



Source: Birmingham Post {Review}  
Edition:  
Country: UK  
Date: Thursday 25, February 2010  
Page: 26,27  
Area: 826 sq. cm  
Circulation: ABC 12076 Weekly  
BRAD info: page rate £6,665.12, scc rate £11.59  
Phone: 0121 236 3366  
Keyword: Inghams

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# Climb every mountain

## Paul Dale find a snowy Austrian Alps ski hideaway

**T**here are times when you stumble surprisingly across something on holiday, a fantastic hotel or a great bar, and you really don't want to shout about it.

After all, why tell everyone else about your secret find?

They'll all want a slice of the action and, before you know it, prices will have soared, the Euro-trash moved in, and the place will be ruined.

It is with huge self-sacrifice, therefore, that I have to alert readers to the delights in general of skiing in the Austrian resort of Zell am See and, in particular, to the splendid Hotel St Georg, where the beds are blissfully comfortable and meals are a seemingly never ending parade of fine foods and splendid wine.

Unlike many other Austrian resorts, Zell is far more than a small collection of twee buildings half way up a mountain.

This is a proper town wrapping itself around one side of the country's largest lake and its small collection of mediaeval buildings pay tribute to the fact that Zell dates back to 740AD, having been founded by monks.

Its cobbled streets around an ancient church are full of up-market shops, bars and coffee houses. A walk right around the lake can be

completed in three hours, but it is worth it for stunning views of the Austrian Alps.

The journey from Salzburg Airport takes just over an hour, and the flight from Birmingham is two hours and 15 minutes.

I went with Inghams, one of the oldest and best winter sports operators in the UK. The firm offers several hotels in Zell, all of a high standard.

The four-star Hotel St Georg has been owned by the Sauper family for generations and, because it is relatively small, staff make a habit of learning the names of all guests. People have been coming back here year after year because they are impressed by the warmth and hospitality, and when members of the owner's family eat most nights with the guests, you know you are on to a good thing.

A cosy well-stocked bar leads to a lounge with comfortable sofas and arm chairs, ideal for relaxing with a drink after a hard day on the slopes.

Almost the first thing likely to strike you is the reasonableness of prices at the Georg. Drinks at the bar are cheaper than in town, there are always special offers on good quality wines, typically discounted by up to 20 per cent, and best of all the hotel lays on free snacks between 3pm and 5pm for ravenous ski-

ers. Dinner, four and sometimes five courses, is of a very high standard indeed with a choice of meat, fish and vegetarian dishes.

And in between finishing skiing for the day, eating the free snacks and getting ready for dinner, it's a good idea to keep those pounds down by sampling the hotel's wellness centre, which includes a swimming pool, sauna and Turkish bath. Zell am See's 50 miles of pistes are largely located on the Schmittenhöhe mountain behind the town.

There is some of Europe's snow-making equipment, but that's hardly been necessary this year given the huge dollops of the white stuff that have been falling across the Alps all winter.

Most people staying in Zell will take the city express gondola, which conveniently is about five minutes walk from the Hotel St Georg.

Alternatively, there is a ski bus to the neighbouring village of Schmittental where a cable car and gondola connect to the 6,500ft Schmittenhöhe skiing area.

The Klitzsteinhorn glacier, at about 9,500ft, is a short bus ride away, providing sure snow conditions and skiing even in the summer months.

Unusually for Austria, a number of the tree-lined home runs back to the resort are steep blacks. But novices need not be put off, for most of the skiing here is on



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reasonably benign sunny slopes and suits beginners or intermediates.

I took advantage of Inghams offer to fix up a ski school guide for half a day to show me around the slopes. The intrepid Helga, who speaks English better than the English, even put up with my less than perfect technique and waited

patiently as I made my way slowly down some of the steeper red runs. It is also possible through Inghams to book refresher lessons at the ski school, ranging from brushing up of basic techniques to advanced skiing and off-piste. Clearly something that I should have invested in, but did not because too much time was spent in mountain huts sipping hot tea and restorative gluhweins.

One of the homeward blue runs, number 12b to be precise, should not be missed for it is here that you will find tucked away on the edge of the woods with a splendid view of Zell and the lake, the Ebenbergalm hut. This traditional Austrian bar-restaurant is tiny, even tinier when the owner's huge German Shepherd dog Otto is lying in the middle of the floor, so make sure you get there by 12.30 to be certain of securing a table for lunch. Then loosen ski pants and get ready for home cooking of superlative standards, fortified by the almost obligatory schnapps.

