

SKIING is one big lottery. In the brochures, the sky is royal blue, the pistes uncrowded and the living always easy. The reality is often freezing rain, braying British boy racers and sub-standard food at London prices.

Come to think of it, the last time I was in St Anton — three years ago — things weren't so great. There was no snow, it rained for four days and we filled the time either walking in mud or accessing weather-forecasting websites in the hope that one of them might provide a reason to believe.

My only other experience of this famous Austrian resort was back in 1964. I was ten, and on my first ski holiday, which was really an endurance test of the kind parents regarded as character-building.

I used to be paired with my father rather than brother on the T-bars, and whenever the weather closed in, we always seemed to be setting off on one of the longest lifts in the world.

Once, the visibility was so bad that you couldn't see the stanchions and then, just to

by Mark Palmer

top things off, the Almighty summoned up a storm that resulted in total loss of feeling in feet and hands, followed by a light-headedness and inability to communicate.

The only comfort came from the certainty that I would be dead by the time we arrived at the top.

St Anton hasn't changed a great deal in all these years. It's still a resort where you ski hard and play hard. It still has its traffic-free central street where smartish hotels, boutiques and rowdy bars coexist perfectly happily.

Access to the mountain is easy. If you're staying near the centre of town, you get to ride the extraordinary Galzigbahn, which houses a ferris wheel that lifts dozens of gondolas up from ground level and puts them on a moving wire.

This state-of-the-art, futuristic device causes engineers to stand and drool. It transports 3,000 people up the mountain each hour.

We hired a guide early in the week to provide some local knowledge and give us a few pointers about our technique. We received both, in spades. Ferdl was born and



Pictures: ALAMY/WIDMANN WIDMANN

Buzzing: St Anton has some great places to eat

raised in St Anton, but has skied the world.

He has variously been Clint Eastwood's personal instructor in Ohio and coach to the Argentine women's ski team.

Apart from some invaluable tips about riding moguls and surviving in powder, he taught me you should always hire a guide who, like Ferdl, is well into his 50s or 60s. Experience is everything in this beautiful game.

Frankly, I've never been a great one for long, boozy lunches on the slopes — and, believe me, I've nothing against long, boozy lunches in general. But Hospiz Alm, in the village of St Christoph (an easy blue run from the top of Galzig) made me think again. The speciality of the house is spare ribs, by which I mean a rack of ribs the size of a small toboggan.

Another spectacular lunch spot — especially if you get a window seat — is at the top of the Valluga cable car (2,660ft), where you can take on some premium fuel for the long, rugged descent into the valley.

'I have to tell you,' said Ferdl

at the end of our session, 'that we have the best and toughest skiing in the world. Tomorrow you must do the White Circle and then tell me if I am right.'

The White Circle is a ski tour of Lech and Zurs, which you can join at any point on the circuit. We began in Lech, working our way to the highest peak on the north-west of town, then moving clockwise over some stunning terrain.

From Lech you take a cable car to Stubenbach and then down — eventually — into Zurs, where it's wise to dally for a while and bomb up and down the village's north-facing slopes.

From Zurs, it's on to the hamlet of Zug, reached via a long, unpisted ski route that goes on and on, ending with a scenic run through trees.

Up an old-fashioned two-man chair and we found

ourselves back where we started, leaving plenty of time to explore Lech's gentle and perfectly manicured snowy motorways.

'More beer is drunk in St Anton than in any other Austrian resort, and more champagne is drunk in Lech than in any other Austrian resort,' said Dave, who worked in our Inghams-staffed hotel Pepi Gable, positioned, genuinely, no more than 60 seconds from the gondola.

'That pretty much tells you all you need to know about the two towns.'

WELL, yes, but I'm also glad that we knew about the Alter Oberlech restaurant in Lech, which was well worth the 20-minute taxi ride from St Anton.

It's run by the Pfefferkorn family, who also preside over the renowned Hotel Goldener Berg. We ate traditional meat fondue in a charming, low-ceilinged room with panelling dating back to the 15th century, and were taken on a tour of the vast wine cellars in which the restaurant takes huge pride.

Back in St Anton, the younger members of our party were enthusiastic about Funky Chicken, a bar in the

main street, and by Krazy Kangaroo, where the twenty-somethings stop off on the final run home and tend not to leave until the small hours.

What really gave us food for thought in this buzzy resort was the reminder that it was here that a 13-year old boy invented the stem Christie method of skiing.

Hannes Schneider went on to found the St Anton ski school in 1921, then became an actor and much-adored ladies' man.

Without him, St Anton might never have grown to what it is today: a haven for the experienced skier looking for new challenges — and ski heaven for the rest of us.

TRAVEL FACTS

INGHAMS offer seven nights B&B accommodation in the three-star Pepi Gable Apartments starting from £640pp based on five sharing a three-room flat. The price includes return flights from London to Innsbruck and resort transfers. Pre-booked six-day adult ski and boot hire costs from £156, three-day ski school starts from £129 and a six-day pass costs from £159. (020 8780 4447, inghams.co.uk)

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