

Edition: 01
 Date: 29-11-2008
 Type: General Consumer
 Frequency: 300 Per Year
 Circulation: 364491
 Page: 7

ArticleId: 19112530



Kinder surprise

Skiing

A chain of baby hotels may sound like hell to some, but for overworked parents they're holiday heaven

It's hard to know how to describe a Kinderhotel holiday. It's sort of like being held down and told to relax, relax, *relax!* At the time you're thinking, hang on, is this really what I want? Where are the markets? The art galleries? Where are the late nights? And then at the end, when you are on the way home, you suddenly realise that your shoulders are four inches lower and that you haven't screamed at any of your children for at least 12 hours. For your modern, overworked, over-tired, narky parent, you really can't ask much more.

Back in 1979, at the age of just 21, Siggie Neuschitzer, out of the blue, had to take over his parents' Austrian health spa in Carinthia. He realised pretty quickly that the customer base of older people who sat around a lot was not his style, so when a friend with a small baby started complaining that there was nowhere he could take his family on holiday, Siggie spotted an opening: a hotel for young parents with free childcare and babysitting.

Baby hotels would be the future, he decided. . . And it has worked out pretty well. He's added one child attraction after another: the baby pool, the snow slope and ski lessons for tots, the spa, the indoor play area, the water slide, the free child-care. And he's also set up the Kinderhotel system throughout Austria, southern Germany and northern Italy. Any hotel can go through a certifying system and is awarded three, four or

five "smileys", depending on how many of the necessary criteria it fulfils. There are now 28 in the scheme.

We took the train to Salzburg, which I had been dreading for weeks, picturing my three boisterous sons swinging from the luggage racks. But they were stunned into good behaviour by the novelty: staying up late for the changeover in Paris, sleeping in a bed on a train and the promise of mysterious activities such as skiing, tobogganing and spending time with their usually absent parents. It was 10 times more enjoyable than flying, and felt like part of the holiday.

We headed for the original hotel, known as Europe's Number One Baby and Kinderhotel, which lies between the mini ski areas of Innerkrems and Katschberg, with the rest of the eastern Alps at your disposal beyond. These are the resorts that the Italians and the Austrians sneak off to: they're not packed out and Carinthia itself is undeveloped, with a calm, lovely appeal which gets under your skin.

But what are the hotels like? Well, Kinderhotels offer the sort of holiday which, if you were young, footloose and child-free, you would rather stick ski poles in your eyes than contemplate. Everything is geared towards families and the Perfect Family Holiday™: childcare, primary colours, family activities. The rooms are child-friendly, bright, with – very clever, this – built-in monitors you can

take down to dinner in the evenings.

The food is all included in the price and it's really good. "I'm going to cry my head off when we leave," six-year-old Sam informed us one morning after his fourth bowl of (forbidden at home) chocolate cereal, while middle son Ben thoughtfully made his way through a bowl of fruit salad, and two-year-old Joe demolished a mountain of scrambled egg. There are drinks on tap all day long, and even a free spread of stonking Austrian cakes at teatime.

Outside is the snow area, with 10 mini toboggans and a great little run for them – although it was bittersweet watching the boys' excitement as they slid down fake snow from a machine. For the past two years there has been little or no snow in the Carinthian valleys: climate change is a real concern for the Austrians, whose winter tourist industry depends on snow (and for years they've led Europe on the use of renewable energy; there are solar panels all over the place). That didn't disguise the fact that the snow the boys took their morning skiing lessons on had been fired from an un-eco snow cannon.

Ben fell in love with "the ski ladies", especially the blonde Elisabeth who caught him at the bottom of each run and lifted him on to the little magic carpet that pulled them back up the slope.

But Mike and I saw the real stuff. On our last full day we finally persuaded

Edition: 01
Date: 29-11-2008
Type: General Consumer
Frequency: 300 Per Year
Circulation: 364491
Page: 7

ArticleId: 19112530



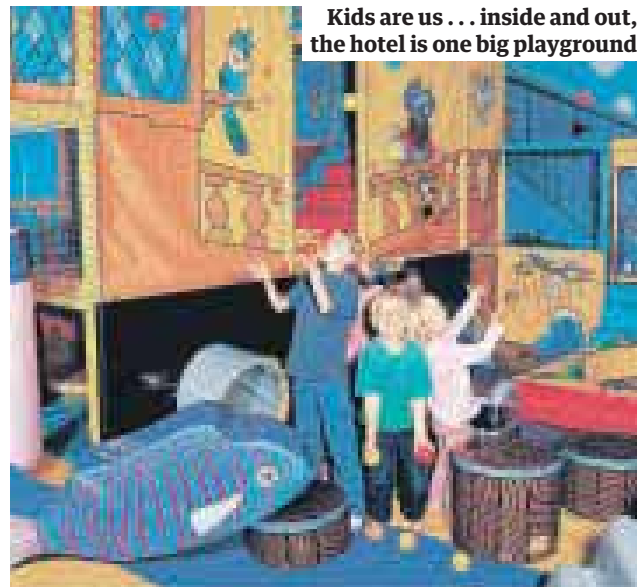
the boys to spend a day in the (free) kindergarten attached to the hotel and went off to the grown-up ski slopes, half an hour up the valley. There are just two runs, black and blue, but they're long, with glorious views. Beautiful to see snowy peaks again, the strange acoustics, the brightness of everything. "I'd forgotten how much I love to be in the mountains," said Mike.

And the rest of the time? We slept. We lounged around the pool. We tobogganed. We read stories. We ate. We slept some more. We could have visited the famous Carinthian lakes nearby, or some of the traditional towns, but somehow... we didn't. Gradually, imperceptibly, we relaxed. My habit of exploding like a hand grenade every time the boys stepped out of line disappeared. The dark

circles under Mike's eyes vanished. And then it was over and we were on the train back to England. The after-effects have been noticeable: everyone is a little calmer, the boys getting on much better. As Siggid had promised, a Perfect Family Holiday™.

● *Europe's Number One Baby Hotel (babyhotel.at), prices start from €95 per day for adults, €33-€85 per child (depending on age) almost all-inclusive. Kinderhotels.co.uk lists all the group's member hotels. From London to Salzburg via Paris and Munich with eRail (020-7619 1083, europeanrail.com) in a four-berth cabin costs from £253 return for adults, £214 for children under 12.*

Bibi van der Zee



Kids are us . . . inside and out, the hotel is one big playground