Skiing in Austria is unlike anywhere else in Europe, for the Austrian sense of enjoyment has not been stifled by ubiquitous health and safety rules.

Smoking is still allowed in bars, there are happy hours, adults are treated as adults, no one takes life too seriously and, remarkably, there appears to be very little in the way of drunkenness or

anti-social behaviour. Perhaps our own Puritanical Health Secretary, Mr Andy Burnham, could benefit from an extended skiing holiday in Austria.

At the Ebenbergalm hut, the onion soup topped with cheese and baked in the oven I enjoyed would have graced the table of many a five-star restaurant. And the cost, including a large beer, worked out at about £6 – a snip for a European skiing resort.

As for the goulash soup, don't even go there unless you want to spend the afternoon dozing by the fire.

Generally reasonable prices – expect to pay not much more for food and drink than you would do at home – makes Zell a good choice for families on a budget.

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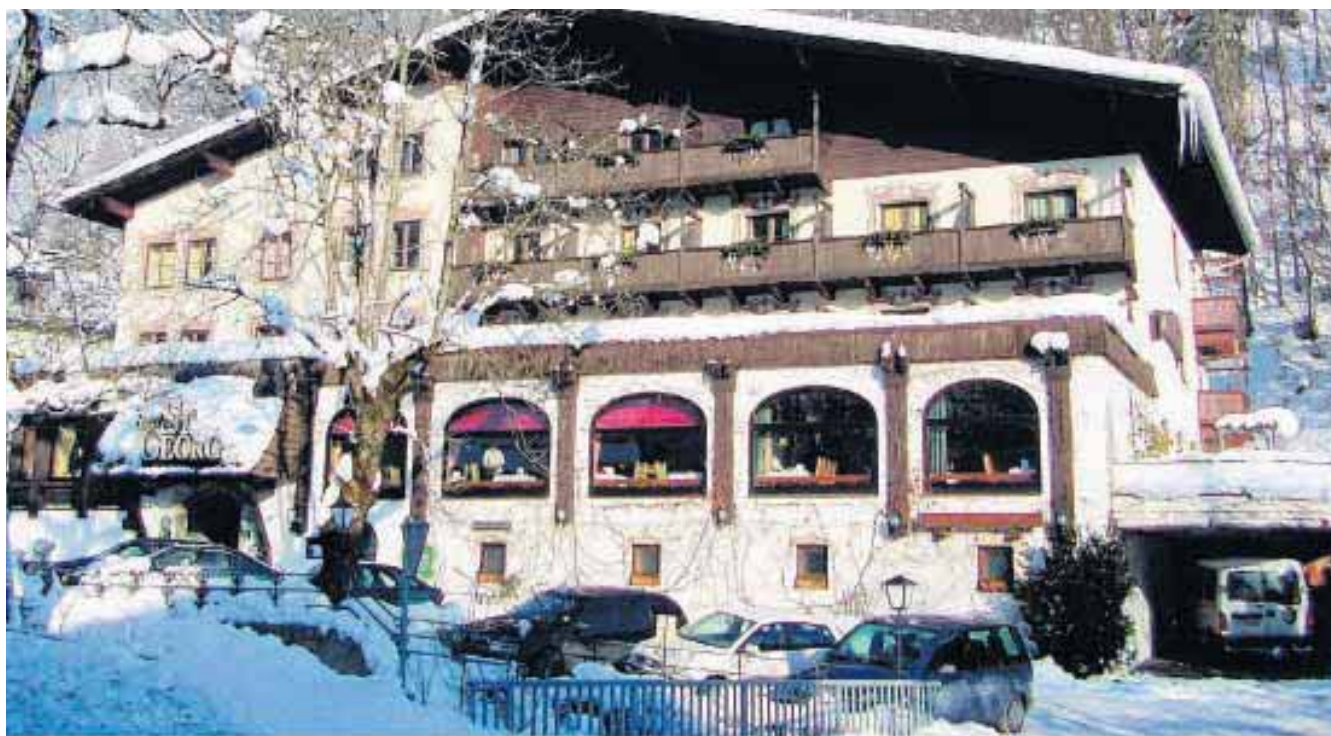
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The view of the Austrian alps from Zell am See

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