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Travel

The perfect Austrian ski resort — and why it's fighting for survival

With its picture-postcard setting and plentiful high-altitude snow, Heiligenblut should be thriving — but charm only goes so far in the modern economics of skiing

Simon Usborne FEBRUARY 17 2024**Unlock the Editor's Digest for free**

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Matthias Lackner was 11 when he first climbed the highest mountain in Austria. He was growing up in the village of Heiligenblut, where the spire of the medieval church is as slender as an upturned icicle. Piercing the sky seven miles to the west is the Grossglockner (3,798 metres).

Lackner had drawn pictures of the spire and the peak obsessively as a child. One summer's day in 1995, he and his brother, who was 18, tightened their harnesses as they reached the mountain's snowbound summit ridge. "I can still remember looking over a cornice into the north face, which is just 800 metres straight down," says Lackner, who was later inspired to become a mountain guide. "It absolutely fascinated me."

Back then, the Alps' Hohe Tauern range also felt like a smart place to build a career; skiing had started in Heiligenblut in the mid-1950s and taken off in the 1970s as farming families began to get into tourism. Lackner, who's now 39, remembers having breakfast with guests to whom his father — a beekeeper — had begun to offer rooms.



Matthias Lackner, who grew up in the village, and became a guide to the surrounding mountains © Simon Usborne

Mountaineers and later motorists had long been drawn to the region's peaks and the hairpin bends of the Grossglockner high alpine road, which rises north from Heiligenblut. Now winter tourism was building on its small-town charm and varied, high-altitude terrain. For a few years in the 1990s, Inghams, one of the largest British ski tour operators, added Heiligenblut to its brochures.

But fortunes have always swung wildly in this valley in Carinthia, which lies east of Tyrol and south of Salzburg. More than 500 years after the church was completed in 1491, during a late-medieval gold rush, I arrive in January with my brother, Patrick, to find a community grappling with the vagaries of modern mountain economics.



Weeks before the start of this season, the Hungarian owner of two of the biggest hotels in town — the Post and the Sporthotel — announced that the Sporthotel would not open (the company blames post-Covid “market conditions”).

Relative isolation has kept Heiligenblut small; the region’s bigger resorts are easier to reach, especially for day-trippers. It relies on overnight stays and the loss of 200 beds represented 10 per cent of the town’s total. In response, the lift company announced it would mothball two high ski lifts for the season. Only an emergency government loan ensured that the remaining 10 lifts opened at all.

“I almost wanted to start crying when we heard,” Lackner says of the closed lifts, which deliver skiers to some of the resort’s best off-piste terrain, at almost 3,000 metres. “It feels very sad because I know the potential here.”



Some of the resort's best off-piste terrain is out of reach after a ski-lift to 3,000 metres was closed for the season

We start talking on the Rossbach gondola, which takes skiers to Heiligenblut's middle station at 1,754 metres. Gusting winds limit our options as we carry on up the Schareck gondola. At the top (2,604 metres), Lackner has to shout to tell me that, were it not for the thick cloud, we would be enjoying views of Grossglockner across the valley.

Despite the conditions, a foot of new snow makes for some great skiing as Lackner leads us to sheltered, leeward slopes. Even when sunny days greet bigger dumps, the guide says there are no sharp-elbowed dashes for stashes here. "There's enough for a whole week just using the lifts," he says.

But the limitations of small-mountain skiing become clear when the winds shut the Schareck. The Fleissalm tunnel lift, a bizarre subterranean gondola that spits skiers into the bowl to the east, is windproof but only opens for weekends. Instead, grateful at least for the sun, we stick climbing skins to our skis and hike west. Soon the wind is so strong I fear it might strip off my beard. After an hour, Lackner calls time on our folly and we search for patches of good snow served by a lower T-bar.

We're among the last skiers on the mountain when we stop for a late lunch. Hans and Manuela Fleissner-Rieger are just closing up the Schistadl Tauernberg, an almost comically cosy mountain restaurant. On seeing Lackner, they dash back in with their dogs, who seem happy to return to their beds. Hans recommends the Kärntner Kasnudeln, cheese dumplings made by his mother. They arrive under a fried egg, swimming in butter, and are delicious. I'm amazed to see that the dish costs only €13; a beer is €4.90. Such are the joys of small-mountain skiing.



Back to the village after some cross-country skiing © Christian Riepler

I stop at the Church of St Vincent while waiting for the short shuttle bus back to my hotel, stepping softly as my ski boots knock against 500-year-old stone.

