

AUSTRIA

## I've found the most family-friendly luxury hotels in the Alps

Combine chic interiors, vast grown-up thermal suites and kids' areas with waterslides at one of these supremely stylish ski-and-spa stays near Salzburg, Austria



Krallerhof  
HOESCH PHOTOGRAPHY

Gemma Bowes | Saturday February 03 2024, 12.11am GMT, The Times

I am walking in my robe and slippers down a long underground tunnel with walls of grey micro-concrete with a timber-like texture, which leads into a soaring space of the sort that I'd normally associate with a starchitect-designed world-class cultural venue; a new Sydney Opera House perhaps. Beside a sleek bar, sky-high glass opens onto one of the longest hotel pools in the world, a 50m heated rectangle projecting over a frozen lake, from which wraiths of steam curl into the night air to enhance a beautiful mountain view.

This new multimillion-pound spa is not where you'd expect. Rather than at glitzy resort such as Courchevel or Kitzbühel, it's in the diminutive Austrian mountain village of Leogang, an hour from Salzburg.

More surprising still, it doesn't belong to any powerful corporate hotel chain. It is part of the family-owned Krallerhof, which originally started out as a basic, rural guesthouse in 1956. Now fourth-generation Altenbergers are involved in its running.



Krallerhof is family owned, with a new 50m pool

KRALLERHOF / DAVID KNORNSCHILD

And it's not alone. As well as Leogang, several other villages in the Salzburgerland region are home to a handful of luxury ski and spa hotels of a variety that seems unique to Austria: enormous, fancy, but homely and family-run. Even better for skiing parents like me, many are tailored to families, with amazing facilities for children, while remaining supremely stylish.

Take Leogang's gorgeous Naturhotel Forsthofgut, which I've visited before; a sparkingly smart black timber retreat where the massive spa has a children's pool with waterslides — so hipster it's decorated charcoal black.



This time I'm staying with my family at Krallerhof, a bigger, rambling five-star, which was perhaps starting to show its age until the vast new Atmosphere Spa opened last spring. Designed by the Iranian-German architect Hadi Teherani, its series of curvaceous, organic spaces are latticed in linden wood, housing a zen garden and every sort of ice or salt room and sauna. You have to be naked (towels are allowed) so this shy Brit is glad to find there's one just for women.

It is also — sorry kids — adults-only, and my children can only gaze wistfully from our bedroom balcony as I do long, long lengths through the mist. Happily there are separate indoor and outdoor family pools, and a spa for over-tens.



Ski all day then slip into the spa at Krallerhof

HÖRSCH, HENNER

Sepp Altenberger kick-started Leogang's winter tourism, opening the first ski school in 1952 and welcoming guests to the simple spare rooms in his farmhouse. The Krallerhof guesthouse officially opened four years later, and gradually he and his wife expanded it with help from their five children, three of whom run it now, along with other connected businesses. Now his grandchildren are involved too — honestly, it's like *Succession* on snow.

Christian Altenberger, the hotel director, admits "you'd build the hotel in a different way today" — not so large and colourful perhaps, though I like that our "colour suit", of which there are 23 among the 124 rooms, forgoes the usual

We fall into a routine of skiing all day then slipping into the spa late afternoon — an easy timetable when the main gondola is only a short *schuss* from the boot-room door — having explored some of the Skicircus's 168 miles of pistes which link the resort villages of Saalbach-Hinterglemm, Leogang and Fieberbrunn. Our days are fun-filled, thanks to jump parks, timed speed courses and cute mountain huts serving schnitzel and hot chocolate, and my children like their Altenberger ski school instructors. Inevitably, one of them is an Altenberger; Philipp, Sepp's grandson, is in training to take over the school one day.

I'm fascinated by the family dynamics. Are Sepp's descendants earmarked for certain roles? Can they leave? Philipp assures me it isn't the mafia; that his sister is a DJ in Berlin (for now). But it's clear something special would be lost if the family bowed out and a corporation took over, as is happening to many other Alpine hotels.

Indeed, few could oversee the family's characterful, museum-like mountain restaurants, Alte Schmeide and AsitzBräu, with as much passion as 28-year-old Josef Altenberger. He talks me through his father's extraordinary collection of antiques, from vintage snowmobiles to some 600 pairs of wooden skis, which decorate every inch of the walls and ceiling.



