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ST. PETERSBURG:
THE FAIRY-TALE CITY

THE BEST OF THE ALPS

VIENNA – THE OLD AND
THE NEW

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Words by Derk Hoberg
Publicity photos

THE BEST OF THE ALPS

Snow-covered mountains, blue skies, and brilliant sunshine entice us to the Alps every winter. Visitors young and old can hardly wait to make their first tracks through the freshly fallen snow and enjoy the thrilling sport in the fresh air. Here are the best resorts for beginners and families, amateur racers, freeriders, music lovers, and après-ski fans.



The awe-inspiring, legendary Gamsleiten II downhill run

Good to know

The Obertauern resort is best known for the Tauernrunde and Super Seven. Both are varied runs around Obertauern's snow basin, whereby the latter takes you to the seven highest points in the ski area. In addition to the challenging Super Seven tour, Gamsleiten II in particular attracts winter sports enthusiasts. With a gradient of around 45 degrees, this slope is among the ten steepest in the Alps and therefore only recommended for the most adept skiers. Master these runs, and you'll really have something to celebrate!
obertauern.com

OBERTAUERN: WHERE A DAY OF SKIING CONTINUES INTO THE NIGHT

Munich-Salzburg-Obertauern-party. You won't find this route saved in any satnav, but it could certainly be entered in exactly this order. Obertauern in the Salzburger Land region is one of the most famous ski areas in the Alps, not least because the Beatles also appreciated the town's many assets. Indeed, Austria's snowiest winter sports destination has long been considered the #1 address by 'snowcity'.

'The home of snow', 'Austria's snow bowl', 'Snowbertauern' – these are just a few of the names used to refer to the small community of Obertauern and its annual snow statistics. Obertauern is renowned for its high altitudes of between 1600 and 2300 metres and for its 100 kilometres of varied pistes. And also for the fact that the Beatles shot scenes for their music video 'Help' here, partied the night away in the town after their first and only concert in Austria, and didn't leave before they had given the local slopes a try.

A number of Obertauern's other benefits can actually be found away from the prepared pistes. For instance, the ski area is a popular destination for freeriders, not least because of the dry ice crystals typical of the region, which make for extremely fine, deep snow. What's more, a perfect day of skiing in Obertauern can be continued into the night at one of the many après-ski bars. Whether you go directly from the slopes and still in your ski boots or dressed in more chic attire following a good meal, spirits remain high late into the night. At *Lürzer Alm*, *Edelweissalm*, or *Gruber Stadl* – to name just three of the town's most famous bars – the party atmosphere prevails until the break of dawn.

Incidentally, in Obertauern it's not only the lifts that undergo regular modernisation to keep waiting times to a minimum for skiers. The restaurants, hotels, and spas also invest millions in infrastructure every year, meaning that great offers await guests. What's more, most of the 25 ski huts, bars, and pubs are located directly on the town's so-called 'après-ski mile', close to the slopes and right next to the hotels. So you can start your night of revelry as soon as you've made your last descent of the day and visit all of the popular haunts with your fellow skiers.



The large ski resort of Ischgl sits proudly above the village.

ISCHGL BRINGS THE STARS TO THE MOUNTAINS

Hot beats even at sub-zero temperatures – numerous ski resorts now open the season with a concert. Ischgl in Tyrol is a pioneer in this respect and has been attracting international music stars of the likes of Elton John, Robbie Williams, and Katy Perry to the mountains several times every winter since 1995. Twenty thousand fans attend the concerts and also let off steam on the versatile pistes of this lifestyle metropolis.

The Top of the Mountain concerts attract thousands of visitors year after year. Leading national and international stars get the crowd going on the Idalp at the very heart of the ski area and at an altitude of more than 2300 metres. Pink, Bob Dylan, and Tina Turner have also had the pleasure of presenting their greatest hits to 20,000 spectators before Ischgl's impressive mountainscape. Naturally, the stars themselves also like to make the most of their visit by exploring the ski slopes and sampling Ischgl's legendary nightlife. Indeed, it's for good reason that the town advertises

itself with the slogan 'Relax. If you can...' and stands for a highly successful blend of sport and entertainment.

Situated at an altitude of 1300 metres, Ischgl offers everything skiers today do not want to do without. The Silvretta Arena impresses with a multitude of perfectly groomed runs for all ability levels, huge fun parks, and the finest powder. Most of the ski area actually lies above 2000 metres, meaning that snow is guaranteed until early May. But Ischgl is also the gourmet hotspot of the Alps *par excellence*, with several starred restaurants that count among the best in all of Austria.

