

TRAVEL
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GET YOUR *skates* **ON**
by COLIN NICHOLSON

It's the biggest natural ice rink in Europe - and James Bond once famously drove on it. We sent our own special agent to give it a spin...

AFTER a few tentative steps on the ice, I push off with one foot, then the other, and glide. And glide. And glide. Then again - one, two, woohoo! I feel as if I'll never stop. This is new to me. In crowded rinks, I'm always turning or stopping to avoid people. Here in the biggest natural ice rink in Europe - and possibly the world - I just have Weissensee (white lake) disappearing into the horizon.

The southern Austrian lake, now reachable from the UK by flights to nearby Klagenfurt, is a geographical oddity. In summer, it's so warm that it's a magnet for swimmers. In winter, it freezes with ice so thick that you can do a 25km circuit on a surface that's usually smoother than an indoor rink.

You don't need to be a pro to enjoy it. I've always loved skating but I'm a keen amateur at best. Beginners can rent stabilising frames for €2 (£1.70) apiece, though it's best to learn without props.

I've signed up to a lesson with Wolfgang Wernitznig in tour skating, a pastime that's



Blades of glory: During winter the ice on the south Austrian lake is as smooth as it is thick, as Colin, left, found



Licence to chill: Timothy Dalton as 007, above, filmed an all-action sequence, above right, on the lake in the 1987 film *The Living Daylights*

growing in popularity. Some people do it for multi-day treks across frozen lakes, marshes and rivers in the Nordic countries and North America.

The lesson is very different from the handful I've had in the UK, which were all about changing direction, skating backwards - which I can just about do - and the odd spin - which I can't. Like speed skating,

tour skating is all about learning an efficient technique to help you travel a long distance.

You learn to swing your body like a metronome, shifting your weight to send you speeding forwards. I even learnt to put my hands behind my back, like the pro speed skaters. Not

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MEANINGFUL TRAVEL



Noodle-do: Cook like a Korean

FLIPPING the notion of travelling to 'find yourself', meaningful travel is about finding other people - connecting authentically to the destination you visit through engagement with the local

WHAT'S IN STORE FOR 2024

From secret locations to lunching with locals, here are the top travel trends for the year ahead

community and soaking up their culture. These longer, slower holidays to less crowded destinations are a regenerative antidote to fast-paced, one-size-fits-all package trips in a bid for travellers to truly appreciate where they are.

Try: Intrepid's Discover South Korea trip includes a two-night stay in a Hanok (traditional Korean house).

You can even snap a family pic dressed in hanbok, the traditional Korean clothing, join local monks at a temple for archery, Sunmudo (an ancient Korean Buddhist martial art) and an insightful meditation as well as attend a cooking class to make kimchi and kimbap.

Prices from £2,025 per person for eight days, intrepidtravel.com. Intrepid's new Japan Highlights family holiday includes a Taiko drumming

workshop in Tokyo, a rural Japanese farm stay and sushi-making classes in Osaka. From £2,192 per person, intrepidtravel.com

MULTI-GENERATIONAL TRAVEL

Post pandemic, people have realised more than ever that quality time is precious and the world is showing a collective desire to get out and explore more - together.

We're not just talking budget breaks, either; US-based safari company African Travel recently reported that 40 per cent of their family safari holiday bookings last year were arranged and paid for by grandparents wanting to fulfil a bucket-list trip with their families beside

them. Think about the childcare, too - not such a bad idea after all...

Try: Rixos hotels offer activities for all ages - from a Rixy Kid's Club to wide-ranging fitness programmes. Their accommodation ranges from standard hotel rooms to villages with private pool plus annexes perfect for grandparents.

The Rixos Belek is an all-inclusive

resort on the Mediterranean coast of Belek, Turkey, from £549, rixos.com

Meanwhile how about a cruise with grandparents, too? Ambassador Cruise Line has launched a Multi-Generational Iberian Treasures & North Africa cruise.

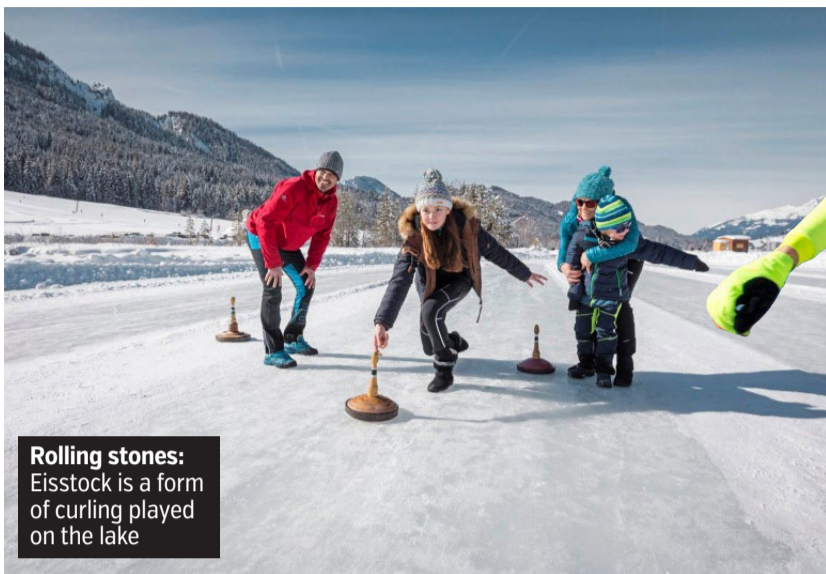
Departing on August 10, it takes families across Portugal, Spain, Gibraltar and Morocco, with a special all-ages itinerary and offering a cabin for parents and two children, alongside a separate cabin for grandparents.

