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Onwards and upwards: Ischgl, where mini-skiers rule the slopes TOURISMUSVERBAND PAZNAUN

It may lag well behind France in terms of its popularity with British skiers, but Austria's scenic slopes will always have admirers - particularly among parents, says **Stephen Wood**

Early in the 21st century, the Austrian ski resorts of the Vorarlberg region - of which the best known is St Anton - introduced a "Learn to ski" offer for children aged five and over. This was the offer: the local ski schools promised to teach children to ski in three days; and if they failed, the lessons would continue, free of charge, until the child became proficient. For the first year, the defining quality of proficiency was the ability to carve a turn. That seemed a very ambitious

target to achieve in three days; yet I was told that in the whole 2001/2 season, only two pupils required the extra tuition. Nevertheless, for the following season - perhaps because "carving" is a fairly broad term - the definition of proficiency was changed, to mean "able to negotiate a nursery slope safely". By then, the offer (still available in some places, among them the Bodele ski area) had done its job, in more ways than one. The business of the ski schools had increased by 25 per cent; and the image of Austria as *the* family-skiing destination in the Alps had

been reinforced. With the country lagging a considerable distance behind France in terms of its popularity with UK skiers, Austria tends initially to be judged on its deficiencies - the lack, for example, of large, high-altitude, lift-linked ski areas. Its virtues therefore seem to have the quality of consolation. But the number-two destination for UK skiers definitely tries harder in catering for the very young skier. This is, after all, a country that for almost 20 years has had an organisation that groups together hotels designed expressly to

cater for families with small children. Called Kinderhotels, it now has 27 Austrian members and an English-language website. This season, however, another dimension has been added to Austria's child-friendly skiing. At the resort of Serfaus in the Tirol, a new eight-seat chairlift has been installed, called Familienbahn Gampen. Like most modern chairlifts, it is "detachable" - which means that, at the top and bottom stations, the chair detaches from the main cable, to move at a slower speed for picking up and dropping off passengers. As is also the

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norm for up-to-date chairlifts, there is a “moving carpet” at the bottom station that gets skiers moving even before the chair sweeps around to pick them up.

On this lift, the chairs move through the bottom station exceptionally slowly, at one-third of the usual

speed, to make the loading process easier for children. (Unloading is done at half the normal speed.) And – this is the revolutionary part – an automatic adjustment ensures that the chairs arrive at the right level for them.

Normally, chairs are set at an adult-friendly height above the ground, which means that children have to be lifted up. Not on the Familienbahn. A sensor scans passengers when – as a group of eight or less – they enter the station; and it commands the moving carpet to move up (or down) so that the chair is at the correct height for the shortest passenger.

That’s not all: the safety bar lowers automatically, locking itself in position for the ride; and the bar has descenders that go between the riders’ legs. These prevent small passengers from sliding forward off the lift, a hazard of which parents taking children on chairlifts are all too aware.

It isn’t surprising that this lift should be in Serfaus, a resort in the next valley to Ischgl. One of its distinguishing features is the Kinderschneealm, literally “children’s snow pasture”. Not so much child-friendly as simply overindulgent, its facilities include 11 magic-carpet lifts, an astonishing range of activities, from tubing to mini-Skidoo driving, an igloo village and funpark for five-year-old snowboarders.

This is all well and good, but what about skiers who

are too old for the snow pasture and don’t have children in tow? Why should they go to Austria?

The enduring attraction of the country is that the skiing is based either in very attractive valley towns such as

Schladming and Zell am See, or in old mountain villages such as Alpbach and Obergurgl. The latter are not purpose-built “ski villages”; they are the real thing, old farming communities dominated by a handful of families who take pride in their shared patrimony. Usually well-kept and attractive places, they are – unlike France’s high-altitude tower blocks – equally pleasant in summer and winter. So the hoteliers do year-round business, and can afford to continually invest in their properties, which are characteristically small, family-run and reasonably priced.

Austria’s mountain landscape is also charming. But its topography is a handicap when it comes to competing with France: the ski areas are never going to be as high, or the snow as plentiful. However, Austrian resorts now do a good job of husbanding their resources, notably with increasingly sophisticated piste management; and they have invested heavily in snow-making, spending €127m (£106m) for the 2006/7 season. Last

year, the mountains enjoyed good natural snowfall in pre-season, and the stimulating effect that had on sales helped Austria to increase its share of the UK ski market by almost 3 per cent. This month, too, there has been good early snow: this week Obergurgl has had 20cm in the village and 120cm on the upper slopes, and both the Stubai and Sölden glaciers have had 90cm of cover.

Characteristically, Austrian ski areas are small- or

medium-sized, and best suited to intermediate skiers. But in the Vorarlberg (St Anton, Lech, Zürs), the slopes are steeper and the areas expansive enough to keep even high-mileage UK skiers happy for a whole week; and recently,

The skiing is based in very attractive valley towns or in old mountain villages

considerable effort has gone into lift-linking neighbouring ski areas, notably at Kitzbühel. This year, another lift has been added there: called the Sonnenlift, this T-bar is powered by solar energy, collected by photovoltaic cells in a system that will keep the lift running even in overcast weather.

The other novelties for Austria’s coming season are more

traditional in nature. Already well served by flights from the UK, it is to have a further three-times-a-week easyJet service from Gatwick to Salzburg. And, as usual, the big tour operators have refreshed their Austrian programmes. Crystal has introduced Galtür (where I had a great day’s skiing last season), little-known Fügen in the Ziller valley, Telfes in the Stubai area, and family-friendly Niederau; Rauris is new to Thomson; and two Carinthian resorts and Maria Alm in Salzburgerland to Neilson. And Inghams has added Serfaus.

Have I laid too much emphasis here on facilities aimed at children? Possibly. So let me draw your attention to another novelty this season, namely a Kinderhotel designed also to appeal to adults.

The Almhof hotel, at Gerlos in the Ziller valley, is owned by the Kammerlander family; and for this season it is being remodelled. In place of the bright, primary colours, the very functional furniture and the plastic, wipe-clean surfaces there will be muted colours, mountain materials (wood and stone) and modern-classic furniture. As Peter Kammerlander puts it, “we are trying a bit harder to please the adults, with a calmer feel”. This will not quite be a design hotel, but almost: “We don’t want to be quite as cool as that. The look is clean, but with the fireplaces and the right lighting the hotel will be warm and welcoming.”

TRAVELLER’S GUIDE

Getting there

EasyJet (0905 821 0905; easyJet.com) flies to Innsbruck, Salzburg and Vienna. Trains to Austria can be booked through Rail Europe (08448 484064; raileurope.co.uk). Crystal (0871 231 5659; crystalski.co.uk)

and Inghams (020- 8780 4433; inghams.co.uk) both offer skiing packages to Serfaus. Neilson (0870 333 3356; neilson.co.uk/ski) and Thomson (0871 231 5612; thomsonski.co.uk) also offer skiing packages to Austria.

Staying there

kinderhotels.co.uk;
0845 082 2422;

More information
stantonamarlberg.com;
00 43 5446 22690
lech-zuers.at;
00 43 5583 21610

boedele.info;
00 43 5512 3570
serfaus-fiss-ladis.at;
00 43 5476 6239

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Making tracks: Austria has already had good early snow; the mountain landscape is charming (below)

