

# High altitude summer

Lech am Arlberg is one of Austria's most exclusive, and popular, alpine winter sports destinations; yet summer is the season to savour the authentic character of the region



Twitter: @andrewforbes

Out from the dark doorway of the timber farmhouse Björn emerged into the bright mountain daylight with a small, round wooden tray, carrying robust shot glasses, almost filled to the brim with crystal clear spirit. It was schnapps of course, a warming treat after a morning's hiking.

## Prost!

I had only been in Austria a few days, but I was already considering myself quite the aficionado of Austria's favourite tipple. Schnapps is a warming spirit, drunk in the countryside and also as an after-dinner digestive. When I arrived, I went to check out the local Tannberg artisan food market in Lech's village centre, and was soon offered a small tasting shot of pine schnapps by one of the local traders. The forest-flavoured liquor, with a distinctive reddish-brown colour was surprisingly smooth, and slightly sweet – it's made from the new season cones of the arolla pine.

Then in the evening after dinner in the family-run Gotthard Hotel, the owner Clemens invited me to try another glass – this time Enzian herbal schnapps, made from the root of the local yellow gentian. It had a distinctive earthy aroma yet a clean, satisfying taste.

Today's schnapps, enjoyed on the farmhouse terrace, was made by local farmers who each year return to the summer alpine area to graze cattle, make cheese and, well, from the



The summer landscape is stunning, lush with wild flowers. :: ANDREW FORBES

looks of things, live an idyllic summer lifestyle.

Björn is Hotel Gotthard's mountain guide; a young man from Germany who loves the mountains – skiing in winter, hiking and biking in summer. As the base for my visit to the super-stylish resort village of Lech, the historic Hotel Gotthard was eager to showcase the area's summer attractions. So this morning, equipped with a packed lunch including freshly-baked bread from Clemens's bakery, I set off with the experienced guide to discover a Tannberg hiking trail.

## Off-piste

Hidden to high-season visitors, who come to enjoy the region's world-class winter sports, and the more than five metres of annual snowfall, the summer landscape is stunning. It is lush with abundant wildflowers. The most famous here is the iconic edelweiss, Austria's national flower, which is a sort of silver mountain daisy. It's hard to find, preferring a high altitude, rocky habitat. Yet here at around 1,700 metres, the mountain pastures are covered in a mass of flowering alpine plants, grasses and thistles – one walks amongst gentians, daisies, alpine roses, wild geranium and many different kinds of intricately patterned orchids.

The walking route also offers glimpses of life as it once was in these striking valleys. Our mid-point stop at this ancient farmhouse, in the historic hamlet of Bürstegg, is a chance to experience a snapshot of rural Alpine life. The hamlet was built by the Walsers, medieval Alpine settlers. Buildings here date back centuries, some as old as 700 years. Beside the farm-



The historic hamlet of Bürstegg was built by medieval Alpine settlers. :: WWW.LECH-ZUERS.AT

## The most famous wild flower is the iconic edelweiss, Austria's national flower

house and its outbuildings is a modest church, with a steeple clad in wood shingles – a quintessential alpine scene.

After enjoying the schnapps overlooking the spectacular view, we were invited inside, to sit at one of the old pine tables in the farmhouse salon and snack on cured hams, flavoured homemade bread, and alpine cheese. These rustic snacks are a far-cry from the gastronomic sophistication of nearby upmarket Lech which often welcomes royalty, VIPs and the super-rich as winter guests. Yet this humble summer mountain meal feels like a feast as we sit and relax within the cosy, historic surroundings of the house,

with its walls and doorways decorated with finely painted designs.

## Snow and sunshine

Summer in the Alps can mean experiencing a little of each season throughout a summer holiday. I had been woken earlier in the day by bright summer sunshine forcing its way past the edges of my guest room curtains. Yet only the day before it had been snowing on the mountains. Getting ready, I had stepped out onto the balcony of my room at Hotel Gotthard to survey the valley – steep verdant mountain meadows ran up to grey rocky peaks now almost covered in glistening white, fresh powder. The light was sharp and bright; the mountain air dry and fresh.

From the room my morning perspective was somewhat different to that now later in the day, high up in the tiny community at Bürstegg.



An Alpine snack. :: DENER VORARBERG.TRAVEL

In the mountains the air was more humid and fragrant; and the sound of cowbells was everywhere.

