



[TRAVEL]

SKI LATE, WALK EARLY

Spring may be in the air, but as GILLIAN THOMAS and RICHARD LOFTHOUSE discover, some ski resorts still have plenty to offer

As winter fades, where can you be sure of great skiing but also spring alternatives such as alpine walking, mountain biking and golf? Overleaf you'll find our best picks from France, Italy and Switzerland – but arguably the best choice is the Arlberg region, tucked away in the far western finger of Austria.

Tourism on the Arlberg dates back to the 19th century, but alpine skiing propelled the area to legendary status. From the first ski club in 1901, the Arlberg evolved into the be-there-and-be-seen destination of film stars in the 20s and 30s, and eventually into today's 85 cable cars, 280 km of ski runs and 180 km of off-piste deep snow runs. All Rolex-tipped, mind you, yet down-to-earth and Tyrolean in the fondue-and-wood-smoke style, with 21st-century attributes like Wi-Fi and spa treatments.

Leading villages in the region include Stuben, Zürs and Zug, but the most feted centres are Lech and its ultra-chic satellite Oberlech, the latter attainable only by cable car, and perhaps most tantalizingly St Christoph, which at 1,800 m is one of the highest villages in the Alps.

Situated on opposite sides of the Arlberg, about 12 km apart, Oberlech and St Christoph have come together through the marriage of two powerful and ancient Austrian families, the Pfefferkorns and the Werners, with the result that the finest accommodation in the whole of the Arlberg is now linked.

A perfect holiday would be one week in Florian Werner's Arlberg Hospiz hotel in St Christoph, followed by a second week on the other side of the Arlberg at Daniela Pfefferkorn's Goldener Berg. Both properties have adjacent restaurants backing onto pristine piste; the Alter Goldener Berg restaurant serves an exquisite meal called the *steingrill*, where you cook your own meat on a salted granite slab brought to the table, and Florian's father Adi Werner, still very present, has built up a claret

cellar in St Christoph that is not only one of the world's finest but also one of the most noteworthy on account of its extraordinary collection of large-format bottles of red Bordeaux.

In between these two centres lies every skier's objective in the Arlberg: the 2,811 m Valluga, approachable only with a ski instructor on account of its thrilling but dangerous descent. Once you've been up Valluga the mundane world is put firmly in its place and there's nothing for it but to seek out the Hospiz gym and spa, a major addition to the St Christoph property. Every conceivable treatment, a full-scale gym including free weights and a multitude of different saunas await the weary skier.

