

# Grash course in the arts of wine and snow



There is only one way to get down a mountain, says **MICHAEL LEVENTHAL**, and it's a bumpy ride

**A**NY idiot can ski downhill. Just point your skis towards the bottom of the slope and gravity does the rest. Shopping is another matter.

Hurting towards my instructor Mike, gaining momentum and speed, the realisation finally dawned that pulling up could be a problem.

Ploughing straight through fellow skiers, off the slope, across the main road of Filzmoos and crashing through a shop window into a forest of ski poles seemed inevitable.

Mike shouted something incomprehensible about a snow-plough. I opted for the "frantically flap arms, tumble sideways and skid to a halt in a cloud of powder" method, as practised by frustrated beginners worldwide.

Marginally less elegant than the effortless turning technique demonstrated by Hermann Mairer and Nazano's Olympic champions, perhaps, but much more amusing for onlookers.

Once I'd embraced the slope for the 50th time and swallowed several litres' worth of snow, my sense of humour began to fade. The "Atomic" logo emblazoned across my skis, quite apt for speed demons, seemed preposterously inappropriate for someone who could only trundle along at a staccato gmp. Not exactly explosive, breakneck pace.

My first, bold attempt to tackle the T-bar lift was also less than successful. After a couple of relatively smooth trips with friends, I decided I'd mastered the art and casually took my place at the back of the queue. An unsuspecting solo German skier graciously offered to share a lift.

I grasped my side of the bar too zealously, pulling the

bar close to my side and away from him. As the lift jerked forward, he lost his balance, and ended up spiralling helplessly down the slope. Rather unfairly, I shrugged, muttered something about the pandemonium caused by hapless beginners and managed to convey the impression that he was entirely at fault.

When I reached the restaurant at the top of the slope, conquering a deep-seated dread of heights, my bemused friend Charlie excused my antics as time-honoured rites of passage.

She offered the comforting words, "Unless you've actually given up all hope at least five times and banged your fist on the snow, then you haven't been trying."

Having established that I have no natural sense of balance, our Winetrails hosts organised another ritual humiliation — spending an evening at an excellent traditional restaurant with toboggan rides back to our chalet.

Our 11-strong group

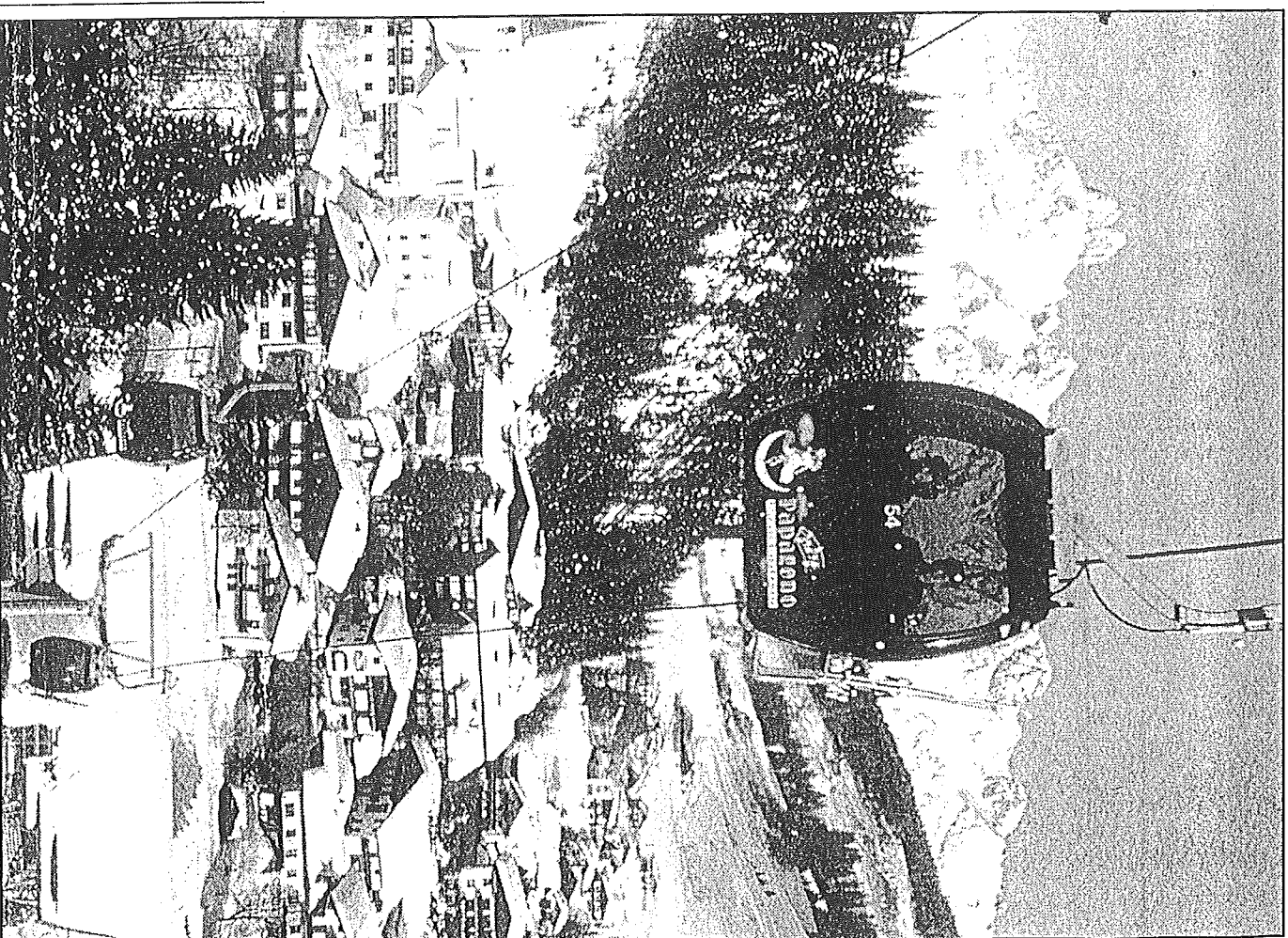
enjoyed a horse-drawn sleigh ride to an isolated locals' haunt, shattering the snowy silence with rousing choruses of Jingle Bells, Jerusalem and a disastrous verse of Edelweiss.

