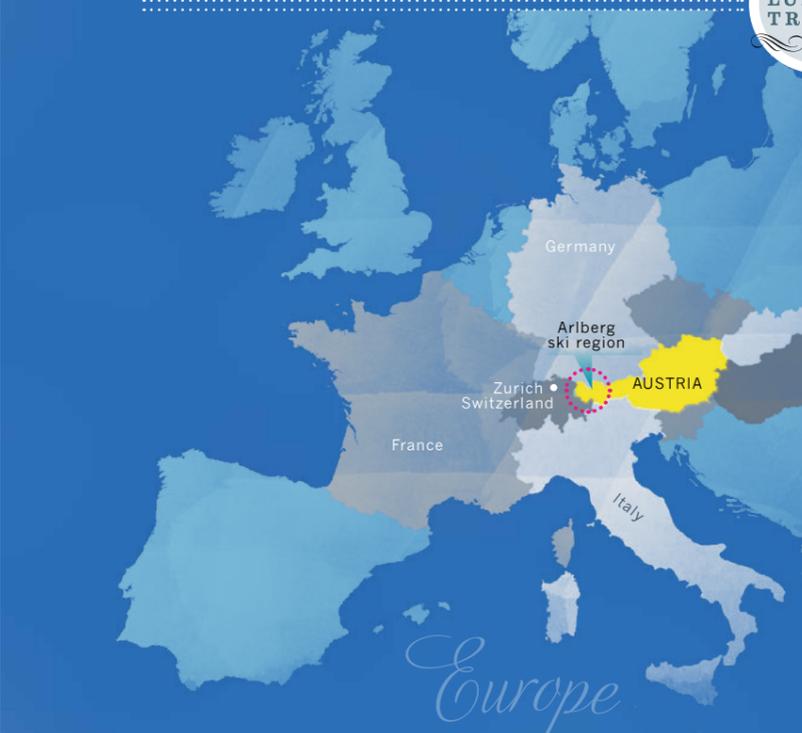




Nobody does it better

Craig Tansley DISCOVERS AUSTRIA'S ARLBERG SKI REGION IS THE PLACE EVERY SKIER SHOULD BE DREAMING OF.



SHE USED TO COME HERE MOST winters; she loved Lech; but she never came here with... him,” ski guide Christl Graf leans in close and whispers conspiratorially as we pass the Hotel Arlberg beside the chairlifts in the quaint Austrian ski village of Lech.

The “she” in question is none other than the late, great Di Spencer, Princess of Wales. The “him” – though she doesn’t actually state it – must be Charles. Somehow I can’t imagine him here amongst the après ski bars beside the tiny river that cuts through town. But she was hardly the first European royal to fall for Lech’s small village charm. Lech is where royals have been coming for half a century or more now. Some privileged visitors should’ve taken far more care; like Prince Johan Friso, the younger brother of the Netherlands’ King Willem-Alexander, who skied off-piste here last year, was buried in an avalanche and never woke from his coma. >>



Opposite page: Making tracks in fresh powder at St Anton. This page: The postcard-perfect village of Lech.



But it's not just royals who flock here for Europe's best – and most personalised – ski hospitality. Tom Cruise is a regular visitor, as are Posh and Becks and their brood of junior downhill thrill-seekers. You'll even find grand ole soul babe Tina Turner here most winters if you can spot her when beanies and goggles cover her famous blonde mane.

Lech – and neighbouring ski resorts Zurs, St Anton, Stuben and St Christoph, which together make up the celebrated Arlberg ski region – serve as the blueprint for ski resorts all over the world. Without the Arlberg there'd be no Vail or Mt Buller or Thredbo. Local skier Hannes Schneider invented modern skiing almost a century ago right here on these slopes and introduced the sport to the world. All the elements of Schneider's beloved Arlberg – from the design of ski chalets to the type of alcoholic beverages favoured – were exported across the planet. Even the concept of après ski itself was said to originate in these humble ski villages.

I've traversed the world skiing and snowboarding for 15 years, from Slovakia to the Pyrenees to Alaska, and I've seen nothing that compares to Austria.