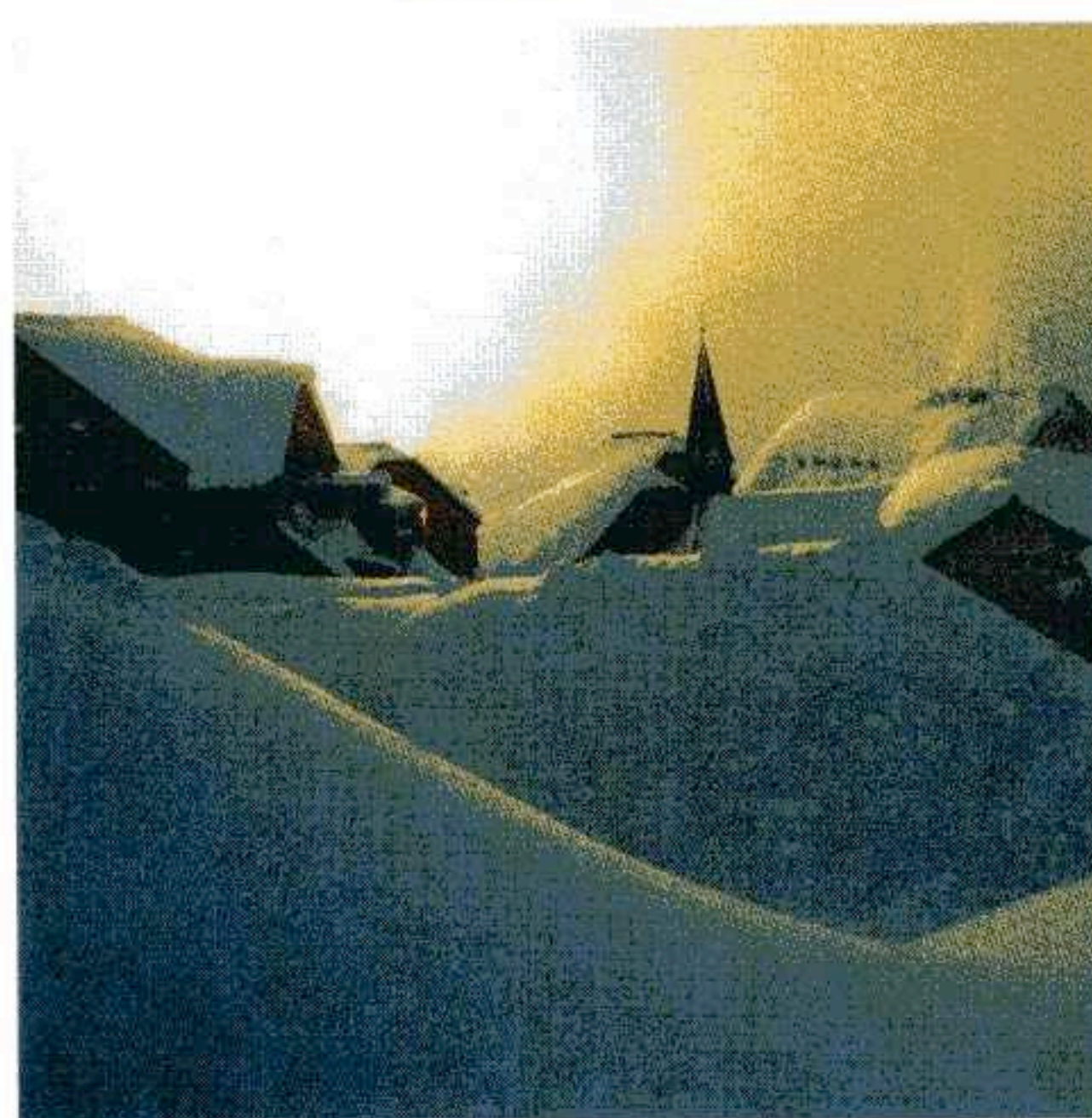
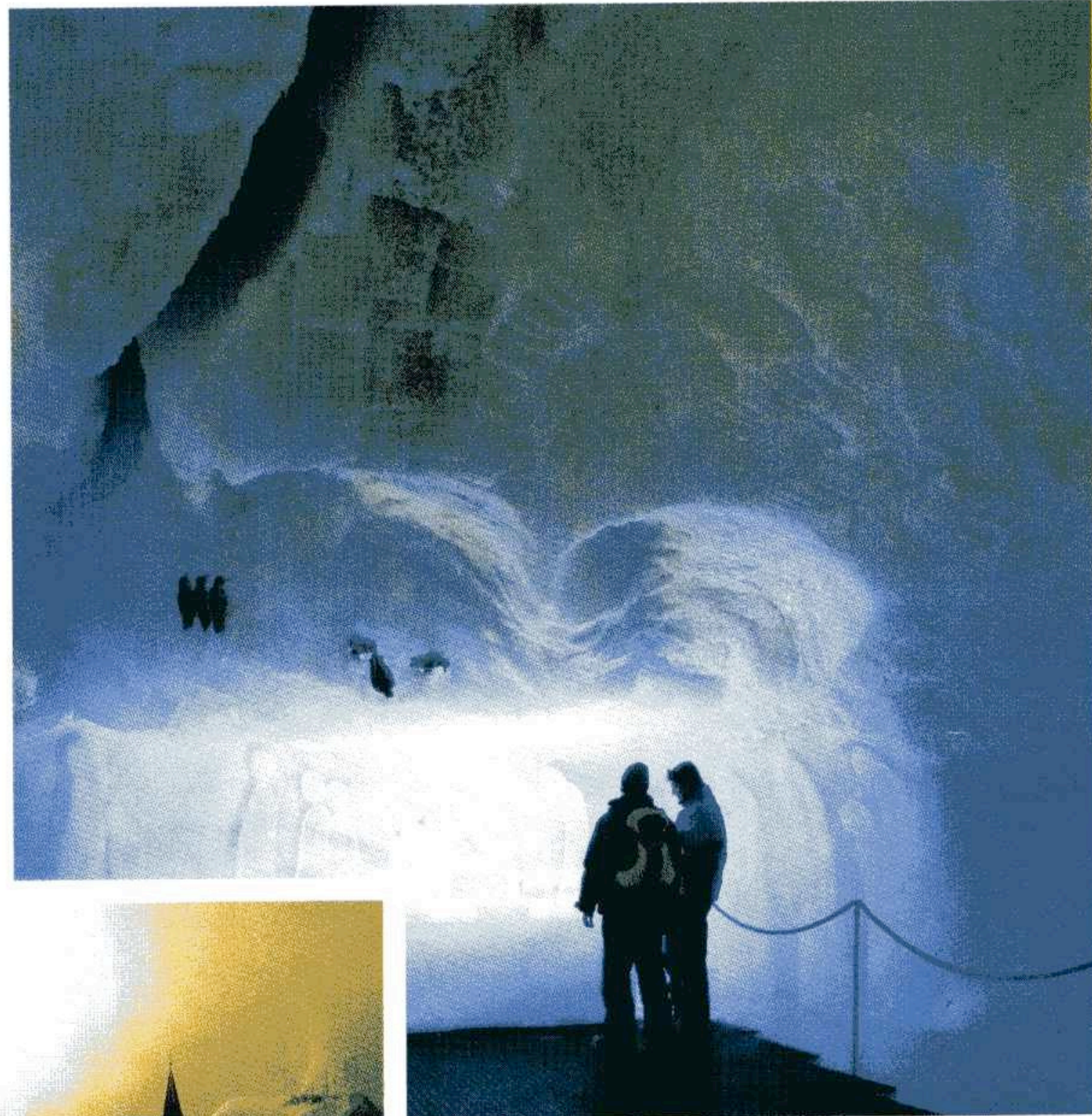
The Arlberg tourist authorities have put a major effort into securing a full range of spring and summer events, ranging from climbing festivals to triathlons – in fact, just about every conceivable activity you can imagine. Florian Werner leads a motorbike tour through the Alps over four days, riding through the nearby territories of Switzerland, Italy and Germany and celebrating the Arlberg pass that gave the St Christoph Hospiz its original function as a refuge for exhausted travellers. St Christoph has become a fixture on the Tour of Germany cycling race, while neighbouring St Anton was recently a stage in the Gore-Tex Transalpine Run.