Puradies has completely reinvented itself  
[CREATING CLICK](#)

Another slick family-run Leogang hotel that has completely reinvented itself is Puradies, which the owner Michael Madreiter took over after a long globetrotting career in finance, turning a farm guesthouse into a seriously cool retreat. Chalet suites are dotted through the slopeside grounds and a new spa extension slot subtly into the landscape, with rustic-chic grey spaces strung with mustardy lanterns and frothy foliage, and contemporary sculptures and paintings by Michael's artist friends. Over coffee, I comment on the unique design of the bar, where huge curving pieces of wood are suspended. Michael reveals it is actually based on a sushi restaurant he happened upon in Taipei. Years of staying in hotels for work mean he is obsessive about details such as soundproofing, so the bedrooms are insulated with hemp and everything looks immaculate.



Why such large and luxurious spa hotels should have sprung up in this part of Austria is partly due, he explains, to the fact that land here was and is still owned by only a few families, and it became a valuable asset they could borrow money against when the area took off. That has happened slowly compared with other resorts such as Kitzbühel, Zell am See and the belle époque spa town Bad Gastein, which benefited from the arrival of railways, drawing early British alpinists.

Yet there's a whole realm of unassuming Alpine villages that didn't have those old connections. Their small hotels never made it to the brochures of the big British ski operators, and it's only recently, in the age of Google and independent breaks, that Brits are cottoning on. Another such village is Grossarl, an hour's drive east from Leogang, which in some 35 years of annual Alpine skiing I'd never heard of until now.



The bedrooms at Puradies are insulated with hemp  
PETER KLUGEN

For the cityfolk of Salzburg and Munich, these Salzburgerland villages are like the Cotswolds are to Londoners, with chic shops, restaurants and hotels they can drive to in an hour for a relaxing escape. While Leogang is becoming the flashier, obvious option, Grossarl is the insider choice, quieter and more traditional, yet with 40 miles of very decent pistes — lovely looping blues and reds through trees — and a lift pass covering 28 small resorts, united as the Ski Amade area. Bad Gastein is one valley west, an easy bus ride away.

We're here for Das Edelweiss, a five-star with 137 rooms, 27 pools and a family spa in which my thrilled children disappear up towering metal staircases clutching ringos, then come shooting out of a series of five colourful tube slides. An enormous soft-play area features nets, walkways, indoor basketball and a trampoline that interacts with a computer game on a big screen. If Google's HQ had a crèche, this would be it. I don't even show my kids the teen area, with a suite of games consoles, air hockey and pool tables — they would never go to bed.



Das Edelweiss has 27 pools, some with water slides



Yet the hotel's head of guest relations, Karin Hettegger, who married one of the founding couple's 11 offspring (a readymade work force) insists: "This is not a kids' hotel." Spa-goers, active guests and couples are equally important. Numerous "silent" rooms, spa areas and a rooftop infinity pool are strictly adults-only, and the overriding atmosphere in the glitzy bars and restaurants is that of any upmarket hotel. The hotel, like all those I stay at, is open year-round, with as many guests in summer as winter.

In warmer months, the Grossarlal valley is a hiker's paradise, with trails leading into the Hohe Tauern National Park and to 40 mountain hut cafés on some of 200 local farms. Only one, Loosbühelalm, is open in winter — you snowshoe there then borrow sledges to toboggan down to the road, leaving them to be collected by tractor ([loosbuehelalm.at](http://loosbuehelalm.at)).

After Das Edelweiss, we spend a night at Nesslerhof. Here, Tina and Herman Neudegger have taken over his family's 40-year-old guesthouse, which had been rebuilt in 2011, and expanded it to 86 rooms, all fashionable pink walls and sawn oak, alongside a new swimming lake (closed in winter) and spa. I adore the adults' bit, with rustic stone and wood decor, properly hot saunas and an icy dipping pool, and our spa suite, with a sauna in the lounge and a bubbling hot tub on the balcony.



The family pool at Das Edelweiss

In addition to its excellent hotel restaurant, Nesslerhof, in partnership with Das Edelweiss, has just launched a hip mountain bar, Wolke 7, at the top of the new ten-seater Kieserl gondola.

Tina's three teenage daughters already work in the hotel in their spare time and, like many local kids, are studying hospitality (with ski racing) at a local college. In the bar, she shows me a scrapbook recently given to her by a long-standing regular who has holidayed at the hotel every year since 1973. It was a goodbye present, she says; he's stopped coming now because he thinks he's too old. We flick through pages of his treasured memories and photos, old laminated ski passes and blurry shots of terrible 1980s ski wear. Neudegger family members appear in most. It's a moving tribute not only to the hotel but to the ski holiday itself, as well as a visual record of inevitable change.





