



IT'S 4pm high in the Austrian ski resort village of Flachau and the après-ski bell is chiming. Skiers and the occasional snowboarder trudge

through shin-deep snow, heading for the warmth of a lively bar off-piste.

The mountain bars they're flocking to don't resemble the Tyrolean standard (think white-washed concrete walls, dark timber beams, copious glühwein). Rather, this rarely visited ski region (by English-speaking skiers, at least) is home to one of the ski world's strangest drinking venues – basic glass structures erected just metres from the bottom of chairlifts. They are more like greenhouses than taverns.

Unlike greenhouses, however, nothing can be seen through these structures, creating a subterfuge that's part of their collective charm. A layer of hazy residue from the breath of scores of drinkers obscures the outside world and cigarette smoke, unrestrained in Austria, completes the dense atmosphere.

Open the door and you'll hear yodelling and schmaltzy oom-pah music at an ear-splitting volume while normally conservative Austrians down shots of potent pear and apple schnapps. Skiers dance on the bar in ski boots. No one, not even the barman, is concerned.

Flachau – and neighbouring ski resorts – is largely ignored by the outside world, except for a few German and Dutch visitors. Perhaps it's only here in Flachau that Austrians can let themselves be themselves, without attracting the attention that resorts in the far better-known Arlberg region are used to getting.

The majority of Australian skiers who visit Austria won't venture to Flachau, nor to the ski region in which it sits, even though it is the largest in Austria.

Flachau is only a 45-minute drive south of the tourist drawcard of Salzburg. In the Arlberg, to the west, resorts like St Anton and Lech are better known. The mountains there are challenging and amenities superb. English is spoken everywhere but the rapid influx of foreign skiers has overwhelmed the Austrian experience. It's likely your instructor will hail from the north of England or from Sydney.

The same can't be said for Flachau. Many locals still live in the villages their families have inhabited for more than 100 years. It is part of one of the largest ski regions in Western Europe. Known collectively as Ski Amadé (and Salzburger Sportwelt Amadé), it has 270 lifts and 360 slopes allowing 860 kilometres of skiing – all of which can be accessed on the one ski pass.

The slopes here include some of Austria's most challenging, with steep black runs that offer little mercy for the inexperienced. If you fancy half-pipes, nearby Flachauwinkl has one of Austria's largest terrain parks.

Flachau's pitch has made it the ideal venue for Ski World Cup events. The two-kilometre long Hermann Maier Weltcupstrecke allows skiers to retrace the feats of Austria's greatest

skier, Hermann Maier, who hails from the village. But it also includes some of Europe's largest areas of beginner runs.

There are runs more than five kilometres long, although if you link some runs together you're able to ski more than 10 kilometres without a break. And you can ski in the region for a week without repeating a run.

Ski Amadé consists of the ski resorts of Flachau, Wagrain, St. Johann-Alpendorf, Schladming, Altenmarkt-Zauchensee, Radstadt, Kleinarl, Eben and Filzmoos.

It's also possible to ski between many of the resorts with the help of chairlifts and gondolas. When this option is unavailable, free buses run between most resorts every 15 minutes.

For low seasonal snowfalls, the region has Austria's most sophisticated snow-making system and its array of chairlifts can shift 352,000 people an hour.

*The Guardian* in Britain voted Salzburger Sportwelt Amadé one of the world's top 10 resorts for crowd-free skiing. But what makes Flachau special is its small town ambience.

In addition it is more than a hub for wild après-ski action. It is also famous for spas and saunas, and night skiing is also available.

The mountain bars and après-ski huts keep visitors returning, along with the gulasch with semmelknödel (dumplings) and desserts of germknödel (yeast dough dumplings) with glühwein, taken beside a log fire in a tiny mountain hut while the snow falls outside.

But most of all, it's the excited banter of a thousand happy skiers, stuck in the confines of their tiny glass après-ski worlds, raising their glasses to the least pretentious ski environment in Europe.

# Austria unspoilt

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In Flachau you can ski world-cup-level runs and enjoy wild après-ski action in one of the world's least crowded ski resorts.

## CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN:

Flachau's black runs are not for the faint-hearted; beginners are catered for, but note the helmet; ski first, party later; runs for insomniacs.

