

Just remember to keep your weight forward

Jo Caird goes to Kirchberg in the Austrian alps to try her hand at snowboarding and discovers that it's harder than it looks, in every sense of the word

Last weekend the Austrian resort of Kitzbühel was the place to be for the international ski community. Over 150,000 people flooded into the tiny medieval town for one of the most important events of the competition circuit: the 68th Annual Hahnenkamm Race. Starting at an altitude of 1,665m altitude and ending at 802m in almost the centre of town, the downhill race is said to be one of the most challenging in the world due to the 85% gradient on one part of the course, which sees competitors fully airborne for 100m.

Kitzbühel is much more than a couple of terrifying races however. The region boasts 168km of groomed pistes, plenty of off-piste opportunities and a separate mountain dedicated to snowboard antics: the Kitzbüheler Horn. As the excitement for the Hahnenkamm began to build, I arrived in Kirchberg, Kitzbühel's smaller and considerably less swanky neighbour to see what the place had to offer.

We flew into Salzburg, Kitzbühel's nearest airport, and were met by a representative of Topdeck, the agency that organised our trip. An hour's winding drive through picturesque alpine forest brought us to Kirchberg and Haus Christian, our home for the next week. New Zealander Liam spent the journey telling us about the revelry awaiting us: the house is staffed by nine young people, most of whom are Australian, and all are there to keep us entertained, whether by supplying us with ski and snowboard equipment, cooking for us, or – perhaps the most important role of all – keeping up an seemingly never-ending supply of

Italian restaurants make the town a nice place to come back to after a hard day on the slopes. It is also home to the VIP American Bar, a table-dancing joint advertised on billboards on pistes throughout the area. The sign outside shows an enormous red drooling mouth with a frog climbing out of it; the drool, on closer inspection, turns out to be frog spawn. Liam assures us that he has never been there and doesn't know anyone who has.

Haus Christian itself is a five-minute walk from the centre of town, always easily locatable (even after one too many shots of Jägermeister) due to its proximity to the *kirch* (church) that gives the town its name. The chalet holds around 45 guests at maximum capacity, most of them in four-bed dorms, but while living space is obviously limited, and showers and toilets are shared, the house is spotless and the showers always hot.

The price of a week's accommodation includes continental breakfasts and four evening meals, eaten with your fellow guests. It may not be to every traveller's taste to have their



mealtimes and food decided for them, but there is certainly something to be said for getting home, showering and dragging one's aching body straight to supper without having to plan



Clockwise from left: view of Kirchberg from the Fleckalmbahn gondola; summit of the Fleckalmbahn gondola; the author and boyfriend; the Igloo Village; Kirchberg's famous *Kirch*; a chairlift over the Winterwanderweg walking trail; one of the area's many 'umbrella' bars in the sunshine

arrival at Haus Christian so the next morning we lost no time in getting to Kitzbüheler Horn to meet our

The chalet is staffed by nine young people, all of them there solely to keep us entertained

shots and shooters.

While Kitzbühel is home to designer boutiques, five-star hotels and Russian women in fur and diamonds, Kirchberg, just a 20-minute bus-ride away, is much like any other ski resort town. A smattering of ski and snowboard shops, lots of cosy places for après-ski fun, several late-night bars for après-ski fun and a few reasonably-priced Austrian and

anything.

Arguably the best thing about the chalet however is that there is an easy (if very long) piste which runs from the centre of the ski area and finishes 2 minutes from the front door, removing the hassle of catching the ski-bus from other points in the valley.

Our hired snowboards and boots were organised in a mercifully speedy 15 minutes on the evening of our

instructor Gail for the first of three days of lessons. The fact that Topdeck offer this service in-house, at the same price as the large rental shops, is one of the biggest advantages of booking with the company. For anyone who has felt the frustration of wasting your first morning on the slopes dealing with paperwork in a rental place, the Haus Christian system is a winner.

I've been skiing for over ten years



All photos: JO CAIRD/STEVE PRETTY



Clockwise from left: view of Kirchberg from the Fleckalmbahn gondola; summit of the Fleckalmbahn gondola; the author and boyfriend; the Igloo Village; Kirchberg's famous *Kirch*; a chairlift over the Winterwanderweg walking trail; one of the area's many 'umbrella' bars in the sunshine

and consider myself competent if technically poor, but have always been jealous of my boarder brother, so thought that now was the time to balance things out. The plan was that I would take to it very quickly and soon be proficient at both sports, able to pick between them depending on company and resort conditions. The other reason was that this way my boyfriend – also a beginner boarder – and I could learn at the same time, thus spending some quality time together. That isn't quite how it all worked out, but I'll get to that later.

