

ROBBIE BUBBLE



Three Way Conversation

In my family, it is a truth universally acknowledged that disasters happen when Mom (that's me) tries to save money. I'm all for being budget conscious, but when I take it to extremes in my search for the perfect deal, we often not only regret it, but we also end up paying more than we would have if I'd faced facts to begin with.

Some cities are expensive—London, Amsterdam, Paris—and Vienna. When I first start looking for a place to stay for our five-day visit to Vienna, I am shocked by

the exorbitant hotel rates for anything within the confines of the Ring Road. I am determined to find a better deal.

After many weeks of searching, I book a studio apartment on the outskirts of Vienna for just \$100 Canadian a night. Gleefully, I congratulate myself for being a Smart Traveler and pay the whole amount, then exhort my family to join me in celebrating my budget success. Just think of how much money we're saving!

Normally, we fly a sedate and doable nine hours to London or Amsterdam, but for this trip, we decide to fly all the way to Vienna—a journey of close to twenty hours with a long stop-over at Heathrow. By the time the taxi deposits us in front of a nondescript building in a nondescript suburb of Vienna, we are more than ready for hot showers, hot meals, and long sleeps, pretty much in that order.

For the first fifteen minutes, everything goes well. Although tiny and shabby with a view over post-war dreariness, the apartment is a bargain and anyway, with all of Vienna to explore, we won't be there much. Our host, the über-friendly but hygiene-challenged Herr Wagner, lets us into the apartment and proceeds to show us every feature of the 200-square foot space in excruciating detail. About twenty minutes into a monologue that shows no signs of abating, Gregg goes into the coffin-sized bathroom and proceeds to take a shower. When, ten minutes later, he emerges wrapped in a towel, he finds Julia and me still frozen in thrall of Herr Wagner, who has progressed to delivering a spirited presentation of *What to See in Vienna*, complete with visual aids in the form of laminated pages torn from guide books published in 1969. He does not appear to notice the 6'5" half-naked man dripping on the threadbare carpet.

Finally, with a flourish, Herr Wagner opens the minuscule fridge incongruously located in the living area rather than the kitchen, and shows us two lonely bottles of something that looks vaguely drinkable.

"For you!" he exclaims happily.

I stand and edge toward him, holding my breath and smiling with what I hope is suitable gratitude mixed with an unmistakable plea to get the hell out of our temporary space so I can also have a shower.

"Thank you! Really, that's just great. Thanks! We'll be great. Thanks!"

He backs toward the door, eyes darting around the room in search of more things to tell us. "But...."

"Yes, thank you! We will be very comfortable. Thanks!"

He is at the door. Freedom is so close.

"And do not forget Mozart's house – and Beethoven's."

"Yes, thank you. We're big music fans."

"And also Haydn."

"Great! Thanks!"

I reach around him and push open the door. He stands frozen, obviously terrified that he's forgotten to tell us some tidbit of tourist trivia without which our visit to Vienna will be doomed and that he, as a loyal citizen, will be culpable.

"Good night!"

His shoulders sag. "You will be comfortable?"

"Absolutely! Thanks!"

"Enjoy Vienna?"

"We will. Promise. Thank you. You've been very kind."

The door closes behind him and we open all the windows.

I hop into the shower to wash off the plane smell. Thirty seconds of lukewarm water dribble into dead cold. Gregg's shower has drained the tank. No matter. The place is a steal and the hot water will be back on by the morning.

We venture into the dark suburban streets in search of food. Long, increasingly frantic trudges down dark, apartment-lined streets lead to more dark streets all sharing a singular characteristic – a complete lack of anything resembling commerce. We can't even find a convenience store. My family, hollow-eyed now with hunger, are no longer quite so impressed with my reminding them of what a great bargain our accommodation is. In the city, we'd be paying double, triple even!

"Yes, but there are restaurants in the city," Gregg points out.

Picky picky.

Eventually, we stumble upon a warm and noisy local establishment that doles out large platters of schnitzel and hefty mugs of good Austrian beer (Coke for Julia). With

our equilibrium restored along with our enthusiasm for Vienna, we are sufficiently fortified for the five-mile trek back to the apartment.

The sleeping arrangements consist of one pull-out couch for Gregg and me and a cot designed for a toddler for fourteen-year-old Julia. But hey, we're saving money.

The next morning, I head for the shower. Cold. Arctic cold. Oh well, who needs cleanliness? A sponge bath is just fine to ready ourselves for a full day of Viennese sightseeing that commences after an hour commute on the train followed by a feet-blistering traverse of many, many long Viennese blocks to the charming central core.

We try for showers again in the evening to rinse off a day of Vienna grit. Cold. Again. We remain philosophical. Well, I do. Gregg is not so sure.

The next morning, I am full of hope as I squeeze into the bathroom. Surely the water tank will have heated up after 48 hours.

That would be no.

We decide that enough is enough. Yes, the place is cheap, but it isn't *that* cheap. Surely hot water isn't a whole lot to ask. We call Herr Wagner. The welcoming Herr Wagner full of jolly sightseeing tips is replaced by grumpy Herr Wagner who accuses us of being profligate, water-wasting Americans.

"But we've had only one hot shower in three days."

"You Americans are so wasteful."

"Canadians, and one shower in three days isn't really very wasteful."

Silence.

We bed down for our third of five nights. Gregg's back is screaming in agony on the lumpy pull-out and Julia's limbs are starting to atrophy. My increasingly grim reminders about how much money we are saving are not making me very popular.

"I'm thirsty, Mom," says a small voice ten minutes after lights out.

"Check the fridge. Didn't Herr Wagner show us drinks?"

"Right." Julia extrudes herself from the cot and pads over to the fridge. Inside are two bottles of fizzy drink. We switch on the light and check the labels.

Robbie Bubble—cloyingly sweet, painfully fizzy, basically revolting. But the name! Grumpiness dissolves into laughter as we take turns swigging and grimacing.

The next morning, with two nights still to go (and paid for) and the hot water still not on, we give up. The sleekly modern, spaciouly comfortable hotel we transfer to is within spitting distance of one of Europe's greatest collections of museums and around the corner from a lively pedestrian street full of cheery eateries and lots of smiling Austrians who appear familiar with the concept of hot water.

My mom likes to tell me that if I choose the more expensive of two options, it's really "only the difference" that matters. In other words, I shouldn't focus on the total cost, just the price difference between the bad place and the better place. *That* amount is the true cost of comfort.

My wise mother has a point, and maybe one day I'll be as smart as she is.

Not long after we visited Vienna in 2001, Gregg created *Three Way Conversation* at a villa overlooking Florence. Now that place was a huge success! Hot afternoons lazing around the pool alternated with forays into Florence to see the great art of the Renaissance and enjoy Gorgonzola gnocchi so good we still talk about it. Gregg describes his piece as a dialog of color; I am reminded of the laughter the three of us shared over Robbie Bubble.