins remain, reachable by footpath — but they're the most photographed ruins in the Wachau.

Dürnstein's other great landmark, the Abbey (Stift Dürnstein), was founded in 1410 by Canons Regular from Třeboň and rebuilt in Baroque style from 1710 according to plans by Joseph Munggenast, Jakob Prandtauer, and Matthias Steinl. Emperor Joseph II dissolved the monastery in 1788, and it later passed to Herzogenburg Priory. Its brilliant blue-and-white bell tower, visible from the river, is the single most iconic image of the Wachau.

Dürnstein also has a footnote in Napoleonic history: the Battle of Dörenstein was fought nearby on 11 November 1805, during the War of the Third Coalition. Today the town is known above all for its wine — and, together with the rest of the Wachau, as one of the most popular stretches of the Danube for travelers.

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GETTING AROUND DÜRNSTEIN

Dürnstein is small and steep, and the best way to see it is on foot — the old town, the abbey, and the riverside promenade are all within easy walking distance of one another. The one genuine hike is up to the castle ruins, which takes about 20–30 minutes on a steep, rocky path; sturdy shoes are worth it for the panoramic views over the town, the river, and the vineyards below.

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WHAT TO SEE IN DÜRNSTEIN

Burgruine Dürnstein (Dürnstein Castle Ruins)

Access by footpath only, and open all hours. Built in the 12th century, the castle is best known as the prison of King Richard the Lionheart from December 1192 to March 1193. The Swedes captured it in 1635, toward the end of the Thirty Years' War, and later destroyed the outer gate; after serving as a refuge during the Austro-Turkish War a couple of decades later, it was abandoned and left to fall into disrepair. In the late 17th century it was purchased by an Austrian noble family, which still owns it today. Entry is free.

Stift Dürnstein (Dürnstein Monastery)

Founded in 1410 and forcibly closed in 1788 on the order of Emperor Joseph II, the abbey is today managed by a consortium of Augustinian monastic orders. Its distinctive blue-and-white bell tower is considered the icon of the Wachau region. Independent visitors can access the courtyard, church, and main terrace; guided tours (in German, English, and French) also reach the crypt and cloister, run every Sunday at noon or by advance booking, and last about an hour. Open April–October, Monday–Friday 09:00–18:00 and Sundays/holidays 10:00–18:00 (last admission 17:30); November–March, guided visits only, Sundays, for groups of 20 or more. Without a guide: €3.50 adults, €2.60 students, €1.50 children (6–14). With a guide: €6 adults, €3.50 students, €3 children.

Kunigundenkirche (St. Kunigunde Church)

The former parish church is the oldest in Dürnstein, dating from 1200. Most of the building was reconstructed in 1783, but the original tower and sacristy survive.

The Old Town

Wander the alleyways below the abbey and you'll find small stores and boutiques tucked among Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque town houses. Don't miss Prangerplatz and the medieval Kremser Tor, the town gate still standing from Dürnstein's original fortifications.

Danube Promenade

A scenic riverside walk with views of passing cruise ships and the terraced Wachau vineyards across the water. The whole valley is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, prized for its natural beauty and cultural landscape — even a simple stroll along the river feels like part of the sightseeing.

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WINE TASTING & HEURIGEN

The Wachau is one of Austria's most respected wine regions, and Dürnstein sits right in the middle of it. Local cellars offer tastings of Grüner Veltliner and Riesling, the two grapes the valley is best known for, and seasonal Heuriger taverns pair rustic Austrian food with house-made wine — a natural stop for an afternoon or evening.

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WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Bäckerei & Konfiserie Schmidl

Operating since 1780. In 1905 this bakery was the birthplace of the Wachauer Laberl, a wheat-and-rye sourdough roll commonly served in Heurigen. The small café serves pastries and coffee, and sells its own Marillenmarmelade (apricot jam). Open April–October, Monday–Saturday 07:00–18:00, Sunday/holidays 08:00–18:00; November–March, Monday–Friday 07:00–11:00, Saturday 07:00–12:00.

Alter Klosterkeller

Set in the former monastic cellar, with a garden overlooking both the vineyards and the Danube. Serves local dishes paired exclusively with local wine — no beer. Open April–October, Monday–Friday from 15:00, weekends and holidays from noon. Reservations recommended.

