

November 2020

I'm in Vienna with my son Nick to watch him compete in a tennis tournament. I had almost forgotten the thrill of travelling, the kindness of strangers and excitement of finding my way in an unfamiliar place. Standing in the participants' and families' gallery with a bird's eye view of the blue tennis courts below, it feels rather disconcerting being amongst people milling around and I'm surprised that no one is wearing a mask. Except me. I'm wavering between feeling brave and knowing I'm stupid for coming here. But I've always tried to be at Nick's matches and he plays better I'm there.

It's early to shop for Christmas, but the Austrian specialities are not to be missed, especially the gingerbread tree houses, and I'm rather hoping we might get some hot gluhwein to go with a slice of apfelstrudel. A lady kindly shows me on google maps where to find the market stalls and suggests that it is best to walk from the arena as the area is mostly pedestrianised. Outside it is pretty chilly so I'm glad that I've brought my thick winter coat and warm boots. Nick has his bright red jacket and although I look up to him at 6' 3" I think to myself that at least I won't lose him.

We cross the commercial square, prettily arranged with flowers and lined with trees to soften the stark illuminated signs of the various banks. Hardly anyone is around and we can't work out exactly which of the narrow passages leading from the square is the one we should take. A slightly oriental looking lady wearing a simple but elegant brown coat and boots is passing so we ask her where the market is located. Unfortunately she doesn't speak any English but after making some shopping type gestures and then showing her my phone, she says 'ah' in a way that gives confidence that she has understood and we follow her along a cobble-stoned passage way. Half way along stands a short round lady in a pink beautician-style uniform and she opens a door ushering us in. The room, triangular in shape, is painted bright orange and has a whiff of nail polish. Between the therapy chair and shelves of creams there is just room for the four of us to squeeze in.

The door closes and the room starts ascending. I look anxiously at the lady in the brown coat but she point upwards and says reassuringly 'shops'. I imagine it is a bit like Colchester where you can emerge from the lift from the outdoor carpark into the shopping centre above.

Whether that is the case or not I'll never know as on the brink of discovering if I'm in the right place, I've woken up and am astonished to find I am in my own bed, it was just so vivid. But maybe that's the way of travel for the time being and my unconscious mind is supplying the experience.