



Winter goes wild in Arlberg

Austria's winter started with a lockdown, but soon opened with three metres of fresh powder. Our intrepid **Andreas Hofer** braved flight cancellations, lockdowns and border controls to open the ski season in Austria's Arlberg region – at least for himself

PHOTOS MIKE PERL



When EasyJet cancelled my flight on 5 December 2021 to Innsbruck, Austria, it felt like Groundhog Day. The year before, Austria's hotels and restaurants had remained closed for the entire season. Ski lifts were up and running, but only for locals. The tourism industry was on life support with many businesses faltering. Who would have thought that we would see yet another lockdown at the start of the winter 2021/2022? I rescheduled my flight to Zürich, doubling the Covid paperwork and tests for Switzerland as well as Austria in the hope that the Swiss transit ban for cars would be lifted in time.

When my mountain guide Mike Perl, who hails from the hamlet of Holzgau in the Upper Lechtal, met me at Zürich airport he came with a satisfactory status report. The border crossing in Lustenau was open and unmanned (all my entry papers for nothing), and despite the sunny weather at my arrival, fresh snow was expected in the coming days. Not much of a surprise here: the village of Warth in Tirol, bordering Vorarlberg, is the epicentre of snow in the Alps. An average of 11 metres of snow smothers the resort and its surroundings every year, luring ski pass holders from the lift-connected resorts of St Anton, Zürs and Lech.

The short road linking Lech with Warth is regularly closed in winter due to heightened avalanche risks. We therefore had to take the B200 through Bregenzer Wald and over the Schröcken pass, making a shortcut from Dornbirn via Bödele, a small resort teaming with locals on skis and sledges enjoying a weekend of blazing sunshine in the mountains.

Mike's family is his lockdown support team. His uncle, Josef 'Pepi' Strobl, a renowned World Cup racer in the 1990s, quartered me in one of the very luxurious flats of

his apartment-hotel, Pepi's Suites in Holzgau, for a token amount that probably didn't even cover his heating bill (which must have been significant, considering the -15°C temperature outside). It wasn't even enough to pay for the free-to-pick contents of the well-stocked wine fridge.

Mike's father, who runs Pepi's ski shop in Holzgau, prepared my skis, taxied Mike and me from mountain to mountain, and opened one bottle of wine after the other when we gathered around the kitchen table, hungry after long days in the mountains. Mother Doris was cooking, and because many in the village were close relatives, the kitchen was always full of nieces and cousins, uncles and aunties dropping in for a chat, gossiping about the latest outrage or dishing up a good story.

LONE VALLEYS AND FRESH SNOW

The sunny weather in the first couple of days saw us skinning elevations left and right of the Lech River, in close proximity to Holzgau, which is a settlement of listed 18th century farm houses, lavishly frescoed, as are many in the other small villages up and down the road, like Steeg, Dürnau, or Bach.

The difference of Holzgau to the luxury resorts of Lech – with its five-star hotels, Michelin-rated restaurants, millionaire patrons and skiing heads of state and royalty, or the pounding, adrenalin-fuelled night-life of St Anton – was striking. Many people still live from husbandry and cheese making here, their little log cabins for hay and potatoes scattered over the valley floor, or braving the elements on high plateaus frequented by transhumance herders and summer hikers. The economic fallout of the Covid-19 lockdowns seemed less severe here, where everyone had a second and a third job.

▲ Skinning elevations left and right of the Lech River



▼ In the lone, powdery valleys of Lechtal the pandemic seems far, far away



I listened to Gernot Schneider, owner of the five-star hotel Almhof-Schneider in locked-down Lech, its ski lifts still mothballed and the pistes still unprepared: “The financial support the government granted last season – and they seem reluctant to give any meaningful support now – was, for a big hotel like us, insufficient.

“They promised to refund our costs, albeit with an upper limit of €60,000 after the first couple of months. This sounds generous. But it was devastating for us. We are not a small enterprise. We have a turnover of a few million euros per season. Our costs exceeded the granted support by far. And we invest every year, to upgrade the rooms, the spa facilities, the restaurants.”