Weinschenke Altes Presshaus

Housed in an early 18th-century building near the town center, this is a good spot to sample both the local wine and regional cuisine in a rustic setting. Many dishes put creative twists on traditional specialties, made from locally sourced ingredients; seating is available

indoors or in a shaded courtyard. Open Sunday 10:00–22:00, Tuesday–Saturday 11:30–23:00.

Restaurant Loibnerhof

A family-run vineyard just outside town in Unterloiben, especially known for its Riesling and Grüner Veltliner, with a well-regarded restaurant specializing in Wachau cuisine. In summer, guests can dine outdoors in a large apple orchard. Open Wednesday–Sunday 11:30–24:00, kitchen until 21:00; open on holidays. Reservations recommended.

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MELK

OVERVIEW AND HISTORY

At the western gateway to the Wachau, Melk is dominated by one building: the great golden-yellow Benedictine abbey that stands on a rocky bluff directly above the Danube. It's one of the largest and most celebrated Baroque ensembles in Europe, and together with the rest of the Wachau valley it forms a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The site's history goes back further than the abbey itself. In the 10th century the Holy Roman Emperor granted a strip of land along the Danube, with a fortified settlement at Melk, to Leopold I of Babenberg — the founder of Austria's first ruling dynasty. For a time the Babenberg castle at Melk served as the family's residence and burial place, along with the tomb of St. Coloman, one of the country's earliest patron saints.



In 1089, Margrave Leopold II gave the castle to Benedictine monks from Lambach Abbey, and Melk has been a working monastery ever since. A monastic school — a forerunner of today's Stiftsgymnasium Melk — followed in the 12th century, and the abbey's library quickly built a reputation as one of the great manuscript collections of the region. In the 15th century, Melk became the center of the “Melk Reform,” a movement that reinvigorated monastic life across Austria and southern Germany.

A fire in the late 13th century destroyed the original monastery, and it took centuries — and, by the 1560s, a religious community reduced to just a handful of monks — before Melk fully recovered. The abbey seen today is the result of a top-to-bottom Baroque rebuilding carried out between 1702 and 1736 to designs by the architect Jakob Prandtauer, with frescoes by Johann Michael Rottmayr and Paul Troger.



Melk's reputation as a center of learning likely saved it: when Emperor Joseph II dissolved dozens of Austrian monasteries between 1780 and 1790, Melk was spared. It went on to survive the Napoleonic Wars and, after the 1938 Anschluss, the confiscation of the school and much of the abbey by the Nazi state; both were returned after the Second World War. A 17-year restoration beginning in 1978 preserved the abbey's frescoes and marble interiors, and the Stiftsgymnasium Melk remains in operation today as the oldest continuously open school in Austria.

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VISITING MELK ABBEY

(David's Austria & Christmas tours do not visit the inside of Melk Abbey)

Melk Benedictine Abbey (Stift Melk), Abt-Berthold-Dietmayr-Straße 1. Between April and early November, the abbey can be visited independently or with a guide; from November to March, entry is by guided tour only, offered at 11:00 and 14:00 in German and English.

Typical opening hours: May–September daily 09:00–17:30 (last entry 17:00); March–April and October daily 09:00–16:30 (last entry 16:00). Plan for at least an hour inside the abbey itself, and two to three hours if you also want to walk the gardens and old town — hours and prices can shift by season, so it's worth checking ahead of a visit.

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WHAT TO SEE IN MELK

The Abbey Church (Stiftskirche)

The golden, twin-towered abbey church is the showpiece of the complex, with a 200-foot dome and lavishly gilded interior. Damaged by fire in 1947, it has since been fully restored, statues and altars regilded in gold leaf.

The Marmorsaal (Marble Hall)

Pilasters coated in red marble support a richly painted allegorical ceiling by Paul Troger — one of the grandest rooms in the abbey, and a favorite for photos.

The Library

Rising two full floors, with another Troger ceiling overhead, the abbey library holds roughly 80,000 volumes and is one of the reasons Melk was renowned as a center of scholarship for centuries.

The Kaisergang (Imperial Corridor)

A 200-meter gallery lined with portraits of Austrian rulers, doubling today as the abbey museum.

The Old Town

A cobbled stairway leads down from the abbey to Melk's old town, where the Rathausplatz (Town Hall square) and the Coloman fountain mark the start of the town's themed walking trails. It's compact enough to explore in an hour, with cafés, bakeries, and restaurants tucked along the way.

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