Snail-pace food

Slow Food doesn't get much slower than this – snail caviar hits Viennese menus

Andreas Gugumuck stands alongside his snail yard on the outskirts of Vienna and begins to tell me about the long, almost lost, tradition of snail farming in this city. The yard is the size of a basketball court, and sprinkled with half-chomped soup vegetables.

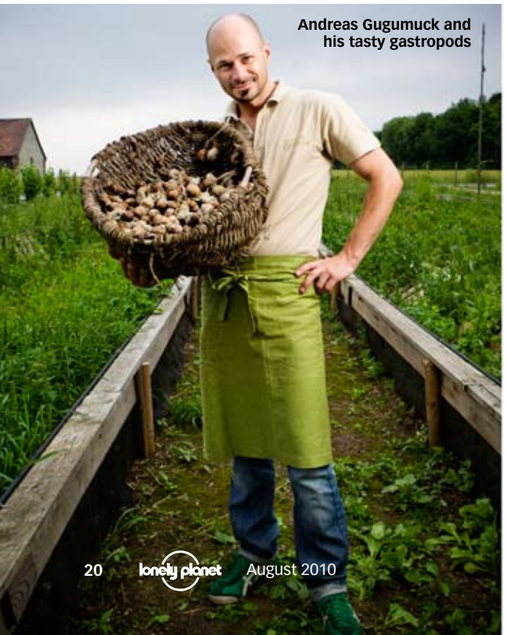
Centuries ago, Andreas explains, snails were highly valued as a source of protein among the poor. By the turn of the 20th century, Vienna had become a world capital in snail production. Those halcyon days vanished, however, and snail farming had virtually died out until Andreas decided to pack in his IT job a couple of years back and revive the tradition. Today he produces two types of snails for Austria's tables – Helix pomatia, a variety common in Central Europe that has a gamey taste, and Helix aspersa, the variety most often eaten in France.

'The pomatia emerge from the ground in late March and begin mating,' he explains, casting an eye about. In a stroke of luck, we discover a threesome. 'The act usually lasts about 12 hours. They lay about 40 or 50 eggs in the earth over about 20 days, and out of the earth emerge about 30 baby snails.'

His snails, however, tell only half the story. Andreas also produces a snail caviar by harvesting their pearly white eggs. I tried it at Aubergine, one of Vienna's upmarket restaurants. It is served with Kalbsbeuschel, a Viennese veal offal entrée based on sliced lung. It's surprisingly good, with no hint of awkward slime.

● **wienerschnecke.at/fuehrungen.html**

Anthony Haywood is based in Germany, and has just completed a new edition of Lonely Planet's *Vienna* guide.



Andreas Gugumuck and his tasty gastropods

TRAVEL PUNDIT

Tom Hall

Lonely Planet's UK-based travel editor shares his latest insider news and tip-offs

All change with the coalition government; Algeria receives a boost, Iceland a set-back; and one of Europe's most expensive countries offers a bargain

AIR PASSENGER DUTY FLYING OFF

Air Passenger Duty, the unloved tax that adds £11 to £110 to the cost of a plane seat, looks set to be a casualty of the new government. It has plans to replace this with a per-plane tax, to encourage fuller and therefore greener flights. This may lead to higher flight taxes – a report is expected in the autumn.

NO REFUNDS ON ID CARDS

The national ID card scheme is also on the scrapheap. The 13,000 people who received one during last year's trial have been able to use the card as a travel document for European flights. Now they'll not only lose their £30 fee – no refunds are on offer – but they'll have to get a passport to continue travelling.

RETURN TO ALGERIA

Tourist numbers don't yet compare with those of neighbouring Tunisia and Morocco, but tours led by clued-up local guides are opening up this enigmatic country. Trips focus on the capital, Algiers, Roman attractions, and the Sahara to the south. Try Syder Travel (sydertravel.com) and Wild Frontiers (wildfrontiers.co.uk) for cutting-edge Algeria tours.