“Upgrading” is a misnomer in his case. Every season the Almhof-Schneider represents the pinnacle of luxury accommodation.

Inoculations are still obligatory in Austria. To go to a hotel, or visit a restaurant, or even to board the plane heading for Austria, you’ll need your three-shot certificate. Apart from this no other restrictions should come in the way of us skiers. A valid QR code. That’s all. No tests, no form filling. You want a lift pass? Show your QR code. Anything else? QR code. Well, I forgot to mention the masks at the ski lifts. You may wear them without a QR.

In the lone valleys and on the silent slopes of Lechtal the pandemic was already far away. Deer clumped through the steep snow; a white hare fled over the snow-cushioned clearing; the tracks of chamois and boar scrapping for frozen bilberries.

Shooting boxes were padded with puffy pillows of fresh snow, and spruce trees and Swiss pines had been candied as for a winter wonderland. We stomped uphill, until we came out from the mists billowing in the valley into wide, sun-lit expanses of pristine snow, twinkling like fields of myriad diamonds.

The avalanche situation was critical, though. The deeper layers of snow were heavily crystallised, the surfaces loaded with wind-transported snow. Often we saw our tracks from the day before erased by flow avalanches the next. We had to tread carefully, avoiding steep inclinations and summit ridges overhung with heavy cornices. Often we turned back, picking runs below the tree line. We hiked up Mutte (2,187m) and Hahnleskopf (2,210m), both modest ascents of less than 1,000 vertical metres, and skinned in proximity to the ski resorts of Saloberkopf (2,041m) and Jöchelspitze (1,800m), weightlessly cruising the fall line.

BACK IN BUSINESS

Two days later a new weather front brought yet more snow, an incredible 50cm per day for the remaining week. Skinning in remote terrain became dangerous. We decided to stick to the not yet open ski resort of Warth, overlooking the idle lifts and slopes of Lech and Oberlech.

Warth’s slopes had been groomed from November onwards, preparing the ground with man-made snow early on. This seemed retrospectively a terrible waste of time and effort, now that heaven had opened the snow gates full throttle. To secure the lift installations, dangerous snow build-ups were regularly dynamited throughout the day. We could hear the detonations through the blizzard even from far away. Both the groomed base of the ski piste and the blasting of snow slabs and cornices in its vicinity added considerably to our safety, despite the fact that the fresh snow remained

untracked, and hence as powdery as Hokkaido snow.

Now we could ski even seriously steep descents without much bother. This we did, enjoying the fact that the closed ski lifts guaranteed us first runs on the pistes and in close proximity to them. No one was around but the pisteurs, desperately fighting against prodigious amounts of snow. Touring skiers come in two types: those who want to bag a summit no matter what, even when conditions really suck, and those who skin on groomed tracks or on the side of the piste to clock up verticals with speed. Those like us, who skin for the fun of skiing, often forgoing the summit to better repeat a perfect run a couple of times, are thankfully not too numerous yet. For a few days we had the resort to ourselves, engraving it with neat powder turns, which all too soon disappeared under ever fresher duvets of snow.

Little did we know that only a week later the hotels and restaurants would be teaming with winter guests again, celebrating on the slopes and après-ski that the Covid-spook was finally over. For Mike and me the search for fresh tracks will be that much harder when we meet up again this spring, as the Arlberg is Europe’s Mecca for off-piste skiers. But who are we to mind?

▼ Duvets of snow and not another skier in sight...

Factfile

Pepi’s Suites, Holzgau (pepissuites.com/en, +43 (0)5633 5246) has apartments sleeping two from €124 per night; sleeping four from €164, sleeping six from €245 per night. Ski instructor and mountain guide Mike Perl (mike-perl.at) charges €400 per day for a group of four skiers max. The Ski Arlberg six-day lift pass, valid for all 88 ski lifts and over 300km of groomed pistes, costs €326, visit skiarlberg.at

