

Hospitality comes naturally to St Anton

Andrew Tong visits the Austrian town that has just won a prize for best European ski resort, and a role in the movie 'Chalet Girl'

Sunday, 30 January 2011

The Arlberg region of Austria likes to call itself the "cradle of skiing".

It's the sort of proud posturing that could provoke an avalanche of counter-claims, but no one can argue with its reputation for hospitality. This dates back more than 600 years to 1386, when a shepherd called Heinrich Findelkind built a hospice on the Arlberg pass as a shelter for the travellers who faced disaster on the treacherous route into St Anton.



PRESS PICTURE

Cold play: St Anton has been named as the best European ski resort in the latest edition of 'Which Ski Resort Europe'

Now St Anton has been named as the best European ski resort in the latest edition of Which Ski Resort Europe – that's the Brit Guide, not the well-known product reviewers – and there will be dancing on the tables and Jägerbombs all round for staggering off with the award for "best après-ski" as well. This is due recognition of a very long tradition of attending to the needs of visitors – and an excellent excuse for a good old party.

The shepherd's Hospiz hotel and its sister, Hospiz Alm, are now world-famous ski landmarks and the charity set up by Findelkind, the Brotherhood of St Christophe, has some 17,000 members. But those who pass through are no longer needy. The entrance to the Alm is lined with photos of its habitués, from Princess Diana to Richard Nixon. There are more pictures of Vladimir Putin than anyone else, but the Pope's there, too, clearly enjoying the hospitality.

Last year the rich and famous descended on St Anton again to make the film Chalet Girl, which will be released on 18 February. It stars Brooke Shields, Bill Nighy and Bill Bailey. The Tirolean town may have to brace its lederhosen for a British invasion.

The Hospiz and its Alm, lying in the shadow of the mighty Valluga as you wind your way down from Galzig, are just two of the many renowned hostelries in the area. The five-star hotel serves superb cuisine and has the largest big-bottle cellar in the world, while its little sister is a bit lighter on the wallet but laden with old-world charm topped off by trencherman's portions.

In contrast, the legendary Moosewirt caters for a much wilder party scene after a hard day on

the piste. By 4pm, the bar, which perches on the Gampen only 500 yards from St Anton itself, is standing room only. It's not long before the punters are up on the tables strutting their stuff to the pounding Europop. As for getting home again, the preferred option is sliding down into town on your backside.

Opposite is the more sedate Griabli, a restaurant that features live music of a more bluesy ilk, while further up the Gampen sits the Krazy Kanguruh, which rivals the Moosewirt for its full-on festivities. At the bottom of the slope are the handy, packed-out Base Camp and the recently reopened Underground, ideal for putting those weary feet up for a couple of swift ones before heading off into the night and raucous activity at the Piccadilly Bar or the adjacent Postkeller.

But even in St Anton you have to get your head down at some stage. Despite the film, chalets are a relatively new phenomenon here; 10 years ago there weren't any. Few other nationalities go in for this very middle-class British tradition. They don't want to be looked after by a couple of spotty teenagers who are only interested in getting out on to the slopes themselves, and spend a week eating tinned soup and pasta. Why not stay in a nice hotel instead?

My partner and I had the chance to sample both. I was booked to stay with a British chalet company, which had opened in St Anton for the first time. We stood outside in a blizzard for a while until the owner's daughter came and let us in. When we finally found our "hosts", they showed us to our room, a tiny one in the basement with a brick wall covering the window, next to a throbbing boiler room. Someone had forgotten to flush the toilet.

The chalet was supposed to cater for 20 people, and we demanded a room that had daylight and oxygen in it. The other guests were great company in the cramped communal space but by the time the salmon fillets had been nuked on the third evening, it was time to head for the hills. Eleven people started the week in the chalet; by Thursday six of us had gone to stay in hotels, while another just went home. It was like a reality TV show.

We moved to the Waldhof, where the cast of Chalet Girl had stayed during filming. The hosts, Michael and Andrea Ladner, provide "traditional living in a family atmosphere", and the set-up was surprisingly similar to the chalet in that the couple do it all on their own. Indeed, Michael rules over his kitchen in splendid isolation, preparing his set menu of four or five courses – even when the mayor turned up with all his staff to hold their Christmas party.

The historic hospice reappears out of the deep snow at this point. Andrea worked at the grand old hotel for 18 years and met Michael there while he was serving his apprenticeship under Sepp Zangerl, its celebrated chef for more than three decades. This dynamic couple are carrying on the Arlberg's age-old traditions and it was noticeable how many locals came along to socialise at the Waldhof.

Wine and conversation flowed around the roaring fire, and on our last night an elderly, bearded gentleman who could have been a relative of Freud, with his sonorous voice and soul-stripping eyes, spent some time trying to brainwash us into joining the Brotherhood of St Christophe. It was time to head over the pass, but it seems that in St Anton you can't go wrong with the hospitality if you set out on the right path in the first place.

Compact Facts

How to get there

EasyJet (0905 821 0905; easyjet.com) offers return flights from Gatwick to Innsbruck from £120. Der Waldhof (00 43 5446 40509; waldhof-stanton.com) offers doubles from €170 per night.

Further Information

St Anton Tourist Board (00 43 5446 2269; stantonmarlberg.com).

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