DISCOVER CARINTHIA: **AUSTRIA'S SUN-BLESSED SKIING HAVEN**

The Katschberg ski area, located north and south of the Alpine ridge, offers sporty and snow-reliable skiing fun where memories are made on and off the runs. Our writer, Wibke Carter, took to the slopes to see for herself.

TEXT: WIBKE CARTER

Photo: Daniela Ebner, Region Katschberg Lieser-Maltatal

"Do the pizza! Don't forget your ski poles! Bend your knees! Do the French fries!" Phew, learning to ski when you are in your 40s is hard mental work. But Dominik Seibald – ski instructor, mountain guide and leader of the Austrian band *Landrocker* – refused to give up on me. After a few runs on the beginner slope, I was finally ready to join the "real" skiers on the blue slope. Reaching this milestone was exhilarating, especially since I'd never made it this far before.

I only ski once in a blue moon, but flying to Salzburg from London, then taking a shuttle for just over an hour to the Katschberg ski resort seemed an easy enough journey to hit the slopes and enjoy some après-ski again. "We are a destination for everyone, from 0 to 99 years old," says Patrick Lengdorfer, Director of Tourism at Katschberg. "The days of skiing from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. are over. It's now important to offer activities, experiences, and culinary temptations beyond the slopes."

ICY CHALLENGES

Putting his words into action, Patrick invites me to try my hand at ice stock sport (*Eisstockschießen*), a game that originated in the Alpine regions of Austria in the 13th century. Similar to curling, players slide ice stocks across frozen lakes or prepared ice surfaces, aiming for a target known as the 'Daube'. Today, the sport boasts world championships, and organized teams practice year-round, even on tarmac during the summer months.

At Katschberg, a frozen field is set up for the game, but sliding the heavy ice stocks across the entire surface proves more challenging than it looks. Before long, however, I start to get the hang of it – so much so that Patrick jokingly offers to recruit me for the local team. Perhaps I'm a natural, or maybe the mulled wine served in the meantime has done wonders for my aim!

GENTLE SLEIGHS

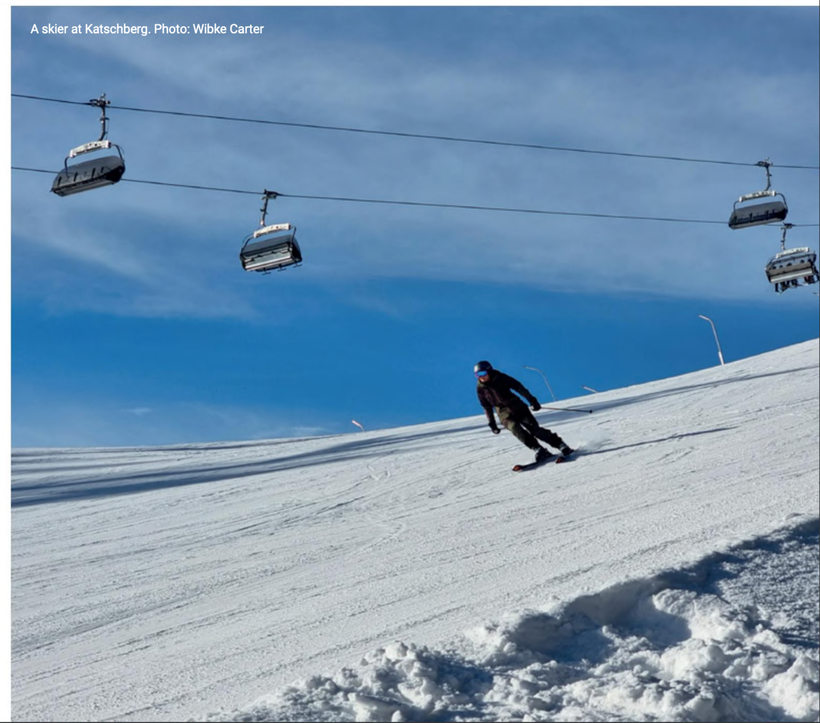
For dinner, I have set my sights on the rustic Pritzhütte, a traditional Alpine hut accessible by a scenic four-kilometre trek from Katschberg. Fortunately, I don't have to trudge through the snow – instead, I hop onto a horse-drawn sleigh. Coachman Andreas Neuschitzer has chauffeured Austrian chancellors, pop stars, and local politicians, among others, since 1981. "The Katschberg ski resort is relatively new, but there has always been an inn along the old trade route between Venice and Salzburg," he explains. "The first cars arrived here in the 1950s, followed by ski lifts in the 1960s. While there are plans for more hotels, building regulations ensure that none can be taller than the highest tree."

Horse drawn sleigh ride. Photo: Franz Gerdl, Tourismusregion Katschberg-Rennweg

As darkness falls, Noriker horses Mona Lisa and Luna gently pull the sleigh through the forest. After about 45 minutes, we arrive at the hut, where a traditional *Pritzjausenplatte* – a hearty platter of rustic bread, cheese, and smoked meats – awaits. To ward off the chill, Andreas suggests a pine liqueur made by steeping pine cones in grain spirit for several months.

On the return journey, the crunch of snow beneath the sleigh, the soft glow of a lantern illuminating the sparkling whiteness, and the vast expanse of starry skies above create an unforgettable experience. Few words are exchanged –it's a ride to treasure.

Karntner Kasnudel. Photo: Martin Hofmann



A skier at Katschberg. Photo: Wibke Carter

APRÈS-SKI

Time flies when you're having (skiing) fun, and a few more runs are a must before the trip ends. For beginners like me, there are around 12 km of easy slopes, while the majority of the downhill runs – approximately 56 km – are of medium difficulty. As for the challenging 12 km of black slopes, I'll save those for another lifetime.

But a ski holiday isn't just about the slopes – it's also about the fun that follows. And at Austria's highest brewery, perched at 1,670 metres, fun is guaranteed. Since 2009, Christoph Hofmayr has been running the Katschberg Brauerei, crafting 30,000 litres of beer annually, most of which is sold and enjoyed locally. Every Friday, Christoph offers brewery tours and tastings, giving visitors a behind-the-scenes look at his craft.

Just 200m further up I enter the Katschberg's top culinary destination: the *Gamskogelhütte* Restaurant. By day, it serves hearty meals, but on Thursday and Friday evenings, chef Stefan Lastin delivers a six-course fine-dining experience. From caviar and Scottish scallops to venison, his creations are a culinary journey. His signature dish is the *Kärtner Kasnudel* (filled dumplings). "In Carinthia, we say that a woman who cannot make it is not ready to get married," Stefan explains with a smile. Luckily for me, men have also mastered this craft.

Recharged and satisfied, I hop onto the skidoo for one final exhilarating ride through the snowy landscape, back to the resort. "Pfiati, Katschberg!" – it's been a blast!

www.katschberg.at
www.skischule-krabath.at
www.pritzhuette.com
www.katschbeer.at
www.gamskogelhuette.at

Andreas Neuschitzer with horses Mona Lisa and Luna. Photo: Wibke Carter

Ski tour through the Maltatal.
Photo: Region Katschberg Lieser-Maltatal, Daniela Ebner