

# A S C E N D I N G AUSTRIA'S ALPS

THIS MOUNTAIN MECCA OFFERS FOUR-SEASON WONDERS, TO BE SURE, BUT FOR THOSE KEEN TO SKI, WELL... **BY AMBER GIBSON**

**H**iking is an integral part of life in the mountains of Vorarlberg—the westernmost federal state of Austria. Locals take every chance they get to go for a *wanderung*, whether after work or on the weekend. In the process, it seems, they embrace the findings of renowned Austrian psychiatrist and neurologist Reinhard Haller, who praises hiking's effects on heart and muscle health, to be sure, but also describes how it heals the psyche, promoting better sleep, relaxation, and a harmonious relationship with life overall.

Trekking also a great metaphor for existence. Watch where you're going, or you just might step in a squishy-fresh cow patty, but trust that the path you're on will lead

to wherever you need to be, and don't forget to stop and smell the wildflowers or forage for medicinal Alpine herbs.

Summer is a beautiful and more relaxed time of year to visit, where the scenic views from Lake Constance stretch to mountains nearly 10,000 feet high. While hiking is the favorite pastime in summer months, come winter, Austrians are, of course, passionate about skiing. The village of Lech, specifically, is known worldwide as a prime destination for cold weather sports; the Dutch royal family spends winter holidays here each year, complete with an official photoshoot. Just be prepared for the crowds that descend upon Lech come December (peak season), when the population increases tenfold from its 1,500 year-round residents.

## KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Vorarlberg is bordered by Germany, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland. The Alps stretch far beyond its borders, but this particular province is home to the best skiing in Austria, connected to St. Anton in Tyrol and easily accessible via a single ski pass. While St. Anton is perhaps its best known ski destination, Lech and Zürs have even more exclusive luxury accommodations. Since 2016, the two sides of the Arlberg mountain have been connected by a new Flexenbahn cableway, making it the largest contiguous skiing area in the country.

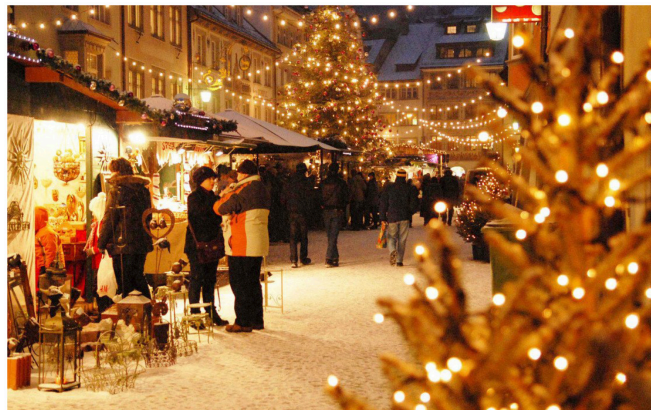
Summer is an absolutely beautiful time to visit as well, with great hiking, cycling, and golfing. Room rates during summer are about half peak winter prices, and the destination receives few American travelers that time of year, so it's easy to immerse in local culture. Nearby Bregenzerwald is known for innovative contemporary architecture and a strong tradition of craftsmanship, with an eye to sustainability and celebrating the gorgeous local wood.

To get here, fly into Zürich and take a train to Bregenz or St. Anton. The journey is quite scenic and takes between two to three hours. Round-trip flights in early December originating from Newark can be had on Air Portugal for as little as \$600 (two stops along the way), while British Airways rates start at \$700 (one stop), and Swissair nonstop flights begin at \$2,500.

## ATTRACTIONS

### CHRISTMAS MARKET IN BREGENZ

Areas surrounding Lake Constance offer a range of Christmas-themed shopping and local delicacies-rich markets, as one might imagine, but to us, none rival the charm, intimacy, diversity, and flavor of Bregenz's. From November 18 to December 23, the city presents



Christmas Market in Bregenz

two markets, actually, but the one on Kornmarktplatz along Bahnhofstrasse is slightly broader in offerings, including stalls, pony rides for kids, a Venetian carousel, and an ice rink. Usually more than 40 vendors are on hand, presenting everything from local artwork to hand-made jewelry, drop-dead delicious Vienna sausage to strudel that might just conjure images of your spirit animal.