You can only hope there won't be too much more of that. In other parts of the Alps the big brands are moving in, taking over treasured traditional family hotels, such as the Dolomites' Rosa Alpina, now an Aman. Whether Salzburgerland holds out remains to be seen. It's up to the younger generation to be its gatekeepers, and to continue developing the creative ideas behind all these fantastically unique hotels.

I ask Tina how old granny Neudegger felt about her traditional guesthouse becoming so lavish. "She told us, 'It's not easy for me'. But she said we must go on: 'You can't stop young people, they are motivated.'" No doubt there will be more of these magnificent yet personality-filled hotels, imbued with family warmth (and hopefully a few waterslides) popping up where we least expect them soon.

Gemma Bowes was a guest of Salzburgerland ([salzburgerland.com](http://salzburgerland.com)); Krallerhof (half-board doubles from £520; [krallerhof.com](http://krallerhof.com)); Das Edelweiss Salzburg Mountain Resort (half-board doubles from £590; [edelweiss-grossarl.com](http://edelweiss-grossarl.com)); and Nesslerhof (half-board doubles from £394; [nesslerhof.at](http://nesslerhof.at)). Half-board doubles at Puradies from £385 ([puradies.com](http://puradies.com)). Fly to Salzburg

## More great Austrian ski and spa hotels near Salzburg and Munich

### 1. Naturhotel Forsthofgut, Leogang



Another hotel reborn from a rural farm guesthouse, the Forsthofgut is run by the Schmuck family, and has been since the 1960s, though the origins of the building date from 1617 when it was used for forestry. Trees and timber are still a strong theme, not least in the phenomenal 5,700m WaldSpa, with timber-clad sauna houses surrounded by steaming hot tubs, hot pools and ice baths (there's a swimming lake in summer). Inside, a substantial family pool area features several long, fast waterslides, in a hip shade of black with dangling foliage. Tasteful Scandi-minimal playrooms contain pastel and wooden toys and crafts. Alpine fine dining and Japanese are among the slick menu options.

**Details** B&B doubles from £358 ([forsthofgut.at](http://forsthofgut.at)). Fly to Salzburg



## 2. Preisteregg, Leogang



This utterly romantic wooden “hut village”, up a winding mountain road above Leogang, comprises 15 sweet, luxurious traditionally styled chalets and three villas with private spa facilities and private heated outdoor pools. Guests get hotel service and can dine on site at Huwi’s Alm, on mountain salads or the traditional “hut” dish, where you cook meat and veggies yourself at the table on a metal pointy-hat-shaped cone over flame, bringing new meaning to the phrase, “I’ll eat my hat” (from £26 for two).

Details B&B doubles from £291 ([preisteregg.at](http://preisteregg.at)). Fly to Salzburg



### 3. The Comodo, Bad Gastein



PION STUDIO

Bad Gastein is famed for its healing mineral waters and belle époque, Wes Anderson-esque buildings, many crumbling towards faded elegance until the hip Comodo shook up the scene when it opened last year. Any traces of the building's history as a sanatorium have been overlain by funky vintage decor and furniture, though terrazzo floors remain, and most of the 70 bedrooms — all modernist 1960s and 1970s perfection — have views to the Gastein valley with its superb and varied skiing. A pool, cinema, gym and sauna complete the picture.

Details B&B doubles from £212 ([thecomodo.com](http://thecomodo.com)). Fly to Salzburg

#### 4. The Stanglwirt, Going Am Wilder Kaiser



When even the slides in the kiddies' pool area are made from wood, and overlooked by a cinema screen showing appropriate movies (*Finding Nemo*, perhaps), you know you're somewhere special. This family-run, luxury Tyrolean hotel is so expansive that it has its own little farm on site, several pools including a swimming lake, a colossal spa with saunas of all sizes and varieties, and its own stable of Lipizzaner horses, whose indoor riding arena you can look down on through a glass wall in the reception. Everything is made of wood, down to the baby-changing tables. Arnold Schwarzenegger is among stars who have stayed — usually while visiting nearby Kitzbühel for the ski racing — though the slopes of the SkiWelt resorts, in the Wilder Kaiser area, defined by dramatic rocky peaks, are even closer, a short shuttle or bus ride away.

**Details** B&B doubles from £265 (stanglwirt.com). Fly to Munich

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ive-found-the-most-family-friendly-luxury-hotels-in-the-alps-qd0m3jcb8>

03.02.2024