Heiligenblut's former wealth is clear to see in the lavishly gilded altarpiece above the crypt of St Briccius, a Danish knight. As the legend goes, Briccius died in an avalanche while bringing a relic of the blood of Christ to the Tauern mountains from the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Heiligenblut ("holy blood") is named in his honour and a recovered flask of the blood is locked in a sacrament box.

I'm staying at the Kärntnerhof, rustic three-star lodgings on the edge of town. Freidl Fleissner, a former mountain guide from a farming family, opened it as a small guesthouse in 1967, gradually expanding it to include 30 rooms and a pool. It has a shorter history than the church's, but it is here that much of the faith in the resort's future is now being expressed.



A view from the slopes above Heiligenblut © Alamy

Last year, just as the Hungarians were pulling back, a wealthy family from Klagenfurt, Carinthia's capital, decided to bet big on the Kärntnerhof. Thomas Seitlinger bought the hotel, together with the nearby Chalet Hotel Senger, with bold plans for four-star refurbishments. The Fleissners, led by Freidl's daughters Helga and Marietta, have a 10-year agreement to operate the hotel while the urbane new owners modernise it. (I decide this has the makings of an Alpine sitcom.)

The Seitlingers believe Heiligenblut has been waiting for someone to shake it from its slumber. "When people see what we are doing, I think they will follow us," Michael Seitlinger, Thomas's son, tells me one evening over dinner as I sip my clear dumpling soup flecked with parsley. I only hope he manages to preserve the kind of rustic, family-run atmosphere that people coming to a small Austrian resort surely expect.

Without elaborating, Seitlinger Jr hints that the issue with the lift company can be resolved. They have the backing of the state; Carinthia has launched a big marketing push for its two-dozen resorts. Heiligenblut, which has a major altitude advantage in the face of climate change, is particularly keen to tempt back British skiers, who make up less than 1 per cent of visitors (I confess I had never heard of it).

Two weeks before my visit, a party of 10 Brits stayed for a week at the Kärntnerhof as they explored Heiligenblut and nearby terrain with Lackner. The Ski Club of Great Britain had added the town to its roster of off-piste destinations in response to demand for quieter places among the megaresorts of the Alps. I gather they will return.

They were more fortunate than me. That wind just won't quit. From the Fleissalm side of the ski area, where we search for tiny ribbons of sheltered snow, we watch in hope more than expectation as two ski patrollers bomb and then drop into the Fleisstal, an off-piste pitch of almost 800 vertical metres on a sheltered aspect. Perhaps they'll open it tomorrow.

We head west instead and climb up the route of the buried Grossglockner high alpine road, which opened in 1935. We eventually reach the Hochtör tunnel, which cuts briefly under a col before the road continues north. Only the top of the tunnel's stone opening peeks out from 15 metres of snow. We pause in the sun in total silence, imagining the summer roar of engines beneath our feet.



Simon Usborne's brother sitting on the top of the entrance to the Hochtör road tunnel, which is closed in winter