AMENDED ROUTES TO ICELAND

Two of this summer's new routes to Iceland have been grounded. Iceland Express was planning to start flights from London Gatwick to Akureyri in northern Iceland and Birmingham to Reykjavík. But it turns out that visitor numbers to Iceland are down this summer so they're juggling routes. Hopes are that this is temporary.

OLYMPIC TRAINING

The news that Stratford International will serve only domestic services for the foreseeable future, including during the Olympics, leaves the station in need of a new name less than a year after opening. The station will be heaving during the games when it will receive a train from St Pancras International every seven minutes, but none direct from overseas.

AIR HOPPING NORWAY

Norwegian airline Wideroe is offering something of a bargain at the moment – two weeks' unlimited air travel around the country for £412. Tie this in with a sailing on the *Hurtigruten* (hurtigruten.co.uk) and a ride on the Bergensbanen Oslo–Bergen railway and you'll have the ultimate Norwegian odyssey. See wideroe.no/explorenorway for information.

Mei Mei demonstrates the guzhen in her Suzhou tea house

Songs of tea-dom

Breathing new life into ancient traditions in Suzhou

The rapid modernisation of Chinese cities means that some of the country's oldest traditions are in danger of being swept away. In Suzhou, a city 50 miles west of Shanghai, famous for its traditional canal-side homes and classical gardens, one woman is hoping to give fresh impetus to an ancient ritual by devoting her tea house to Pingtan, a 400-year-old story-telling art form.

Sung in the local dialect and often accompanied by stringed instruments such as the pipa (four-stringed lute), Pingtan done well is an enchanting blend of singing and strings. Done poorly? Think wailing cats.

I stumble upon Mei Mei's tea house as I wander along Shi Quan Street. Each night, a pingtan master takes the stage from 8pm to 10pm. Customers order Yunnan pu'er tea, sit back and pick songs for the master to play. The tea house quickly fills with local enthusiasts and musicians – unlike other places in Suzhou, this is not just for tourists – and the tea flows as different masters take to the stage.

Afterwards, Mei Mei gives me a quick lesson on the guzhen (21-stringed zither) and pipa, telling me that she is proud to be able 'to provide a place where we can keep our traditions alive'. I finally make it out just past midnight with a three-note repertoire, and ancient melodies reverberating in my head.

Shawn Low is currently on the road researching Lonely Planet's new *China* guide.

ILLUSTRATION: NATSKO SRU/AGENCYRUSH.COM. PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY, SHUTTERSTOCK, LUKAS ILGNER, BRANO I SVAC, LONELY PLANET IMAGES

Going underground

The oldest 'new' motel room in the world opens – 220 feet under the Arizona earth

As the elevator begins its 21-story descent, I wonder if I'm going to have a panic attack. I'm not claustrophobic, but limestone caves in the bowels of the earth aren't my natural habitat. My destination? A new motel room buried deep inside Grand Canyon Caverns, a kitschy attraction, complete with model dinosaurs guarding the entrance, on a scrubby stretch of Route 66 in western Arizona.

I shouldn't have worried. The £470-a-night Grand Cavern Suite opens up like an inviting chapel, its prehistoric walls softened by colourful mood lighting and a 70-foot-high ceiling. Two double beds, a comfy sofa and a bookcase grab centre stage, all perched on a wooden platform just above the stone.

An adjacent trail winds past rock formations, two mummified bobcats and a stash of Civil Defense supplies stored here during the Cold War. The caverns were a ready-made nuclear fallout shelter, and the rations, enough to sustain 2,000 people for 30 days, have never been removed. In fact, they are said to still be edible – the cave is so dry that nothing decays.

Guests aren't charged for late checkout, but there is a penalty for staying past 10:30am – tourists. The suite is an exhibit on the one-hour tours of the caverns and photo-snapping Peeping Toms can see right into the room.

● **Tours £10; gccaverns.com**

Amy C Balfour co-authored Lonely Planet's *USA's Best Trips* and is currently updating the new *Arizona* guide.