

Skiing on your stomach

Fine wines and good food have Peter Hardy fearing he may grow fat on the powdery pistes of Austria

'HI, HANDSOME, how are you doing?" said a sexy Austrian voice behind me.

"Do you want to dance?" Er, no, actually. Do you mind if I sit this one out? You see, I've been skiing all day and my legs are tired. It was not so much that the voice belonged to a Friesian cow. Indeed, had I been a Friesian bull I am sure I would have gone even more wobbly at the knees, but she was smoking a particularly large and evil cigar.

Anyway, as it transpired, it wasn't me at all but a giant voochlerous vulture on the far side of the room that was the real object of her amorous attentions.

It's Zam in the Happy Filzmoos disco, somewhere in the land of *The Sound of Music*, and it must be the wine — or rather, wines. Six of them with the six-course gourmet dinner. Champagne before and peach schnapps with the coffee. And let us not forget the loganberry *eau de vie* sorbet at half-time, nor the mug of glühwein at tea-time — nor, indeed, the foaming tankard of beer now clutched in my hand at party-time.

Then again, it might be an interaction with the food, a mentally explosive meeting between the salmon mousse, the tortellini with cheese in burnt butter, the fillet of wild deer and the Tudor sour-cream sauce.

It comes as a distinct relief to realise that the speaking cow and vulture, not to mention a stuffed accordion player in lederhosen, are merely a part of the decor of Happy Filzmoos.

"Schumacher, Schumacher, vroom vroom," go the lyrics of this week's mindless Euro-techno hit, thumping out from the speakers above my head. It alternates with the brain-numbing familiarity of *The Birdie Song* by the Tweets, still the stalwart of jolly Austrian nightlife even after all these years.

Rumour has it that on one such winter's night in the Sixties Lady Thatcher danced here. This evening, for undisclosed reasons, a group of Eastern European holidaymakers, led by a mus-fachiod figure bearing a remarkable resemblance to Lech Walesa, are sitting on the floor and rowing — in time to the music — an imaginary eight up their own illusory Putney-to-Mortlake. Ian Mitchell, a Kentish fruit grower, looks on from his table with a quiet air of stupefaction. He had been searching for a holiday with a difference for his wife, Jilly, and their five twentysomething children plus two young family friends. He found it, not necessarily in the Happy Filzmoos but half-a-mile away up the snow-covered road in Haus Stadler. It is the kind of classic Austrian *persiston* usually run by a friendly rosy-cheeked hausfrau whose cooking is a cause for dread rather than delight.



Picture: MARTYN HAYHOW

"I wanted to gather all our children together, which is difficult these days when they are so busy with their own lives," said Ian. "I wanted to go somewhere that none of us had ever been before, and I wanted them to experience the kind of food and wine they can't normally buy for themselves. Call it a final bit of education."

"Then I discovered we could combine all this with skiing in a part of Austria which was unknown to us," Wine trails, run by wine expert Stephen Dallyn, orga-

nises what it calls gourmet, wine and walking holidays through the world's most spectacular wine regions.

"All our programmes aim for an excellence of cuisine, fine wines and a family or house party atmosphere not generally found in large impersonal venues," says the brochure.

In this case, his first serious venture into an Alpine winter, the programme is centred around Haus Stadler and a middle-aged married couple who are as Welsh as rarebit.

Ex-restaurateur Margaret Rees has a glittering array of culinary gongs. These include Welsh Restaurant of the Year, nine consecutive Roullets awards for excellence, and citations in *The Good Food Guide*. Her wine-buff husband, Ian, has a PhD in architectural psychology and enjoyed a golden career as an academic in the United States before they have dropped out and gone skiing.

Margaret provides the gastronomic entertainment while Ian, an accomplished skier who has worked as a resort representative for the Ski Club of Great Britain, guides groups of skiing foodies around the mountainside.

Filzmoos is a small, attractive village less than an hour's drive from Salzburg airport. It dates back to Edwardian times when it was a popular winter holiday location for wealthy Viennese. It has its own impres-

sive 17 lifts, but it is also a part of Sportwelt Amade, a ski area comprising a dozen villages and served by 350km of mainly linked pistes and 130 lifts. The regional capital of St Johann im Pongau (not to be confused with St Johann in Tyrol) is the principal resort. Much more attractive, however, are Altenmarkt, Wagrain and Flachau. Skiers hungry for even greater variety can use Filzmoos as a base to explore Obertraun, Schladming and Dachstein. All are within a pretty 45-minute drive and are included in the Top-Tauern Skischeck, a wider regional lift pass that covers the whole of this corner of Austria.

I have a hankering to return to Obertraun, where I first met my wife, but Ian overrules. He leads us instead to Gamskogel, above Zauchensee — the high point of the region at 2,188m. With visibility limited by the

clashed, not on politics during dinner and a bottle of Kaiser Blaufränkisch Barrique 1993, but on piste when we ran into each other at speed above Kleinarl. Or rather, when he ran into me. With Ian in the lead we glide between the trees in powder so deep it puffs around the face, making it difficult to breathe. Below me, all I can see of Humphrey is a cloud of smoke moving majestically down the slope. This, indeed, is the stuff of dreams.

On the lift, Ian brings us down to earth. "Oh, we often get outstanding conditions here," he says dismissively. "This area has its own micro-climate and it has a reputation as a *Schneeloch* — a snow hole."

Lunch is a surprisingly low-key affair in a pleasant but ordinary self-service mountain restaurant. Our dozen foodies eye the black-board with growing stomachs: *Gulaschsuppe*, dumplings and Wiener schnitzel. Austrian midday mountain cuisine is as predictable as *The Birdie Song*.

It is like drifting through a sea of talc. Eat your heart out, Utah?

storm, its tree-studded slopes are deemed to be best for today.

A gondola takes us up to the top of Gamskogel. It is more than 10 years since I have skied what used to be called Die Drei Taler (The Three Valleys) — and they have now developed into Punt. Certainly, I don't remember the area being as big as this.

And overnight, the snow has transformed these undulating pastures into a corner of the Rockies. Just for today, this is the home of that fabled champagne powder — snow so cold, light and dry that skiing it is like drifting through a sea of talc. Eat your heart out, Utah.

Humphrey, a young London solicitor who is a member of the Ian Mitchell party and who has also been an instructor in Alpbach, is impressed both by the best snow of the season and the scope of the skiing. Yesterday we had seriously

a *Gerrknodel*, a giant rounded sweet dumpling which looks uncannily like the mountain on which we have spent the morning. Anticipating the culinary black run that will begin yet again when darkness falls, I pump for a plain pair of frankfurters.

True to form, back at Haus Stadler the tea table is laden with porridge cake (better than it sounds) and a heady aroma is emanating from the kitchen. "I'll grab an hour's sleep," says Humphrey. "Fired after the skiing?" I venture. "Not at all," he says, looking in the direction of the kitchen. "I am just preparing myself for the long evening ahead."

Every January, the resort's secondary claim to fame is its title as the hot-air balloon capital of Austria when it plays host to balloons from all over the world. Another night of this, and I am going to look like one.