

An Austrian ski safari

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KITZBUEHEL, AUSTRIA — From Saturday's Globe and Mail

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Life is good on ski safari at Kitzbuehel, which is why thousands of skiers make their way to this luxury resort every season. (Lori Knowles for The Globe and Mail)

There's an old man riding next to me on the *schlepplift* (T-bar) at Kitzbuehel. He says he's 102 and he has been skiing these pistes for nearly a century. The ski pants covering his spindly legs are tucked neatly into his woollen socks, which are stuffed into his ski boots -- his equipment looks nearly as old as he is. We disengage from the *schlepplift*, say *auf Wiedersehen*, and he slips off into a sunny, white valley, ringed on all sides by rocky Austrian peaks. He speaks no English, and I speak no German and that's a shame. I'm in the heart of skiing's history, in the province of Tyrol, on what Austrians call a *skisafari*. There's so much this man could tell me.

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- Where Swiss style crosses into France
- Wind-powered resorts leave a smaller footprint

Kitzbuehel's ski safari is a peak-to-peak, lift-to-lift, hut-to-hut trek from one end of the resort to the other. One way takes at least a day: 35 kilometres of ski trails, 15 kilometres of lifts and 6,000 glorious metres of vertical. Skiers never ride the same *sesselbahn* (chair lift) or *schlepplift* twice while making their merry way from the centre of Kitzbuehel, up the famed Hahnenkamm, then onto Pengelstein, Steinbergkogel, Jochberg and Zweitaussender all the way to Pass Thurn. Spent, giddy from schnapps and soothed by all that creamy hot chocolate consumed along the way, pooped skiers are picked up by a free bus and hauled back to Kitzbuehel. My advice: Ask the driver for a wake-up call so you don't miss your stop.

I start my ski safari on a sunny day in March. The bells from the church in the centre of Kitzbuehel, a ski village an easy two-hour train ride from Munich, drag me from my feathery bed to the window, where I throw up the sash. A bluebird sky and brilliant sunshine light up the candy-coloured roofs and stuccoed buildings of this European ski town. The mountain rises above it. By the looks of it, the Hahnenkamm, the World Cup's most feared downhill, lives up to its reputation.

I'm met by our ski guide from the Rote Teufel Skischule (Red Devil Ski School) and he guides our group to the gondola through the steep, tapered streets of Kitzbuehel. Audis and Mercedes roar through the 700-year-old laneways like Ferraris race through Monte Carlo, their drivers clad in fur coats and Dior sunglasses. Their destination? Smoke-filled cafés for a morning hit of espresso.

Our destination is the Hahnenkamm lift. We have a photo snapped at the top of the awesome downhill Canada's Crazy Canucks dominated in the '70s and '80s. Then we shove off for a day full of skiing, eating, drinking, and more eating. We ride a lift, stop in an *alm* (a farmer's alpine hut and restaurant -- there are more than 40 along the route) for sips of *milchkaffee* (coffee and hot milk), then continue. We ski slopes that are wide and tree-less, mostly groomed, with tufts of powder along their edges that's easy to turn in. Then we ride some more lifts, ski some more empty pistes that seem to go on forever, and stop for lunch at Panoramaalm.

We fill our bellies with Austrian heavies: sausage, dumplings and *kasspatzl mit salat* (a cheesy pasta with salad). Our waitresses -- dressed in heavy, colourful sweaters -- plunk massive platters of food before us and we dig in en masse, Tyrollean style. The best is the *kaiserschmarrn* (emperor's trifle) for dessert, a mash of broken-up pancake, raisins and powdery white sugar, with sides of jam to make the mess even sweeter.

The afternoon is a dizzy blur, so full are our bellies. The sun continues to light up the Alps, and we lounge for a while on slope-side *liegesthuls* (sun chairs) to drink in the vistas. The views are chased by short shots of schnapps.

Life is good on ski safari at Kitzbuehel, which is why thousands of skiers, mostly German and British, make their way to this luxury resort every season. We end our day on a sleepy shuttle bus ride back to our hotel, where I fold myself back into my downy bed for an hour of late-afternoon shuteye.

But rest is hard to come by in a ski town in Austria. There's shopping to be done in the ritzy stores along the cobblestone streets. There are visits to be made to one of Kitzbuehel's many, many spas. And there's more food to be eaten in restaurants such as the Sonnbergstuberl, one of Kitzbuehel's oldest. There's also fun to be had at The Londoner, a dingy English pub near the base of the Hahnenkamm where Brits, ski racers, ski pros and more Brits hang out after long days of ski safariing. A visit to Kitzbuehel isn't really a visit until you've partied at The Londoner.

The ski town holds special interest for Canadians for several reasons. First, it's one of dozens of ski resorts -- including Innsbruck, Sölden and St. Anton -- that are traditionally less expensive to visit than ski areas in pricier France or Switzerland. Austrian ski vacations are sometimes even cheaper than trips to Canada's ski grounds because the costs of lifts, hotels, transfers and meals are often figured into travel packages.

Second, most Austrian ski resorts are within two to three hours of the Munich airport, which Air Canada flies into regularly direct from Pearson in Toronto (the train from Munich rolls right into the base of the ski village).

And finally, while Austria's lifts are much older and its pistes aren't always as challenging as parts of, say, British Columbia, Austrian skiing is mostly ski-safari style. There's nothing comparable in North America. There's no place in our Coast Mountains, Sierras, Rockies or Monashees where you can get quite this fat or quite this happy on a six-day ski vacation.

An Austrian ski trip is all about the vistas, the emperor's trifle, the outdoor sun chairs, and the 102-year-old man you could meet on the T-bar whose life spans a century of skiing.

Lori Knowles is a Toronto-based ski writer and senior editor of Ski Press magazine. **If you go GETTING THERE** Skiers can get to Kitzbuehel via direct flights on Air Canada from Toronto to Munich and then by shuttle bus, train or car. For transit information, visit <http://www.kitzbuehel.com> or <http://www.austria-tourism.com>. **Skican:** phone: (416) 488-1169 or (888) 475-4226; Web: <http://www.skican.com>. Toronto-based company operates ski travel packages to Austrian ski resorts Kitzbuehel, Innsbruck, St. Anton and Sölden from \$1,450 a person. **Connection Tours:** Phone (416) 449-4652 or (877) 449-4652; Web: <http://www.connectiontours.com>. Also offers ski trips to Austria. **WHERE TO STAY Hotel Schwarzer Adler:** Florianigasse 15, A-6370 Kitzbuehel; phone: 43 (5356) 6911; Web: <http://www.hotel-schwarzer-adler.at>. Moderate prices. **Hotel Weisses Ross:** Bichlstrasse 5, A-6370 Kitzbuehel, Tyrol; phone: 43 (5356) 62541; Web: <http://www.weisses-roessl.com>. Luxurious. **INFORMATION** For information on guides, there are a number of ski schools providing guiding services in the Kitzbuehel area.

The most famous is the **Rote Teufel Skischule** (Red Devil Ski School): phone: 43 (5356) 62500; Web: <http://www.rote-teufel.at>.

The ski season runs from December to March, but the best time to go is between January and mid-March. One-day lift tickets for adults start at \$50.