The distinctive 'Tyrolean Grey' cattle that graze these green pastures offer a classic alpine soundtrack to summer activities in the mountains.

The afternoon return hike was pleasantly downhill, passing idle ski-lift stations, and through small forests of tall pines. The dozens of marked hiking routes, covering over 250 kilometres around the alpine villages of Lech-Zürs typically begin or end at bus stops so one can easily make it back to one's hotel using your 'Lech Card'.

However there are no queues here. One of the many pleasures of summer in Lech is the tranquillity; the hills are most certainly alive, but not with the sound of thousands of tourists.

Travel and transport: how to get there and how to move around

Lech am Arlberg, in the Austrian state of Vorarlberg, is in the Alps at 1,450 metres. It is often referred to as 'Lech-Zürs', since it is administered together with the neighbouring villages of Zürs, Zug, Oberlech and Stubenbach.

The nearest Austrian airport is Innsbruck; although it's often more practical to take a direct flight from Malaga to Zurich Airport in neighbouring Switzerland. Flights from Malaga are available with Swiss Air and Vueling.

The transfer time to Lech from Zurich is around 2 hours 15 minutes by car – hotels such as the Gotthard can arrange private transfers.

Alternatively for travellers from the UK, half-board packages including flights and transfers are available from 'Thomson Lakes & Mountains'.

The Lech Card is an ingenious alternative to using money for travel or experiences in the area. For example, my room key at the Hotel Gotthard was also my digital Lech Card, affording me use of the local buses, gondolas, chair lifts, the stunning Riffkopf cable car, the open-air forest swimming pool, as well as museums and cultural sights. The prepaid card can also give access to family services like the summer kids club, and the Buxbaum family play park.

**More information:**  
www.lechzuers.com  
www.vorarlberg.travel  
www.thomsonlakes.co.uk



## THE INSIDER GUIDE

## Lech-Zuers



Gotthard Hotel.

## STAY:

## Hotel Gotthard

In an Alpine village chock-full of formal hotels and über exclusive private chalets, it was a real luxury to feel so at home at the family-run Hotel Gotthard. This stylish hotel is spread over two shingle-clad chalet-style buildings, with gardens, a wellness area, an onsite bakery, restaurants and a café. Accommodation is in generously-sized rooms, many with balconies.

The property has been in Clemens Walch's family for generations, and together with his wife Nicole, originally from Australia, the couple offer genuine, friendly hospitality at this 4-star superior hotel. Founded by Filomena Walch, Clemens' entrepreneurial grandmother in 1931 as a bakery with guest rooms, a stay in this now luxury hotel is like being welcomed into the extended family.

Nicole has co-written a fascinating book, full of vintage photos, about the family and its history in Lech; a copy of which is in each guest room.

Following in the family tradition, Clemens is also an accomplished Master Baker. The family bakery is below the hotel, so expect fabulous breakfasts (served until midday!) and also the best bakery shop in the village, 'Backstube Café Lech' located within the hotel. The multi-lingual team offer unpretentious service,

from booking activities to arranging dining. Accommodation is B&B or half-board. There are special offers for summer and also special three-night mid-week rates until the autumn.

[www.gotthard.at](http://www.gotthard.at)

## Blumen Haus Lech

This summer the finishing touches are still being added this Alpine retreat; a new boutique property of nine super-upscale suites that is scheduled to open for the 2016/2017 winter season.

[www.blumenhauslech.com](http://www.blumenhauslech.com)

## Hotel Almhof Schneider

At the foot of the Schlegelkopf Mountain, and overlooking the village's main street and the slopes, this 5-star hotel was a favourite of Princess Diana.

[www.almhof.at](http://www.almhof.at)

## EAT:

## Hüs Nr. 8

House Number 8 is just that – the 8th house to have been built in the village of Lech. So expect wonderful historic Alpine architecture. This was the family home where Clemens was born, and is now an acclaimed restaurant and lively bar run by his cousin Christian Walch. Low ceilings and honey-coloured timber walls give each space a cosy feel. Enjoy here hearty Austrian country cuisine like 'Gröstl' (delicious potatoes with black pudding served in a large iron pan), or 'Käse-

spätzle' (soft egg noodles served with cheese and fried onions – like a very tasty version of Mac 'n' Cheese).

