

# HEILIGENBLUT: A WINTER LIKE NO OTHER



**The snow is falling, the lifts are turning, but the hotels remain closed. Andreas Hofer visits the quaint – and empty – mountain resort to speak with the locals about life during the pandemic**

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While we read of fellow skiers locked up by health authorities in Verbier instead of enjoying their paid-for skiing vacations, and about all of Europe fighting the Swiss and the Austrians for trying to keep their ski lifts running this season, deep uncertainty is chipping away on our plans to ski this winter. Direct flights from the UK were banned by most countries, travel discouraged, hotels closed and opened and closed again, and the opening of ski lifts postponed everywhere on a weekly basis. For the first time since the harsh winter of 1951, which made access impossible, Heiligenblut, an Alpine hamlet in Austria, found itself without guests over Christmas and New Year.

The quaint mountain village of Heiligenblut (1,288m) is tucked in a narrow valley at the foot of Austria's highest mountain, the Grossglockner (3,798m). It consists of a host of timber-built farm houses, a post office and a handful of hotels huddled around a pretty, medieval church with a spindly, steep-roofed spire. In the north corner of its graveyard rests an iron book, engraved with the names of all those who had perished while

attempting to scale Grossglockner since the year 1800 - the year when a hardy group of mountaineers and local guides, put together and led by the mountain-crazy Duke-bishop von Salm, reached the summit for the first time.



Heiligenblut has experienced several snowfalls throughout December and January - every other week roofs have to be cleared to prevent collapsing

Located on one of the most spectacular mountain roads crossing the high Alps, the Großglockner Hochalpenstrasse, the hamlet is in winter cut-off and at the end of a cul-de-sac. Thick duvets of snow bury the farmsteads and transhumance barns and make the high road impassable. Since the 1960s, when the Aga Khan initiated the construction of a few, rickety chairlifts, the villagers, who used to sell souvenirs on the road side in summer, started to regularly host ski enthusiasts in winter too. It was always a modest affair and even today, with a dozen of ski lifts, it cannot compare with Courchevel, Lech or Zermatt. Yet regulars would visit unwaveringly, attracted by a wide open terrain and ski pistes covering 1,700 meters altitude with views of the highest ridges of the Alps.

Heiligenblut, in the centre of the National Park Hohe Tauern, is the base camp for all who wish to explore by foot or on touring skis the largest untamed Alpine territory in Europe, where chamois, ibices and lammergeiers roam and marmots whistle in summer. It is a ski tourer's paradise. Rarely, if ever, one meets fellow skiers here - neither on any of the 3,000 metre peaks, nor in the numerous, snow-steeped gorges cutting through the rock on both sides of Moelltal valley. Après-ski Ischgl-style has never arrived and ski huts serve hearty food without blaring schlager music.

## CUT OFF FROM THE WORLD

The Ski Club of Great Britain, under its Freshtracks programme, offers freeride skiing weeks here, guided by Schorsch Schiechl and his buddies, all internationally qualified UIAGM-mountain guides. Schorsch runs a small ski shop near the gondola, renting out 300 pairs of skis and boots on a daily basis - usually. Now all his brand new skis, acquired for this season, stand idle. Not a single Ski Club member has shown up so far this winter, which is not much of a surprise when airports stay shut and hotels are mothballed.

Schorsch is terribly busy though. As head of the local avalanche rescue team, he and his fellows are tasked with securing the roads for snow blowers and woodcutters. Since it had started to snow in the beginning of December with avalanches blocking roads, cutting electricity lines and felling transmitter masts, ever new layers of snow have been added. The tunnels trenched from house to house look Siberian. Every other week roofs have to be cleared to prevent collapsing.



Sepp Schachner, mayor of the village for almost a quarter of a century

Commissioned by Ski+board I had come to interview local hoteliers, shop assistants, ski lift personnel, guides and Sepp Schachner, mayor of the village for almost a quarter of a century. He stood at the epicentre of the first lockdown in March, when after a sudden outbreak of Covid, Heiligenblut was cut off from the outside world.

Early in the morning federal police had started to erect manned barriers at the only access road to the village. Nobody was allowed in or out. Food and medical supplies had to be picked up by the villagers at the barrier, where they had to deposit their garbage too, collected by binmen in full protective gear. "The police order came in the morning of 14 March," Sepp remembers, ruefully leafing through his voluminous files of by-laws issued by the county and the police on a weekly basis ever since.

"All guests - we had still 450 skiers on the ground at the time - were suddenly turned into prisoners. They were, under the threat of punishment, ordered to stay. When eventually our foreign visitors were escorted out, the Austrian nationals locked up in their rooms were on the barricades. Why can they leave but not us? It was

mayhem. We had to keep them under lock for 14 days. I couldn't possibly ask them to pick up the bill and paid their stay out of my municipality budget. What could I have done otherwise? Sadly my expenses were never recognised by the authorities."



Hofer skinning up in perfect conditions in Heiligenblut

## **NO FRIENDS ON A POWDER DAY**

Hannes Pichler, owner of Nationalpark Lodge, like Chalet Senger one of the premier hotels in the resort, sits in the unlit bar of the hotel, complete with a massive Covid beard and his unshakable smile. "Christmas without guests seems like a boon for family life. But you know, we as a family, we are in the hospitality business. We feel exhilarated and honoured when we can celebrate with our regulars. Many families are our guests for three generations. They are our friends too. It will be a very lonely affair without them, really. Our business is compensated for by the government. We get grants either covering our fixed costs at full, or 50% of our usual turnover. But we are in this because we like what we are doing. We could all do other, easier jobs."

His and the other hoteliers' main difficulty is not the present plight. It is the limbo, not to know from one day to the other what to plan for. "At the beginning of the season we were told to be ready for Christmas. Then it was January 7. Then January 11. Then January 17. Really, can we be sure?" As it turned out, hotel openings are postponed now at the time of writing until at least the end of February.

Ski lifts on the other hand are allowed to operate for locals and day guests since 25 December. "We have to hire seasonal workers. If we don't hire them at the beginning of the season, we cannot hire them anymore, as happened already with our chef and his first assistant. We cannot employ on demand. We need 14 days to get the hotel ready for the opening, five days to heat the 20-metre pool. When should we start?"

I checked in at Karin Eder's Alpinside, a luxurious cottage 10 metres from the main gondola's valley station. It sports three apartments that can be connected, each sleeping four in comfort. Usually each unit is rented out for 90 to 360 euros per day, dependent on the actual guest count and the time of the year. Karin, an old friend since childhood, let me stay for free. "You know, as this is a fully furnished apartment, it could be a WFH rental. But I don't want to be unfair when B&Bs and hotels cannot yet operate. I will open when all the others can do so too."

From the doorstep of Alpinside I skinned up the ski resort, every day groomed to perfection, yet eerily void of people. Not a single soul to be seen, with t-bars and cabins all tucked in storage. The lifts' cables were heavy with snow, with personnel, reduced in numbers and lacking urgency, slowly cleaning the sensors and rollers and waving me a good morning.



Hofer was the only one to set fresh turns in the untracked, pristine terrain

I could enjoy a winter wonderland with blue skies, wind-still and smothered in metres of fresh powder. Usually my maxim is: no friends on a powder day. Yet I was the only one to set fresh turns in this untracked, pristine terrain. Gliding over vast, untouched slopes it felt as if skiing was just invented.

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