Everything you need to know about this region is contained in the fact that couture watchmaker Chopard recently launched a limited edition to its "Happy" range of freely floating diamond watches, called the "Happy Arlberg". Yet the reality is even better than the materialism (which ain't bad): despite the obvious prosperity of the region, the astonishingly good service and sense of being welcomed into a family hotel rather than an anonymous chain has not changed in the Austrian Alps.

www.hospiz.com, www.stantonamarlberg.com



LEFT: Lech in the Arlberg region is one of the top ski destinations in Austria. RIGHT: Saas-Fee offers over 320 km of hiking trails. BELOW: the picturesque surroundings of the Arlberg Hospiz hotel



FRANCE: LES ARCS

Good snow stays late on the challenging slopes of the Aiguille Rouge mountain. This rises to a height of 3,225 m above the four Les Arcs villages, which are named after their respective altitudes – Arc 1600, Arc 1800, Arc 1950 and Arc 2000. The views from the top – which stretch as far as Mont Blanc – can be enjoyed by non-skiers too, as the cable-car goes virtually to the peak.

Thanks to their altitude, all four villages, which are linked by lifts and shuttle buses, remain open for skiing until the end of April. The arrival of spring opens up the River Isère's valley to walkers. Easy access is provided year-round by the funicular railway that runs between Arc 1600 and the town of Bourg St Maurice in the valley, an eight-minute ride.

During summer and winter, the smartest village to stay in is Arc 1950, built by Canadian developer Intrawest. Set in a bowl of mountains around a "village square" of restaurants and shops, its accommodation is in a group of attractive "residences" and ranges from studios for two to luxurious four-bedroom suites. There is also a fitness centre and indoor and outdoor pools.

www.lesarcs.com

ITALY: ARABBA

The small village of Arabba nestles below the Porta Vescovo mountain and the Sella Massif in the spectacular Dolomites in northern Italy. Rising up like castles and glowing pink when bathed in evening sunshine, these mountains are as spectacular when surrounded by snow as when the meadows are covered in wild flowers.

For skiing, Arabba's north-facing slopes and the 3,342 m Marmolada Glacier guarantee the best late conditions in the area. From the high point, 2,500 m up on the Porta Vescovo, skiers have a choice of returning to the village, taking a series of chairlifts onwards to the glacier or heading off around the famous Sella Ronda, a 25 km circular network of lifts that links four valleys around the mighty limestone massif.

For walkers, trails lead over the hills into the neighbouring valleys of the South Tyrol, an area renowned for its mild climate and sunshine. Arabba is a relatively quiet and still very traditional village, but several of its hotels, most family-run, have impressive leisure facilities including pools, saunas and steam rooms. The Hotel Grifone, 4 km outside the village on the Campolongo Pass, is particularly special, having log fires, a large pool and five-course candlelit dinners in its atmospheric restaurant.

www.arabba.it

SWITZERLAND: SAAS-FEE

Thirteen mountains – including Switzerland's highest peak, the Dom – surround this old village, which is traffic-free and as popular in summer as it is in winter.

With slopes rising to 3,500 m and a glacier, you can count on finding good snow throughout Saas-Fee's long ski season. Indeed, the glacier stays open all year and in summer has a "park" that attracts pro-boarders. You get great views from the mountain restaurants, particularly at the Mittelallalin beside the glacier. The world's highest revolving restaurant, it is open for lunch all year.

When spring arrives, Saas-Fee turns into a walking centre, offering a choice of over 320 km of hiking trails that lead across Alpine meadows, through forests and along the glacier. For access to many of them, the cable car and chairlift system, including the world's highest underground funicular, the Metro Alpin, continues to run – be aware, however, that you need to hire a mountain guide to explore the more difficult routes, including some across the glacier. Many hotels organise guided walks.

Among a large choice of hotels, the five-star Ferienart Resort has traditional Alpine-style rooms, as well as a modern wing with suites, an indoor pool and a spa.

www.saas-fee.ch