After forking out 180 each for a six-day lift pass (which covers the entire Kitzbühel area, as well as giving free access to the region's ski bus network, which runs services frequently throughout the day) we began the 20-minute gondola ascent to the Horn to learn the basics of snowboarding on the nursery slopes of



the snowboard mountain. Group snowboard lessons with Element3 (the school recommended by Topdeck staff) cost 60 per person per day or 150 for three days. One-on-one lessons are 70 per day. The first day our group comprised my boyfriend and I and two other beginners from Haus Christian, so progress was quick, but when other boarders of different levels arrived on the following days, standards deteriorated. If you have the cash and want to waste as little time as possible, then one-on-one is a good way to go.

Lessons were 10am-12pm and 1pm-3pm with an hour's break for lunch at the Alpenhaus at the top of the main Kitzbüheler Horn gondola. Alpenhaus is just one of the many reasonably-priced restaurants and bars dotted throughout the ski area. You'll find one nestling at the top or bottom of practically every major run, but Alpenhaus boasts one of the nicer views. When the weather was good we were able to eat our hearty Austrian lunch on the huge sun terrace and look over onto the expanse of shining white spreading out below us. Tuesdays are Happy Horn Day (we seemed to be the only people on the mountain who found this funny), an event which sees the regular live lunch-time accordion band replaced by an Elvis impersonator named Colin. Hearing a man in an oversized white jacket emblazoned with multi-coloured musical notes sing along to a tinny

easiest grade of slope, so we really weren't pushing ourselves too hard. Except that in snowboarding you never know when you're going to fall, even on a shallow slope, going very slowly. And fall I did.

They say you know when you've broken a bone, but I had no idea - I was just stunned by the pain. Wailing like a child I was escorted back to the Alpenhaus – mercifully, Elvis had left

company by a black labrador (Gail's faithful companion) must have been a ridiculous sight for the restaurant staff, but no one batted an eyelid. No schadenfreude here.

Eight hours later I was back at the chalet with the unwelcome addition of a plaster on my fractured and dislocated wrist. No more snowboarding fun for me. In September my boyfriend got an ear infection and had



to spend the whole of our week's diving holiday sitting around reading. Now it was my turn.

There are in fact a whole host of activities on offer in the Kitzbühel ski region in addition to the usual ones. The guys at Haus Christian will organise night skiing, rodelling (tobogganing to you and me), ice-skating on the frozen Schwarzsee (Black Lake), trips to local ice-hockey matches, and curling. Unfortunately my condition prevented me from doing most of these things and the weather and sporting calendar made the others a no-no. Reports from the chalet staff and other guests however testify that there is much fun to be had, although both rodelling and night skiing are fairly hazardous, often resulting in injuries. Even the most hardcore of the boarders there, men who think nothing of trekking with snow shoes for three hours through snow-filled forest to find virgin powder on which to make their mark, admit that hurtling drunk down an icy slope in the dark on a device with no steering mechanism is dangerous.

So while my uninjured boyfriend was able to explore some of Kitzbühel's 1705 acres of runs – sticking to the blues for the most part – I had to find other things to do. Although obviously designed for skiers and boarders, there are areas of the Kitzbühel mountains that are accessible to those who prefer (or in my case, those who are forced into) gentler pursuits.

The Winterwanderweg is a walking

trail that connects the summits of the main gondolas, Fleckalmbahn and Hahnenkammbahn (where there is also a small free museum stuffed with photographs and equipment from the beginning of skiing in the area in the late nineteenth-century). My fellow walkers were mainly old ladies with yappy dogs and attractive young parents with expensive prams, but everyone was clearly enjoying themselves in the afternoon sunshine. Accessible via the trail is an 'Igloo Village', a small collection of real igloos including a 'wellness igloo with infrared cabin'. Everything was locked when I visited but during specified periods you can stay in one of the sleeping igloos at the igloo hotel (99 pppn or 145 pppn for a bed in a VIP Igloo), drink at the igloo bar or even undergo shaman baptism at the igloo church. The open-air bar is full of skiers and boarders throughout the day, lounging in deckchairs and drinking beers and Jägermeister.