Midway through the meal, I ventured to suggest that tobogganing for the first time in pitch-black conditions was a guaranteed recipe for disaster. The imminent heavy schnapps session was unlikely to improve my decidedly iffy co-ordination.

**G**UE countless collisions with trees, compatriot's toboggans and bruises. We may have only trickled

down the hill — but when you are a foot off the ground, you feel as if you are Richard Noble breaking the sound barrier.

On this tailor-made trip, everything was planned to perfection. After a hearty breakfast, we set off with the more advanced skiers escorted by the chalet hosts to the black runs and beginners



**LIFT-OFF:** Heading for the slopes of Filzmoos, Austria's largest ski resort

sticking to the baby slopes and button lifts. Charlie's unsympathetic description of the beginners' pistes as "almost entirely flat" was particularly disheartening.

Austria's largest ski resort, Filzmoos — 350km of pistes, five ski areas and 150 cable cars, lifts and gondolas, all covered by one pass — is part of the Salsburger Sportwelt Amade, 45 minutes from Salzburg, which also includes Altmarmarkt, Flachau, Wagrain, St Johann, Kleinarl, Radstadt and Eben.

Only a tiny number of British holidaymakers visit

the resort, which has thankfully stunned over-powering tourist complexes and bigger operators, catering for small parties in pensions and "gasthofs" instead. Queues for lifts were never painfully long and the slopes were never too crowded.

Bar a brief lunch interval, we continued skiing — I do use the word in the loosest possible sense — for a few hours.

It was then that the real endurance test began: Gluhwein and cake at our cosy chalet in the highest

valley of Zauchensee, followed by wine-tasting and delicious six-course candlelit dinners accompanied by at least six more wines.

Knowing next to nothing about wine, the idea of pompous or formal tuition terrified me. In fact, the relaxed and convivial atmosphere was just right for learning, both for curious beginners and dedicated buffs. Traditional wisdom about whether white or red wine should accompany a particular dish was abandoned — if you liked a particular combination, you stuck with it.

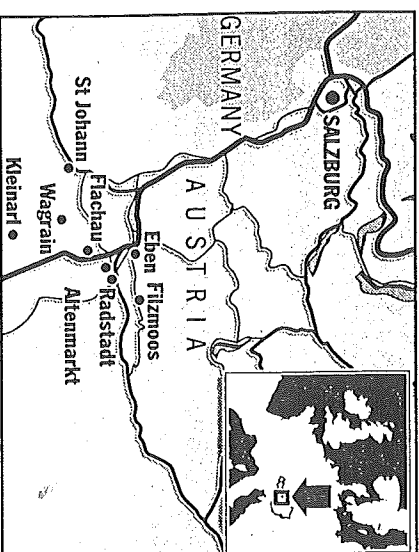
**H**AVING had a five-day introduction, courtesy of Winetrails hosts, I can now confidently walk into an off-licence and wax lyrical about Austrian wines, or even discuss boityrits, the "noble rot" that dehydrates grapes and develops a sweet wine.

But having enjoyed faças prepared by Margaret Rees, Ski Gourmet's award-winning chef, my own culinary efforts seem sadly lacking.

A week's break is ideal for disengaging your brain and settling into simple luxury. Crashing back to reality takes more getting used to.



**IF AT FIRST:** Novice Michael Leventhal faces up to the challenge



**INFORMATION:** Winetrails (01306 712111) Ski Gourmet holiday in Filzmoos £795 per person per week, half board, inc. gourmet dinner, transfers, guided skiing. Winetrails can organise return charter flights to Salzburg from £150. The Austrian National Tourist Office (0171-629 0461).