£1,699 per adult, £99 per child for 12 nights, ambassadorcruiseline.com

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Turkish delight: Grandparents can enjoy their own annexe at Rixos Belek



Rolling stones: Eisstock is a form of curling played on the lake

Lake superior: Skaters on the Eleven Cities Tour, below and left

It's a big deal.

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The Virgin Atlantic Holidays sale runs from 00:01am on Monday 18 December 2023 to 23:59pm on Wednesday 31 January 2024 for travel 1 January to 31 December 2024. Bookings are subject to availability. Virgin Atlantic Holidays full terms and conditions apply. virginholidays.co.uk/terms

Blades of glory on an ice little learner

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that everyone on the ice is so focused on technique. We overtake young mothers pushing baby buggies, ice hockey players passing a puck, and dog walkers, all moving in a giant anticlockwise loop around the western part of the lake. But why must we skate anticlockwise, I ask Wolfgang.

Speed skaters aren't able to turn right, he says, laughing. Apparently turning left is easier mentally.

Next, we're overtaken by a Ford Escort. This isn't a car that took a wrong turn, it's the eismeister's mode of transport for grooming the ice. A local celebrity, he looks for spots that are starting to freeze, and when the ice is 15cm thick, relies on these 1990s cars with a snowplough on the front to clear the snow. You don't want to risk an expensive vehicle in this profession.

The reason the lake freezes so quickly is that, as well as being 930m above sea level, it's fed mostly by underwater springs and shielded from the wind by mountains on every side.

With global warming, the start of the skating season is getting later, but it usually lasts from mid-late December to early-mid March. I was there in the first week of January, when the eismeister prepared a 3.5km circuit. And, in what seems like no time, I've done four loops of the lake on rented long-bladed touring skates.

Wolfgang has another lesson before lunch, so I stop at one of the three café-bars spread out along the western loop for a coffee and viennoiserie. But I'm itching to carry on.

By this time, the lake is buzzing with activity, and to reach the ice I navigate past a game of eisstock – a form of curling – and an ice hockey match.

The skating is so addictive that I'm averaging 15kph, but many go faster. The organisers of the Eleven Cities Tour – an ice skating race on Dutch canals – now hold their 200km event here after being inspired by seeing a British man on the ice. No, not me, but Timothy Dalton as James Bond in *The Living Daylights*, which featured a car chase on the lake.

Having done 14km in the morning and again in the afternoon, I'm not sure I can manage the 'blister party', which turns this quiet village into a wild, all-night party venue.

I finish with a schnapps at a lakeside bar as a celebration, which is in order as

the skating was in doubt because of what skaters fear most: snowfall. There was a lot of that at the start of my trip.

So, the next day I go cross-country skiing instead, exploring 40km of trails through the magical winter landscape under my own steam. This is harder work than skating, and afterwards I need the lakeside spa at my hotel, the Regitnig. Here, a spameister throws oils on to hot stones and swirls a towel over their head until everyone is so hot, they plunge into an open section of the lake.

After that, I had earned my dinner of fillet of freshwater zander, medallions of pork and saddle of veal, all served by waiting staff in traditional dress.

The next day, when the snow was heaviest, I took the free 45-minute bus ride to Nassfeld, with 110km of pistes that cross the Italian border. If you want a skiing holiday with skating thrown in, it's a good base, and British tour operators such as Crystal Ski come here. I aimed to take all 30 lifts, but skiing the deep powder was challenging.

Beginners don't need such a big resort and can try Weissensee's ski area with five lifts – which is where I went the next day while the snow eased. It's charming, with the beginner slopes intersecting walking and snowshoeing trails at the top of the mountain, and challenging runs offering spectacular views of the lake. A must was sledging on the walking route from the summit, where friendly huskies wanted to race me down.

But no sight was more beautiful than the one that greeted me over breakfast the following morning, when the freshly prepared ice glistened in the sunlight, sparkling like the bubbles in my prosecco – and offering by far the smoothest glide of the holiday.

Getting there

Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies twice weekly to Klagenfurt from London Stansted for £29 return. Colin travelled as a guest of Weissensee and Nassfeld (nlw.at), Carinthia (visitcarinthia.at) and Austria (austria.info). He stayed at Hotels and Chalets Regitnig (regitnig.com; +43 4713 2225) which offers double rooms from €168 (£144) a night B&B. Skate hire from €12 (alpensport.at). A day ticket on the lake is free to overnight guests in Weissensee, otherwise €8. Lessons (weissensee-aktiv.com) cost €31.40 per person for a group of five for 90 minutes.