I was never able to forget my irritation at not being able to ski or board, but beautiful surroundings and great weather did dampen my envy enough to let me enjoy myself. Après-ski is not quite the same when you haven't done any skiing but staying in a chalet with a group of people all of whom are having a great time means that the atmosphere is always positive. A serious injury has to have an enormous effect on a winter sports holiday, but certain things enable you to make the most out of a bad situation. People kept asking if I would be put off boarding or skiing in the future and the answer is certainly not. With a region as big and as reasonably priced as Kitzbühel awaiting me, as soon as my physio is over, I'll be back. And next time hopefully I'll get off the nursery slopes.

TRAVEL INFO

Jo Caird travelled to Austria with travel adventure specialist Topdeck Travel (www.topdecktravel.co.uk).

A 6/7 day stay in the ski resort of Kirchberg in the Tyrolean valley is from £259 per person, excluding flights, ski hire and lift passes. The price includes hotel accommodation, breakfast daily and 4 group dinners. Topdeck can arrange a lift pass for the entire stay at £135; skis and boot hire at £85 and ski school training over 5 days at £105 per person. To book email: res@topdecktravel.co.uk, telephone 08452575411. Topdeck Travel also runs ski breaks to Andorra, France and Switzerland.

Many budget airlines fly to Salzburg, Munich and Innsbruck, which are not too far from the resort.

A hot lunch at a mountain lodge costs around 10, with similar prices in Kirchberg. Fondue at the Sporthotel will set you back 19.50 per person (min two people). A large beer is 3-3.50, while a glüwein (mulledwine) cost 4-4.50.

For more information on the Igloo Village, visit alpeniglu.com

Wailing like a child I was taken back to the Alpenhaus

Overseas report

Each issue this column features a different study or work abroad experience, direct from London students on their year abroad. From Paris to Panama City, from Berlin to Beijing, they tell you what it means to live in a different culture, whether far away or close to home. In this issue, Kim Cranshaw reports on life in Bangkok, Thailand.

Upon discovering that a uniform was to be part of my university experience in Bangkok I physically shuddered. The last time I wore a uniform I was 16 and the ensemble was maroon and baggy. As a teen of the 90s, I had always envied the short, sophisticated summer dress uniform of the girls from Neighbours.

Really, I should have known. Uniform is something of a Thai obsession. It seems that everyone here has a uniform of some kind whether official or otherwise. The police in Bangkok dress in tight fitting brown fatigues that state that they mean business; the complete opposite of the flailing florescent of the British force. Within Thai society, appearance is extremely important. It is a rare occurrence to spot a filthy or rereck Thai. Uniforms here re-establish the importance of looking smart and identifiable whatever your profession.

Regarding the university uniform my initial horror swiftly turned to delight when I discovered that it was more Neighbours than nasty; fitted white shirt, snappy belt, split skirt and...the crème de la crème...stiletto! Adherence to the uniform is only required during the examination period. However, a fellow international student and I found ourselves cramming in as much wear as possible; a trip to the convenience store, meeting a friend for coffee or a trip to the post office were all occasion enough to don 'that little number'. It wasn't just the utter suaveness that drew us into sporting our unnecessary costume; it was also the way in which Thai people reacted to it. For example, the fruit seller no longer tried to overcharge us, the once silent taxi driver yakked our ears off and the police even stopped traffic for us (a film star moment if ever I've had one). The uniform differentiated us from the *farang* (westerners), of whom many Thai have a negative opinion, the *farang-kii-nok* (bird-sh*t westerner) in particular. Most of this category can be found on Bangkok's infamous Khao San Road: baggy fisherman pants, badly dreadlocked hair, wife beater vest and occasionally, bare feet. The Thai view these people as lacking in personal hygiene and therefore hold them in low esteem.

Thais constantly judge people's appearances. Chubby-as-children adults are still called *uwan* (fat) as a "cute" nickname and a street vendor is as likely to comment on the appearance of an overweight businessman as a buxom blonde. So, whilst wearing a uniform in Thailand is common, it is the art of observing a person's appearance that is truly Thai 'uniform behaviour.'