An Interview With Christian:

A Look At Austria

By

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For the purposes of my interview, I talked with Christian Drganc, a computer programmer and database administrator with Sony DADC out of Anif, Austria, currently working in the Terre Haute, Indiana branch. But first, a little bit about the country of Austria.

Austria is a landlocked country in Europe, sharing borders Germany, Czechoslovakia and Italy. Austria is a mountainous country, lying within the Swiss Alps region. Only a quarter of the country can be considered low lying, and only about 32% of the country lies beneath 500 feet compared to sea level. Austria is a cool/temperate country, lying as it does in a mountainous region. Although it can be pretty cold in the winters, it has relatively warm summers, with temperatures reaching around 68-95 degrees Fahrenheit (Austria, 2009). When asked a similar question, Christian agreed with the information presented above, giving me the same information (About Austria, 2009). He also went on to tell me that Austria is a federal republic, divided up into nine separate states. Christian was born in the capital of the state called Salzburg, which is also named Salzburg (About Austria, 2009). The actual capital of Austria as a whole is Vienna (Austria, 2009).

In terms of GDP (Gross Domestic Product), Austria is one of the 10 richest countries in the world, coming in at #10. The United States, for comparison, comes in at #6 (Richest Countries in the World, 2009). Austria has a social market economy. Austria joined the European Union in 1995, and switched to using the Euro along with most of the rest of Europe in 2002, previously using the Austrian schilling as its main form of currency (Economy of Austria, 2009). Due to its close proximity to Germany, the economic success or hardships of Austria were closely related to those of Germany until Austria joined the European Union, which opened up trade relations with several other countries in Europe, thus lessening their dependency on Germany as a trade partner (Austria, 2009).

The government of Austria is federal Parliamentarian democratic republic, with its capital located in the city of Vienna. The Parliament of Austria consists of two parts. The Nationalrat has elections every 5 years, and is the dominant house in terms of legislation. The Bundesrat is the upper legislation in the Parliament, and has the power of veto over the rest of Parliament, although this can be overruled by holding a second successful vote by the Nationalrat. As of 2006, the dominant political party in Austria is the Social Democrats party, ousting the People’s Party very recently, a Christian democratic and conservative party. The Social Democrats party is one of the oldest political parties in Austria, with strong ties to the Labor Unions and strongly socialist roots (Austria, 2009).

The subject of religion, I discussed with Christian, and he had quite a lot to say about that (About Austria, 2009). Austria was originally a country primarily composed of Roman Catholics by the end of the 12th century, while about 5% considered themselves Protestant. Austrian Christians are obligated to pay a 1% tax, called the Kirchensteuer or Eclesial/Church tax. This was put in place in measure with the Religionsfond, founded by Emperor Joseph II to pay Clerics and finance Churches. This fund was plundered in 1938 by the Nazis and was never reinstalled after the war. In the Austria of today, about 12% claim to follow no religion. Of the remaining population, around 340,000 people claim to be of various Muslim religions, mainly due to the influx from neighboring Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania. 180,000 or so are of various Eastern Orthodox churches, and 200,000 Jewish. The Jewish community in Austria, of course, suffered severe casualties during World War II due to the Holocaust, bringing them down to a mere 4,000-5,000 by the end of the war. Today, they’re back up to around 200,000 strong (Austria, 2009).

The educational system in Austria is very different than what we’re used to in the United States. First of all, Austrian education is free, even on the university level. According to Christian, everyone in Austria starts school at the age of 6, and the first four years of school are referred to as the “Volksschule”. Christian went to “Volksschule” in Grödig, near Salzburg. From here, the Austrian student is presented a choice; either continue their education at the “Hauptschule” or the “Gymnasium” (Austria, 2009). The difference, according to Christian, is that the “Gymnasium” is much more difficult (About Austria, 2009). This part of the education continues until around the age of 14 or 15, from which another choice is presented. The Austrian student can either decide to continue schooling by taking an exit exam, or one can start specializing by going to work in the field of their choice and earning money right away. With the second option, you’re still going to school, but only part time, as the time is split with an internship of a sort with a business in the field you’re specializing in. Once these are complete, the student has the option of continuing on into more specialized universities, or finishing school and beginning to work (About Austria, 2009).