The bar is a friendly and lively place to share a late night drink. [www.hus8.at](http://www.hus8.at)

## Lecher Stube Restaurant

Found within the Gotthard Hotel, this stylish Alpine restaurant, run by husband and wife team Werner and Sara Müllner, offers the chance to enjoy classic Austrian dishes like 'Wiener Schnitzel', as well as contemporary-style plates such as vegetarian risotto. Many ingredients are sourced locally from the waters and forests of the Vorarlberg region.

[www.gotthard.at](http://www.gotthard.at)

## Fischteich Restaurant

For the freshest mountain trout and salmon then this is the place to visit. A quaint log cabin beside fresh water fish lakes in Zug is home to this intimate restaurant offering a varied menu based predominantly on local fish. Owner Andy Mittermayer and his team make you feel welcome and will help you with the menu. For a starter, try the pancake soup, a beef broth with sliced pancake on top, a local favourite. Remember to order schnapps too – here the small glasses of Austria's favourite after-dinner digestive are served in a little 'schnapps tree', a charming wooden holder, placed on the table. Prost!

[www.fischteich-lech.at](http://www.fischteich-lech.at)

## Baristo Café Bar

Trendy coffee shop and bar on the village square by the cable car. Order the hot chocolate – it's so good! Search 'Baristo Lech' on Facebook

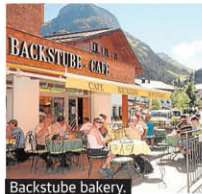
## Schneggare

This small timber chalet offers some of the best pizzas in town – great reputation and sociable atmosphere thanks to years of popular après-ski hospitality.

[www.schneggare.at](http://www.schneggare.at)

## Urban Sundowners

In summer, visitors enjoy late afternoon drinks in the valley – the alfresco terraces of Hotel Tannberg-erhof or Hotel Krone offer the



Backstube bakery.



Fischteich restaurant. :: A. F.



Haus Nr. 8 restaurant. :: A. F.



Gotthard Wellness Area.



Lech Golf Club. :: A. FORBES

chance to enjoy the last warm rays of the day's sun. [www.airbds](http://www.airbds)

## DO:

## Golf Club Lech

New for 2016; this is the highest golf course in Austria. Clemens Walch is co-Founder and the President of the nine-hole Lech Golf Club and as such his Hotel Gotthard offers special golf packages for summer guests together with a comprehensive Golf Butler Service. Very close to the hotel is also a 3-hole Golf Academy with driving range, putting green and practice bunker which Gotthard Hotel guests can use for free. The hotel also partners with golf pro Michael Coventon, PGA AA, and his colleague Heiner Neubaur at Iconic Golf, who operate the Golf Academy and offer tuition. [www.golf-arlberg.at](http://www.golf-arlberg.at) [www.iconicgolf.com](http://www.iconicgolf.com)

## Hiking

Summer in Lech is like an eternal spring: wild flowers including abundant orchids cover the hillsides. The winter sports 'White Ring' of ski pistes is transformed into a verdant 'Green Ring' of interconnected alpine hiking routes. Björn is the Hotel Gotthard's professional mountain guide who is available to take guests on stunning walks. [www.lech-zuers.at](http://www.lech-zuers.at)

## Mountain bike

During the summer the ski and snowboard rental stores of Lech become mountain bike rental and hiking stores. 'Strolz on Rüfplatz' is a chic store offering one of the best selections of mountain bike gear.

[www.strolz.at](http://www.strolz.at)

## Cultural festivals

During the summer evenings, there are often musical and cultural events in the village. During the first week of August the modern 'New Church/Neuen Kirche' auditorium hosts the Lech Classical Music Festival. Then there is the Jazz Bühne festival; and events continue into the autumn. Details on the local tourism website.

[www.lech-zuers.at](http://www.lech-zuers.at) [www.vorarlberg.travel](http://www.vorarlberg.travel)

## Spa Wellness

Enjoy an authentic Austrian sauna or a relaxing swim at the wellness centre at the Hotel Gotthard. Outside is a beautiful alpine garden for sunbathing.

[www.gotthard.at](http://www.gotthard.at)

## BUY:

'Strolz Sport & Mode' is Lech's flagship retail experience – a classic luxury department store with plenty of old-school Austrian charm. It's also where you can pick up tailored dirndls and Lederhosen!

[www.strolz.at](http://www.strolz.at)



Lech village. :: HANNO MACKOWITZ