But it's not only skiers and fans of culinary indulgence who find all they could wish for in Ischgl. The ski area hosts a whole series of top-class events throughout the winter. The legendary Top of the Mountain concerts headlined by celebrated music stars are undoubtedly among the annual highlights. This community of only 1500 permanent residents is transformed into a vibrant music mecca three times a year: when the season opens in November, at Easter, and again in early May when the season closes.

Good to know: climate-neutral and duty-free

With its 45 state-of-the-art lifts and 239 kilometres of runs, Ischgl is not only one of the largest continuous ski areas in Austria but also regularly wins awards. Starting this season, it is also the largest climate-neutral ski area in the Alps, offsetting all unavoidable CO₂ emissions through an internationally recognised climate protection project and a reforestation programme in the valley.

There's duty-free shopping in neighbouring Samnaun, too. The Swiss town can be reached directly via a beautiful downhill run in the cross-border ski area. Browse the leading brands for watches, clothing, jewellery, and cosmetics at more than 50 shops on Europe's highest shopping street. You'll find everything here that you could possibly need for the 25th anniversary of the Top of the Mountain concerts in Ischgl on May 2.
ischgl.com



Hochfügen, situated at the entrance to the Zillertal valley, is a paradise for sporty skiers and freeriders.

Good to know: ski-in/ski-out

This ski area offers plenty of opportunities for action-packed fun on perfectly groomed runs as well. There are a total of 12 lifts in Hochfügen itself. The link to the Hochzillertal valley established a few years ago expands these offers to 38 lifts and 88 kilometres of pistes, meaning that there are more than enough runs for all ability levels and ages. What's more, all of the hotels and most of Hochfügen's mountain huts and guest houses are located directly on the slopes, allowing for unique ski-in/ski-out experiences. hochfuegenski.com

POWDER PIONEERS IN HOCHFÜGEN

The high alpine region of Hochfügen is situated at the entrance to the Zillertal valley, a popular resort just an hour's drive south of Munich. The area has long been the top destination in Tyrol for freeriders seeking fresh snow, as the off-piste options are extremely diverse. The high plateau has focused on this target group for some time now and offers comprehensive services for beginners and pro freeriders alike.

There's nothing more enjoyable for skiers than gliding down untouched slopes covered in a layer of fresh snow. And you'll find plenty such slopes in Hochfügen. What's more, the high alpine location at altitudes of between 1500 and 2500 metres means snow is virtually guaranteed from November well into spring. Even in winters when there is less snow. Of course, word of this has got around among ski enthusiasts! Hochfügen particularly welcomes those skiers who don't need any marked runs at all, in other words, freeriders.

Whether you're a beginner or an expert, there's something for everyone in Hochfügen, especially freeriders. Powder fans will find a diverse selection of slope

exposures, rapid access to freeride areas directly from the lifts, and countless off-piste options. Many different aspects must be borne in mind when skiing off-piste, which presents additional challenges and dangers compared with safer prepared areas. The ski area offers numerous services to ensure backcountry trips are as easy and safe as possible – and a guaranteed success.

Due to the moderate gradient, the Starter Freeride Area is especially suited to powder novices seeking their first deep-powder experience. Take your first turns in untouched snow here without any worries or putting yourself at undue risk. The Freeride Infopoint is another special service: an experienced team provides powder fans with the most important information for backcountry trips in the Hochfügen ski area, including the weather, avalanche conditions, and many other aspects. Moreover, every weekend from January until the season ends the so-called 'Ski Friends' are available to accompany experienced freeriders as free guides and share information on the current avalanche situation along with other safety advice.

Last but not least, there are freeride checkpoints at the main access points to open terrain. These boards contain maps and other important information, for instance, regarding slope gradients, rescue hotline numbers, and what to do in an emergency. They serve as a reminder and encourage freeriders to complete a few final checks before heading off into deep snow at their own risk. Hochfügen offers everything that a freerider could ever desire and follows the motto 'have fun, but be smart'.



Action and fun: powder skiing in the backcountry at Hochfügen

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Spoiled by snow and sun: Nassfeld in Carinthia

© Dirk Hoberg

Good to know: the best of both worlds

Even if you think you already know the ski area like the back of your hand from competing in this challenging race, it's well worth returning here to explore the slopes and region again when you have a little more time to spare. Because further highlights await in Nassfeld: 'The location close to the Italian border means enormous culinary variety. You'll find the best of both worlds here,' remarks Armin Assinger, who also appreciates the many other benefits of his home region. He will return to his former stamping ground in 2020 to complete the challenge for the eleventh time on March 7. Unlike his TV show, Schlag das Ass is not about winning a million euros. Instead, it's about what some would argue is worth far more: sporting prestige and a whole lot of fun. schlagdasass.at nassfeld.at

THE WORLD'S LONGEST SKI RACE

The important thing is taking part! For most of the around 800 participants in the world's longest ski race, this Olympic idea is what counts. That being said, the Schlag das Ass event held at the Carinthian ski resort of Nassfeld is actually all about beating a bona fide pro: former alpine skier Armin Assinger.