While these villages now constitute some of the world's most exclusive ski resorts (Lech is where King Hussein of Jordan chose to come each season after he scoured the world for the perfect ski locale) and its reputation for pampering is legendary (Lech closes its doors to skiers when the day's allocation of 14,000 ski passes is reached, meaning its slopes are never crowded), there's little pretence at all about the place, unless, of course, you come looking for it. On the contrary, simple après ski bars are jovial affairs, home to lively, unfashionable music played loud and patrons intent on unself-

consciously celebrating a successful day on the slopes with you (you'll meet a lot more people than you would in Australian ski resorts).

There are still cobblers toiling away in tiny workshops beside fancy five-star digs, tiny baroque churches dating back centuries standing on each street corner and it's the mountain goats you look to on the slopes to assess incoming snow rather than modern technology. You can also enjoy traditional fare like *speckknodel* (a dumpling made with bacon that is a local staple) or local meat shot by the folk who serve it to you in tiny, cosy inns that barely allow taller visitors a safe entrance.

I've traversed the world skiing and snowboarding for 15 years, from Slovakia to the Pyrenees to Alaska, and I've seen nothing that compares to Austria (hell, I liked it so much I even lived here for a year). While the country's at times rigid adherence to ceremony and old-fashioned societal rules can be hard

Below from left: The village of St Anton; There are over 280 kilometres of ski runs in the five resorts of the Arlberg region. Opposite page: The small village of St Christoph, one of the Alps' highest ski resorts. Inset: St Christoph by night.



to decipher, just being here on holiday makes you feel like you're a bit player in a lavish period drama.

At one of Austria's most exclusive hotels – the Arlberg Hospiz Hotel in St Christoph, just 20 minutes drive from Lech – diners must don suits to attend dinners prepared for Austria's most dignified families. Dishes are served on silver trays presented by waiters in tuxedos and traditional Austrian leiederhosen, while a small orchestra plays beside us. But after dinner I take a short taxi ride



into nearby St Anton in baggy jeans and an old snow jacket. The Arlberg is like that – diversity has always been its strength. Austrians are a curious mix: a population who respects tradition, even amongst its teenagers, but also a nation of people with a reputation as the most notorious fun-lovers in all of Europe. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Arlberg.

But for all its unique hospitality attractions – and it is truly unique – it's the skiing that brought me here. The Arlberg region is home to some of Europe's best >>



For more information on the Arlberg, see arlberg.net
For more information on ski passes, see skiarlberg.at/arl/east/en/winter/w-tickets/austria.info/au



ski slopes, with wide-open runs for complete beginners and terror-inducing tight chutes in the backcountry for ski experts. Located in the southwestern corner of Austria bordered by Switzerland and Italy, the Arlberg is made up of five ski villages, 84 cable cars and ski lifts providing access to 280 kilometres of finely groomed ski runs and 180 kilometres of free-skiing terrain – and it’s available all on the one ski ticket.

In a week here I don’t do the same run twice, journeying from resort to resort by way of a cleverly set out grid of lifts and gondolas (although getting to some resorts requires a short bus ride). I love the fact that I’ll never quite know where I’ll end up. In the morning I take a ski lift up high to the tops of the Alps and ski down, crossing through ancient villages, stumbling onto entirely empty ski slopes and lunching at lively on-

mountain huts that look out across a mountain range jutting off into neighbouring countries. The Arlberg hosts Europe’s highest altitude prize-winning restaurant – the Verwallstube – and has the highest density of restaurants with awards from influential French restaurant guide *Gault Millau* in Europe, so a good meal is always just around the corner. Although it’s St Anton that has a reputation as one of Europe’s premier party ski resorts, an impressive collection of exciting restaurants, bars and cafes can be found throughout Lech, Zurs, St Christoph and Stuben.

And at the end of the day, when my legs are so tired I can barely ride another ski slope, I shuffle my aching body down the narrow, cobbled streets of the region’s villages looking for an après ski bar with the tastiest Gluhwein and cheeriest atmosphere.



WHERE TO STAY

Stay in the Arlberg’s most celebrated hotel, the **Arlberg Hospiz Hotel** in St Christoph. Rooms are priced from €248-701 (about A\$355-1,003) per night and suites from €528 (about A\$755) per night. arlberghospiz.at

GETTING THERE

Emirates flies from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth to Zurich, Switzerland via Dubai daily. Return economy fares start from A\$1,992 and business class fares from A\$7,722. Total flight time is between 22 and 17 hours plus stopover. emirates.com

St Anton is just over two hour’s drive from Zurich. A number of companies operate private car transfers with prices starting from around €400 (about A\$572) one-way.

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