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Innsbruck Introduction

489km (304 miles) SW of Vienna; 159km (99 miles) S of Munich; 360km (224 miles) SW of Linz; 190km (118 miles) SW of Salzburg; 204km (127 miles) SE of Bregenz

The capital of Tyrol, Innsbruck (elevation 573m/1,880 ft.) is one of Europe's most beautiful cities. It has long been a center of commerce and traffic, as it lies at the junction of two important routes across the central Alps. In the eastern Alps, Innsbruck is about 30 minutes from the Italian border and 45 minutes from the German border.

Today Innsbruck's beauty is protected by town planners who ensure that any new structures built in the inner city harmonize with the pre-existing Gothic, Renaissance, and baroque buildings. Modern urban development exists, spreading along the Inn River to the east and west, away from the historic areas.

The name Innsbruck means "bridge over the Inn," which is the river that flows through the city. The city lies at a meeting place of the Valley of the Inn and the Sill Gorge. As long ago as 1180, a little settlement on the river was moved from the northern bank to the site of the present Altstadt (Old Town). In 1239, as a part of Swabia Bavaria, it was granted its own "rights and privileges," and in 1420, Innsbruck became the capital of Austria.

The city was celebrated throughout Europe under the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I. Under Maximilian, whose reign (1490-1519) signaled the end of the Middle Ages, Innsbruck reached the height of its cultural and political importance (it's still the cultural center of Tyrol). The city had a second imperial heyday some 300 years later, during the 40-year reign of Maria Theresia. Much later, in 1945, Innsbruck became the headquarters of the French zone of occupation.

Twice in a dozen years -- in 1964 and 1976 -- the eyes of the world turned to Innsbruck when it hosted the Winter Olympics. It's now a winter sports center with modern facilities. Skiers who come to Innsbruck benefit twice: They stay in a cosmopolitan city called the jewel of the Alps, and they ski on some of the world's choicest slopes. Nonskiers and summer visitors enjoy the sights of the medieval Old Town, the shops with Tyrolean specialties, and the many other outdoor activities that Tyrol offers.

Innsbruck Attractions

Maria-Theresien-Strasse, Innsbruck's main street, cuts through the heart of the city from north to south, and it's a good place to begin your exploration. It's fascinating just to watch the passersby, especially when they're attired in Tyrolean regional dress. Once this street was traversed by wayfarers heading over the Brenner Pass from Italy and on to Germany. Today many 17th- and 18th-century houses line the street.

On the south end of this wide street, a **Triumphforte (Triumphal Arch)**, modeled after those in Rome, spans the shopping street. Maria Theresia ordered it built in 1765 with a twofold purpose: to honor the marriage of her son, the Duke of Tuscany (later Emperor Leopold II), to a Spanish princess, and to mourn the death of her beloved husband, Emperor Franz I. From this arch southward, the street is called Leopoldstrasse.

Traveling north from the arch along Maria-Theresien-Strasse, you'll see **Annasäule (St. Anna's Column)**, a much-photographed attraction. It enjoys the same renown in Innsbruck as the Eros statue does in London's Piccadilly Circus. A statue of the Virgin Mary stands on a crescent moon atop this Corinthian column, which has statues of saints Cassianus, Virgilius, George, and Anna surrounding the base. Standing in front of the 19th-century **Rathaus (Town Hall)**, the column was erected in 1706 to celebrate the withdrawal, in 1703, of invading Bavarian armies during the War of the Spanish Succession.

Not far north of the Annasäule, the wide street narrows and becomes **Herzog-Friedrich-Strasse**, running through the heart of the Altstadt. This street is arcaded and flanked by a number of well-maintained burghers' houses with their jumble of turrets and gables. Look for the multitude of dormer windows and oriels. Most buildings here are overhung with protective roofs to guard them against snowfalls.

Innsbruck's Open Sesame Card

In a move to attract more visitors to Innsbruck, the city has come up with the **Innsbruck Card** (www.innsbruck-tourismus.com), granting you a number of discounts to attractions, including 18 museums and all city-operated public transportation. The card even entitles you to a visit to the Swarovski Crystal Worlds, including transport on a shuttle bus specifically designed for cardholders. Free visits to the Alpenzoo are also included. The card costs 23€ (\$30) for 1 day, 28€ (\$36) for 2 days, or 33€ (\$43) for 3 days. The card is sold at half price for children under 15.