

Glacier skiing in Austria

I've always been a keen skier, but the thought of dusting down my boots and heading to the Alps at the beginning of July had never crossed my mind. Yet when I discovered that the Austrian Tyrol's southernmost valley (which is home to the Hintertux Glacier) provides such good summer skiing that it's a popular training destination for ski teams from all over the world, it wasn't long before I was packing my bags with an unusual mix of thermals and shorts.

After a scenic two-hour transfer from Munich, I arrived in Hintertux, a small village comprising a cluster of family-run hotels, including the ominously named Bad Hotel. The recently refurbished, four-star Hohenhaus, seemed like a far safer bet and I spent the rest of the day relaxing by the hotel's pool, which has panoramic views of the glacier I planned to be zipping down the next day.

Glacier skiing isn't for you if you like long lie-ins on your holidays. The secret to getting the most out of Hintertux's 18km of pistes is to ski

the south-facing runs first thing. These are only open until lunchtime and even by 11am the snow has begun to soften considerably in the sun. So my instructor Greg collected me at 8am to catch the first lifts.

The village sits at 1,500m and it takes three cable cars and over 20 minutes to reach Gefrorene Wand, at 3,250m. As we stepped out at the summit, the biggest surprise was that there was actually very little ice to be seen. Except for at the edges of the glacier, most of the pistes are covered in several feet of snow all year – the glacier acts as a giant refrigerator preventing a thaw. It was incredible to think that the ice

beneath my feet was 120m thick and, at its core, over 1,000 years old.

In fact, the only clues that this was midsummer and not the depths of winter were the lush green mountains and valleys surrounding us – it felt like I'd been dropped into a scene from *The Sound of Music*.

Having spent some time trying out the southern slopes, I decided to brave the steeper north side of the glacier. The ice there is hard-packed for most of the morning and much more challenging. I decided to tuck in behind one of the ski racers as he carved his way down the slope under the watchful eye of his trainer. I thought that I had done pretty well to

keep up as we stopped at the lift – only to discover that he was a she, that she was only 15, and that she skied for that top winter sports nation, Greece. I clearly need more practice.

By midday the professional teams had decided that the snow was getting too soft and had packed up and headed down the mountain. For me, the slopes they had been using had softened into perfect snow and by 12.30pm it was fantastic. I skied until 2pm, taking the piste all the way to the bottom of the gondola.

The beauty of putting away my skis in early afternoon was that it left plenty of time for the other more summery pastimes on offer, such as



Clockwise from below left: the Hintertux Glacier; on the piste; après-ski Austrian style



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relaxing by one of the swimming lakes, whitewater rafting, kayaking and sailing.

On my last day, I strolled into the village and wandered into the Bad Hotel, curious to discover what *Fawlty Towers*-esque dramas might be behind its doors. Instead, I discovered an outdoor pool, opened in 1926 and filled directly from a thermal spring. It was these “baths” which, in translation, gave the hotel its name. When I asked the receptionist if they had many British guests, she shrugged: “We have visitors from all over Europe, but none from the UK – I don't know why.” I didn't feel I should be the one to enlighten her.

Mike Gill

Redpoint Holidays (0845 680 1214, www.redpoint.co.uk) offer three nights half-board accommodation and three days glacier skiing from £331 and return flights to Munich from £50.

