

Silent Night

Salzburg's song

(From Tourist Promotions Material)

On the trail of the story behind Silent Night, William Cook discovered a romantic alpine city with a remarkable musical history.

Probably the world's most popular Christmas carol, and certainly its prettiest, was written 200 years ago in a country that feels custom-built for Christmas. The story behind Silent Night is almost as enchanting as the song and is the perfect excuse for a midwinter tour of Salzburg and its beautiful surroundings.

All is calm: Salzburg's magical setting makes it perfect for a Christmas break. Salzburg, whose most famous son is Mozart, was also the birthplace of Joseph Mohr, who wrote Silent Night. Mohr was born in 1792 in Steingasse, a fashionable address today, but a slum in the 18th century.

A modest museum housed in Mohr's childhood home tells the tale of his early years: the bastard son of a spinner and absent soldier, he was rescued from poverty and disgrace by a local priest who heard him singing in the street, and sent him to the best school in Salzburg, where he learnt to play the organ, violin and guitar.

Mohr became a priest and was posted to the pretty town of Oberndorf bei Salzburg. Today it's only half an hour from Salzburg by train but two years before Mohr's arrival; a new border had been drawn along the river, cutting Oberndorf in two. The east bank was in Austria, while the other side was in Bavaria.

The border also separated the church, to which Mohr was sent, from its congregation, and the building soon fell into disrepair. When mice ate the organ bellows, Mohr and a local teacher called Franz Xavier Gruber teamed up to compose a carol that could be sung without an organ, in German rather than Latin. *Stille Nacht* was born.

A folk museum in Oberndorf commemorating Mohr and Gruber's partnership includes Silent Night recordings from as far afield as Korea and Mexico, plus some original paintings by Gruber, who was also an accomplished artist. Beyond the museum is a lovely walkway beside the river that now forms the border between Austria and Germany. You can stroll across the bridge into the busier German town on the opposite bank, where old houses huddle around an even older church.

Oberndorf's main attraction, however, is a charming chapel that marks the spot where Silent Night was first sung, and where it's still sung every Christmas. Opposite is Mohr's old house. There's a perfunctory plaque outside, but next year the house will be opened as a new museum.

Gruber composed the music a few miles away, in the sleepy village of Arnsdorf. It's barely more than a hamlet, but the big church beside the village green is implausibly grand. A glockenspiel chimes Silent Night although the shelves of human skulls outside the church lend the tune a more sinister, mournful air. Nearby is the half-timbered house where Gruber lived and worked as a humble schoolmaster. The upper floor is now a museum, but the ground floor is still a school and the desk where he wrote the melody is tucked away in the corner of a classroom.

Gruber's last resting-place is an hour's drive away, on the other side of Salzburg, in Hallein, in the foothills of the Alps. It's an industrial town, whose wealth, like Salzburg's, was built on salt, but its centre has hardly changed since Gruber lived and worked here. His grave stands alone, in between the house where he spent his final years, and a new museum where the prize possession is the guitar that Mohr played at Silent Night's world premiere, in 1818.

The Silent Night trail gives you an intimate glimpse of small town life in Austria, past and present, but for a traditional Advent, visit the urban bustle of Mohr's birthplace. With its array of domes and turrets, and the cliff-top castle that towers above it, Salzburg's skyline looks like a Christmas card.

The smart boutiques that line Salzburg's narrow alleyways make Christmas shopping here a sophisticated treat. The best place to buy presents is in one of Salzburg's three Christmas markets, where tradesmen sell handmade toys and decorations, plus festive food and drink. After dark, the wooden huts become alfresco pubs and cafes, where Salzburgers swig mugs of mulled wine and wolf down giant pretzels. There are also markets in the fortress and Mirabell Square, beside the palace gardens, but there's a prettier one across the river, in the old cathedral square.

Salzburg was the setting for *The Sound of Music*, but the city's musical heritage stretches back further than Julie Andrews. There's a unique thrill in listening to an orchestra play *Eine Kleine Nacht Musik* in the ornate auditoriums where Mozart performed his own masterpieces for the first time. The Festung Hohensalzburg and the Alte and Neue Residenz all host Mozart recitals during Advent, Christmas and New Year. If you've had

enough of Salzburg's boy wonder, then Brahms, Strauss and Vivaldi are also on the bill.

Salzburg's greatest pleasure, however, is its street life, and the best pastime of all is to wander the cobbled lanes that cluster around the cathedral, and watch another world go by, just as it did Mozart's day - and Mohr's. I always thought Silent Night was kitsch, until I heard it echoing around these ancient courtyards. Where better to spend Christmas than in a place with both feet planted so firmly in such a romantic past?