The arts have an old and successful home in Austria. Austria has been the birthplace of many famous composers over the years, including Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Joseph Haydn, Franz Schubert, Anton Bruckner, Johann Strauss, Sr., Johann Strauss, Jr. and Gustav Mahler. And the Vienna Boys’ Choir is one of the most well-known boys’ choirs in the world, due to their exceedingly high vocal standards. When it comes to architecture, Austria is famous for its various castles, palaces and cemeteries. Some of its more famous castles include Festung Hohensalzburg, Burg Hohenwerfen, and Castle Liechtenstein (not to be confused with Lichtenstein Castle in Germany). The Historic Center of the City in Salzburg was listed as a World Heritage Site in 1996. In newer media, Austria is also the home of the Ars Electronica, one of the world’s major centers for arts and technology, founded in 1979 in Linz, Austria (Austria, 2009). Structures of note, Christian mentions include the “Stephansdom”, the main church in Vienna, as well as many of the traditionally Austrian architecture that can be seen up in the Alps (About Austria, 2009).

According to Christian, public transportation plays a much more prominent role in the daily lives of the average Austrian, compared to the lives of people in Indiana, due mostly to a large number of people living within a smaller area (About Austria, 2009). Some of the main streets in Salzburg don’t even allow motor vehicles. Also, when it comes to technology, Christian says the main difference he’s noticed between Austrians and Americans is that Americans seem much more open to “newer” technologies, while Austrian and most Europeans in general seem to prefer the “old” or traditional way of doing things, incorporating new things slowly and gradually. As a matter of fact, the biggest difference between Austria and the US, one that Christian mentioned several times, is that the US seems focused on “quantity” vs. Austria’s focus on “quality”. Everything in the US seems to need to be bigger, better, faster than the previous version. He quotes the expression of “German engineering” as an example of this. Also, he says things seem to be so much bigger in America vs. Austria, from parking lots to streets and cars. What he thinks he’ll miss the most when he goes home is the variety of 24/7 shops available here. Most businesses aren’t allowed to be opened 24 hours a day in Austria due to employee concerns (About Austria, 2009).

As far as the average Austrian’s life, it really doesn’t seem to be that much different from the lives of people in the United States. The average diet of the average Austrian isn’t too much different from ours, although there is much less of a focus on “fast foods” than we have here in the US (About Austria, 2009). Also, there are several dishes uniquely “Austrian” to note, as well. For example, Wiener Schnitzel, Schweinsbraten, Kaiserschmarren, Knödel, Sachertorte and Tafelspitz to name a few. There are also Kasnockn, a cooked filled dough-bag with cheese and parsley, and Eierschwammerl (chanterelle) dishes. The Eierschwammerl are native yellow, tan mushrooms. It’s also of interest to note that PEZ candies originated from Austria, as well (Austria, 2009). Christian admits to having an addiction to coffee and Mozartkugel, a type of rum ball named after Mozart (About Austria, 2009).

The roles of men and women in Austrian society aren’t much different than they are in the United States. However, the role of marriage is decisively different. Christian said he was very surprised to see how young people in the United States feel the pressure to get married and have children. People in Austria usually wait until they are much older before having children, though Christian thinks the longer time spent in school might have something to do with this. Couples living together, unmarried, aren’t viewed all that different from married couples, according to Christian. One of the reasons for this is that there are very few actual benefits to marriage in Austria. While in the US, a married couple can share insurance, bank accounts, etc, none of these are options for an Austrian married couple. The only real reason to get married in Austria is for the sake of children, so most couples hold off until they’re ready to have children (About Austria, 2009).

Christian brightened up at the mention of Austrian customs and traditions. One particular tradition in Austria, celebrated every December, is one called Krampusläufe. Krampusläufe is sort of an anti-Christmas celebration. It’s often symbolized by pictures of Saint Nicholas accompanied by the incubus demon, Krampus. Whereas Santa gives gifts to all the good boys and girls, Krampus gives out warnings and punishments to bad boys and girls. So much for coal! During the first two weeks of December, especially on December 5th, young people will dress up with masks resembling Krampus, and go around scaring young children (Austria, 2009). There’s usually much partying and celebration accompanying the event, as well. May 1st celebrations are still very popular in Austria, as well. The Maibaum, or Maypole, is still a celebrated event in Austria. The young people select a tree, bring it to the town center, and the local celebrations center around the decorated tree (About Austria, 2009).

In conclusion, Austria, although being an old world country, has evolved to be very similar to the United States in many ways. Or to be more accurate, we’ve evolved to be more like them, I guess. Much of the same things we’ve come to enjoy in the United States can be found there as well, as well as a rich history one could spend a lifetime exploring. Just the wealth given to the world in classical music alone could take the better part of a lifetime to explore. Christian said at the end of the interview if he could add one more thing to this to help give others a better understanding of Austria, it would be that it is most definitely a country worth visiting. Christian heads back home this week, but I was glad to meet and get to know the guy, and after everything I’ve learned from him and this interview, look forward to visiting Austria someday soon.

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