Every skier dreams of leaving a real champ far behind them in a race. And when spring arrives and it's once again time for Schlag das Ass in Nassfeld, almost 800 amateur skiers – yourself included – have the opportunity to do just that. Vie for victory on nine ski runs together with Assinger, the race's initiator and namesake, who is a former ski star and currently hosts Austria's millionaire quiz show. Covering 25.6 kilometres in total, the course boasts an altitude difference of an astounding 6400 metres. The fastest time is still, of course, held by none other than Assinger himself. At the race premiere in 2010, the 55-year-old needed just 50 minutes and 38 seconds to make it down all nine descents.

The race itself is extremely challenging from the very start, when competitors must first master a short ascent on skis. This helps to immediately spread the field out a bit. So it doesn't hurt to prepare for the race a little – after all, it covers almost

26 kilometres and the innumerable gates that must be navigated as quickly as possible are pretty tricky. While you can certainly rest and catch your breath on the chair lift, it doesn't get any easier towards the end of the race. The final descent down into the valley is more than seven kilometres long and thus presents the ultimate final challenge. For more ambitious amateur racers, stopping off at one of the ski area's many cosy ski huts is out of the question, even if their thighs are starting to burn towards the end. But Assinger reminds participants to not take the race too seriously. The focus remains on the Olympic idea of taking part and simply having fun: 'I say to all participants, health always comes before placement! After all, we want to be able to enjoy a cold beer together afterwards and share a few tales from the race.'



© nassfeld.at

Schlag das Ass is a spectacular ski race for everyone.

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© Ski Juwel Alpbachtal Wildschönau

Snow-hungry children have lots of fun learning to ski at Alpbachtal.

With its conveyor belt (think magic carpet), various trails, and fun obstacles, learning to ski in the Alpbachtal valley is literally child's play. But a day of skiing here is also an adventure. The kids can attempt their first turns through the magic forest during special ski courses and are transformed into ninja warriors on the like-named parcours course. With specially trained entertainers, the day in the snow flies by for the little ones, while their parents and older siblings can hone their skills further up the mountain or by taking one of the special courses available for beginners or advanced learners.

Indeed, Alpbachtal Wildschönau attracts many a visitor with its family-friendly offers that include overnight accommodation, ski passes, and ski courses. At Easter, for example, children under the age of 15 can ski for free when accompanied by a parent (valid with the purchase of a three-day ski pass). And children under the age of six can use the ski lifts for free all winter long – to help them decide whether a career as a junior racer is on the cards. **bo**

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL: THE ALPBACHTAL WILDSCHÖNAU FAMILY PARADISE

With a kids' world, family parks, and the opportunity to co-pilot a snow plough, Alpbachtal Wildschönau is an absolute gem of a resort where every day of skiing is an experience for the whole family. With its abundance of pistes, the ski area situated just over one hour's drive from Munich attracts ski fans both young and old, beginners and advanced skiers, and also families. Ski holidays with children are always a challenge. Therefore it's all the nicer that ski resorts such as Alpbachtal Wildschönau today have a whole host of creative ideas, countless services, and professional childcare by qualified staff to cater to exactly this target group. Snow-hungry kids can let off steam at Juppi-Do kids' world, where they can try skiing for the first time and gradually work their way up to more challenging terrain.

Spread over four mountains and two valleys with 109 kilometres of perfectly groomed runs, a network of 45 lifts, two cool snow parks, and 24 cosy ski huts offering delicious dishes for guests both young and old, the ski area has something for everyone. The experts have also confirmed this: Tyrol's tourism agency, Tirol Werbung, has accorded Alpbachtal Wildschönau the title of 'Certified Tyrolean family ski area', and the editors of *Skiresort.de* have awarded it five stars – the highest distinction for family friendliness.



© Ski Juwel Alpbachtal Wildschönau

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Good to know: action off the slopes

For those who've had enough of skiing, Alpbachtal offers further exciting leisure opportunities. The high-speed turns and jumps of the 'Lauser Sauser' alpine coaster on the Wiedersbergerhorn guarantees lots of fun and action for all. From the end of December until mid-March, visitors can also sign up to co-pilot a snow plough in the Reither Kogel ski area. The two snow ploughs weigh ten tonnes apiece and boast more than 500 hp to make a dream come true for children (and those still young at heart!) during this unique experience lasting around one hour. skijuwel.com



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