### WERKRAUMHAUS ANDELSBUCH

Bregenzerwald has a rich history in handicraft, including woodworking, and this showroom and salon in Andelsbuch is the best place to connect with local artisans and craftspeople. Special exhibitions rotate throughout the year, inspiring conversation about design in society. Currently, the in-house fair showcases the products of 90 members, including carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, upholsterers, felters, goldsmiths, and florists, just in time for holiday shopping. Ask for a private tour of the permanent furniture collection in the basement. **Hof 800, 6866 Andelsbuch, en.werkraum.at**

## WHERE TO STAY

### HOTEL GASTHOF POST

This 46-room Relais & Chateaux property is a relaxed country inn imbued with luxury and grace. The Moosbrugger family produces its own wines, too, mainly Riesling and Grüner Veltliner, which you

can enjoy at dinner. The young new chef from nearby Tyrol approaches traditional Austrian fare with a light, contemporary touch and whimsical plating. Fuel up for an active day with a sumptuous breakfast buffet at the new Postblick-Restaurant while enjoying panoramic mountain views. After a day on the mountains, retire to the spa for a detoxifying poultice massage with Alpine herbs. **Dorf 11, 6764 Lech, postlech.com**

### HOTEL DAS SCHIFF

Guest rooms here are modern, clean, and minimalist, showcasing the design of local craftsmen in smooth wooden walls, floors, and furniture. Bath products are also local, from Metzler Molke, a cheesemaker turned cosmetics company famed for making skincare products from leftover whey (rich in vitamins and minerals). The spa also uses Metzler Molke products in its gentle and relaxing facials. Half-board here includes a lovely five-course meal each evening and a breakfast buffet each morning (with a dozen different local cheeses!). You can purchase many of the cheeses, house-made jams, and other local food products at the hotel's Ernele shop. **Heideggen 311, 6952 Hittisau, schiff-hittisau.com**

### BURG VITAL RESORT

With one of the most impressive wine cellars in Vorarlberg, a newly renovated spa and fine dining restaurant, and a prime location on the sunny plateau of Oberlech, this 69-room wellness



Facing page: Hotel Gasthof Post's Kaisersuite  
Above: Chef's Table at Rote Wand Schualhus

finest. Chef Thorsten Probst is the Dan Barber of the Alps, working closely with 16 local farmers to produce unique ingredients like the first Austrian saffron and buf-falo milk mozzarella. He's growing a hundred different kinds of herbs on Burg Vital's terrace garden, too (and foraging for more in the surrounding mountains), to create a clean, purist meal inspired by the finest Vorarlberg ingredients. Vegetarians, vegans, and all other dietary restrictions are happily accommodated, and the Scottish Highland cattle they breed and butcher in house make for an exquisite experience. **Burg Vital Resort, Oberlech 568, 6764 Lech am Arlberg burgvitalresort.com**

### CHEF'S TABLE AT ROTE WAND SCHUALHUS

Chef Max Natmessnig met owner Joschi Walch while working at Chef's Table at Brooklyn Fare, and his cooking so impressed the hotelier that he lured Natmessnig back home to Austria to head up a similar 18-seat open-kitchen concept, but with Austrian ingredients. Begin with a series of stellar one-bite snacks before savoring trout from the fish pond next door, followed by a hearty main course of Montafon stone sheep. Natmessnig shows restraint when working with such flavorful products, letting ripe, juicy apricots shine in a simple tart, for example, with raw milk ice cream and a drizzle of caramel. **Gourmet Hotel Rote Wand, Zug 5, 6764 Lech am Arlberg, rotewand.com**

### HOTEL GASTHOF KRONE

Cozy and casual, this local haunt is as popular with locals as it is with visitors, despite being located in a hotel. Befriend the table next to you and share an aperitif toast. Whole trout from the live tank is cooked in broth or butter and served with pepper from an adorable hand-cranked mill. Try the ice cream for dessert; it's some of the smoothest and creamiest in the country, served with farmer's yogurt, caramelized walnuts, cinnamon, and honey, or sample the kirschen grütze—like cherries jubilee without the brandy. **Platz 185, 6952 Hittisau, krone-hittisau.at/en** 