



**I.**  
**Drink it in**  
Vienna loves its water so much it's protected in the constitution – and we can see why.  
*by Kimberly Bradley*

When I moved to Vienna I noticed that my hair was shinier, my skin softer. No limescale dotted the bathroom. Locals carried metal water bottles, not plastic. Then it hit me: in Vienna there's something in the water.

Or not. Unlike tap water in most European cities, the Austrian capital's supply is soft. Springs in the northern Calcareous Alps flow directly into the city's system in a free-fall pumpless delivery that, along the way, even generates hydroelectric power.

The city used its own ground water until the early 1800s, when a lack of a proper sewage system caused a public-health crisis. The First Spring Water Main, 120km long, was inaugurated in 1873 and still provides about 40 per cent of the city's supply. A second was installed in 1910 and more have been added as Vienna has grown.

Tap water is an invisible quality-of-life marker. But there's evidence that the Viennese value it: drinking fountains are everywhere; a theme park surrounds a vintage water tower; and, in 1998, a hiking trail opened along the main water route. Vienna is also the first city to protect its drinking water in its state constitution. Michael Häupl, Vienna's former mayor, once said to me, "There's an old saying: 'When he comes back from holiday, the Viennese most appreciates Anker bread and mountain spring water.'" I see his point. — (M)



**2.**  
**Driving me crackers**  
Why forgoing a car in Houston, Texas is turning out to be the ride of this writer's life.  
*by Christopher Knapp*

I live in one of the most car-centric US cities yet a bicycle is my primary means of transport. What started out as an experiment when the car went in for repairs became a habit, a passion and then an obsession. And this in a place with a climate so inhospitable that, until 1972, the city was on the "unhealthy" list for UK diplomats being posted abroad.

First, a bit of context. I grew up here. Air conditioning arrived in the classrooms when I was in third grade. This was 1970,

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just a year or so after the Apollo 11 lunar mission and Neil Armstrong's famous (to us local folks, anyway) first word as he stepped onto the surface of the moon – "Houston". The Apollo launches and their supervision were led from Nasa's Houston base and this idea of seemingly infinite accomplishment – what I think of as a culture of possibility – permeated all aspects of Houston's civic identity.

Indeed, the city had recently opened the world's first air-conditioned indoor stadium, the Astrodome, dubbed the "Eighth Wonder of the World". This was the baked-in optimism of a place that many had heard little of at the time but that, years later, is the fourth-largest US city – and among its most diverse.

Back to the bike. It was the only way we got around as kids. My brother,

our friends, we all rode everywhere on our bicycles, climate and weather notwithstanding. It was a liberating sensation to get home after school and hop on your bicycle – a sense of freedom and mobility too often impaired or diluted as one "grows up" and switches to other forms of transport. It is a relief then to experience this sensation once again well into my fifties and to shed a few layers of object ownership and responsibility.

As so often happens when we are touched tangibly by something previously unknown (like living in an automobile-obsessed city with no automobile), perceptions change. I find that daily patterns are more intentional than before. There's a necessity to thinking through how I go about the day, a mindfulness of sorts that I do not recall from the days of simply jumping in the car and running an errand just because I could.

There is a relief too of ridding oneself of the mind-numbingness of sitting idle in traffic and a coincident awareness of the toll this must surely take on the energies of those who endure it. I find my energy enhanced, not diluted, by the physical and mental effort of making my way through each day on my bicycle – a resourcefulness I have come to believe is a human craving and also a powerful source of inner contentment. My perception is sharper: I notice more. And I appreciate where I live and how I live in ways that surprise me almost daily.

And there's where I live. I find that without a car I spend more time at home. I invite others over more frequently; I garden; I cook. It is as if I have discovered a dimension of my life that has always been there, albeit unactivated. There is an odd pleasure in this that I feel compelled to share with others.

A lifelong goal has been to meld my personal and professional lives so they are undifferentiated from one another. An area of particular passion has always been the way we approach our built environments and how we engage with them and one another. A window is opening in Houston and in cities across North America to redefine our urban landscapes and to change the too-often isolated patterns in which we experience the civic forum. I feel a sense of urgency to pry this window open wider. A guy on a bike won't change a lot. Still, it's a start, and I am sticking with it. — (M)