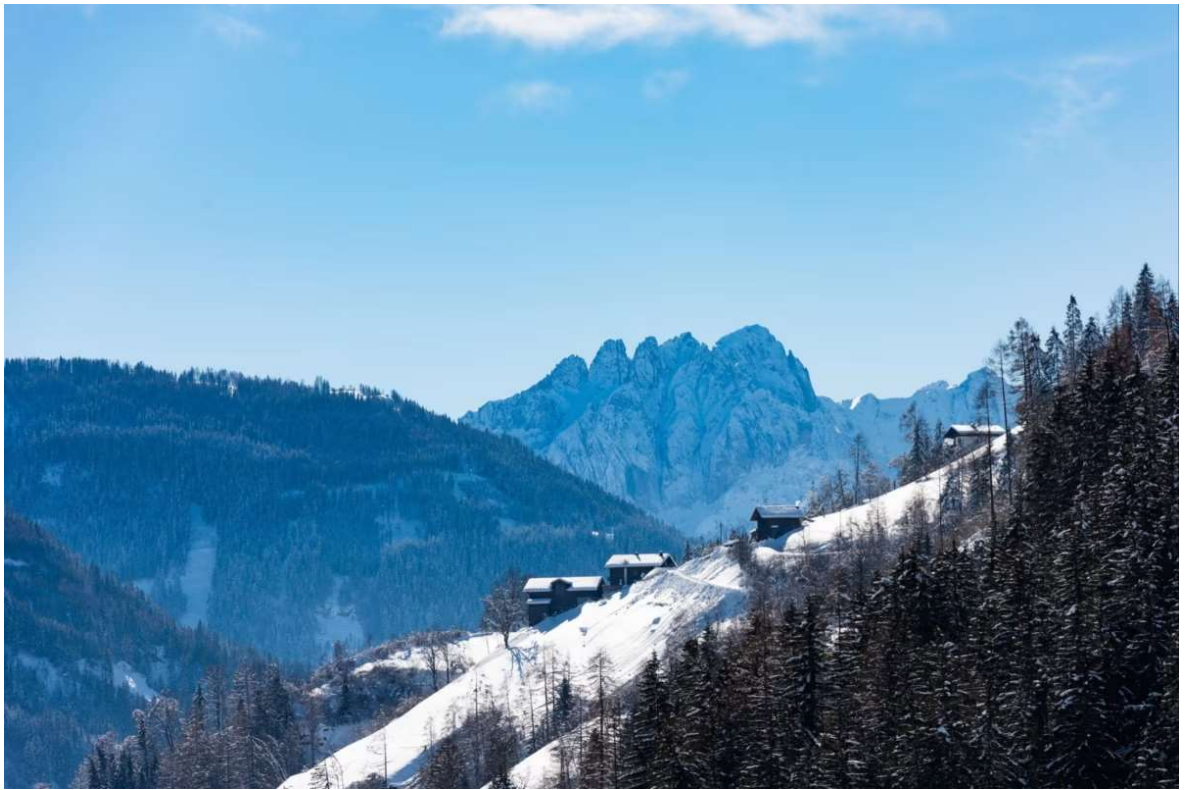


Heiligenblut's diminutive après-ski bar, Die Mühle

After zigzagging up to the col, we find some excellent snow on the 1,300-metre descent to Heiligenblut. Before dinner at the hotel, we go in search of a bar. There are two of note, including the Laterndl, where locals gather to enjoy very fine pizzas that cost less than €10. Closer to the Kärntnerhof in the middle of a field is Die Mühle, a tiny blackened former water mill that was delivered from a stream down the valley on the back of a lorry in 2000.

The old millstone now forms part of the bar itself, behind which Michael Siebler, 42, is the genial host. He celebrated his 18th birthday on Die Mühle's opening day, and has owned it for five years. He also works in the ski rental shop and plays accordion in the town's band. Siebler, who reckons he knows "about 960" out of Heiligenblut's population of 980, is sad about the current downturn yet sure that the only way is up. "Of course we don't want to become too big," he adds.

There's time to ski for a morning before the journey back to London. I leave our bar bill for Siebler at the ski shop (I had run out of cash, which most places in the town still demand) and head up the mountain to find the Fleisstal still shut. We hike up to the tunnel again, this time all the way from the middle station, enjoying the quiet rhythmic exertion and the views towards Grossglockner.



'This is one of the most beautiful villages in Austria and it's in the middle of this huge playground that everyone should know about' © Franz Gerdl

Even in iffy conditions, I need no convincing to realise that this is a special place. There aren't many ski resorts within three hours of two airports (Salzburg and Klagenfurt, which is closer but with fewer flights) that serve up serious, high-altitude, crowd-free terrain from a town that hums with quiet, old-school charm.

Erhard Trojer, chair of Heiligenblut's tourism board and a local hotelier, tells me the town needs 500 more beds to give the lift company confidence to invest in its ageing network. A return to the 1990s peak of 3,000 beds would, he adds, make the place sing while preserving its atmosphere. (St Anton, by comparison, has 12,000 beds, Sölden 15,000). "We have something special here, and it starts with this picture of the church and the Grossglockner," Trojer says. "We will always have this."

There is hope that the next generation will push Heiligenblut forwards. Freidl Fleissner, who is now 86, still lives at the Kärntnerhof with his family. His great-grandson Leon, who's five, serves me my eggs one morning before school. Meanwhile, Lackner's two-year-old son Gabriel has already started skiing and ice-climbing using improvised crampons.

"This is one of the most beautiful villages in Austria and it's in the middle of this huge playground that everyone should know about," the guide said at the Tauernberg hut, while Hans and Manuela roused their dogs once more for the snowmobile ride home.

Details

Simon Osborne was a guest of Flexiski (flexiski.com) which offers four nights at the Hotel Kärntnerhof from £450 per person, half-board (based on two sharing a double room). For more on the village see heiligenblut.at

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