



Source: Press & Journal (Aberdeen) {Your Life}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Saturday 27, February 2010
Page: 4,5
Area: 1501 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 15433 Daily
BRAD info: page rate £11,770.00, scc rate £26.75
Phone: 01224 690 222
Keyword: Crystal Holidays

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Travel Abroad Tirolean treat

A MAN in tweeds makes his way down the slope on a pair of wooden skis and we watch entranced. For a few minutes, we blank out the modern-day ski tourists who, like us, are here to see a spectacular ski show. Actually, it's quite easy to drift back in time here in Niedereau. This part of Austria is home to the Tirol's first chairlift, which was built in 1947. Marilyn Monroe used to sashay her way across these slopes, as did Doris Day and other major Hollywood stars. Dirk Bogarde liked to ski here and Marlon Brando once sat on the balcony of Staffler's Hotel enjoying a sophisticated cocktail and a fat cigar.

Wide, forgiving runs make the Austrian resort of Niedereau just the place for those who want to hone their ski-ing and snowboarding skills, writes **Jenny McBain**

Fast-forwarding to the 21st century, this part of the Tirol has become a magnet for those who want to hone their ski-ing and snowboarding skills. My seven-year-old son, Ruairidh, is a beginner with a couple of weeks' experience in ski-ing while I come into that catch-all category described as intermediate.

We are staying in a family-run hotel called the Schneeberger and dinner is an elaborate affair of five courses. We start with a salad buffet and then have soup with dumplings followed by a pasta dish and then a substantial main course of meat, potatoes and home-made noodles. Pudding, when we can manage it, is mousse,

ice cream with fruit or cake. A holiday on the slopes needs an almost military approach if things are to go smoothly. Our Crystal ski rep, Ian, smooths our path by taking us to the ski hire shop and then walking us to the children's club, where Ruairidh is to be looked after by nannies Carol and Ruth. They will make sure he is suited, booted and ready to take part in his morning and afternoon ski sessions. Between lessons, they will see that he is fed and entertained. The downside of a budget ski holiday is that it inevitably involves a degree of legwork. When you pay more, you can expect on-site childcare facilities and for everything to be within easy reach.



Now child-free, I meet up with another rep, a young Welsh lawyer called Paul who has forsaken a desk-bound job for a season of looking after holidaymakers. It soon becomes apparent that he is having a rather wild social life and making the most of apres ski.

Paul shows me and another couple of holidaymakers round the resort's main runs. For a moment, we almost lose each other in the mist, but we soon learn our way around the mountain.

Basically, it consists of a series of wide runs, so it's like being on an American freeway. There is loads of room to play with and our creaks and wobbles smooth out with practice. The scenery is stunning. Forests of conifers line the slopes and even the felled stumps add charm. Paul points out that they look like a series of pints of Guinness.

Ruairidh seems to be enjoying what is his third ski holiday, although so far, he is not shaping up to be one of life's powder-bashers. Rather, he is quite content to take life easy and perfect his snow plough. When I tell him we are going for an evening's tobogganing, he is quite enthusiastic. And it turns out to be fun.

We each have our own wooden sledge. These attach to the button tow by way of a small hook. On we get and glide our way to the top of the slope.

True to form, Ruairidh does not want to tackle the descent himself so I loop his sledge on to mine and we both get on to the lead sledge and whoosh gleefully down the piste.

I listened carefully in our training session so I know to keep the soles of my boots in contact with the snow, applying pressure to either side in order to turn. It's quite simple to master. The sledges are mounted on skis, so you apply pressure in the direction you want to go. Once we have mastered the straight run, we

follow a track round a ruined farm building. Maybe some people did not pay attention to the instructions, or maybe they were unlucky. More than one crash occurs.

The next day, I deposit Ruairidh at the children's club and make my way by bus to another ski area – Auffach.

There is a greater number of challenging runs here and several mountain-top taverns compete for lunchtime custom. Although many modern skiers are now sealed off in their own worlds and living out their adventures to a backing track from a personal music gizmo, it is still possible to strike up a conversation in a gondola. Two guys from the Isle of White share their rather unflattering view on Scottish politicians, but I take no offence and we keep each other company for a few runs.

One evening, Ruairidh and I sign up for a horse sleigh ride. It's rather cold and the miles pass slowly, but it's quite fun to be immersed in the landscape and to peak into farmsteads and mountain houses. Sometimes we run on wheels and then, when conditions allow, we glide along on runners.

This part of Austria would not be challenging enough for advanced skiers or boarders, but as a place to up your game with wide, forgiving runs, it's hard to beat. We did not have anything approaching the social life experienced by rep Paul. But falling into bed after a day's exertion and a hearty meal makes for a healthy holiday. We fly back to Edinburgh with roses in our cheeks and newly sculpted muscles. Ski-ing is hard work, but compelling. We'll probably go again next year.

TRAVEL FACTS

- Crystal Holidays runs package holidays to Niederau, departing from Edinburgh
- One week half-board at the Schneeberger costs about £549 per person. Cheaper accommodation and late booking discounts are available.
- For more information, see www.crystalholidays.co.uk

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