

Walking holiday in the Austrian Alps

On a walking holiday in the Austrian Alps, Christopher Somerville revels in spectacular scenery - and warm welcomes.

By Christopher Somerville

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'You don't have to be a hairy-chested peak buster to enjoy walking in Austria' Photo: GETTY

Of all the European countries blessed with sensational mountain scenery, Austria remains the walker's favourite. There's something about the combination of the mind-blowing drama of the Austrian landscape and the good humour and generosity of the people that's irresistible to walkers, from absolute beginners to hardened mountain-hurdlers.

The paths that cross ridges and wind through valleys are beautifully maintained and efficiently marked. There's a network of inexpensive, welcoming Hütten or mountain inns that British ramblers would give their eye teeth for. And from April to October the tourist information centres deal out walking maps, information, contact details for mountain guides and tips as though every other customer was a hiker in search of a good walk – which in the case of the Vorarlberg and Tirol regions of western Austria is not far from the truth.

You don't have to be a hairy-chested peak buster to enjoy walking in Austria. From the highest Tirolean alp to the gentlest Vorarlberg path, there is something for everyone.

Vorarlberg: Bregenzerwald

The Bregenzerwald, a seductive area of undulating pastures and wooded hill ranges, lies in the north of the Vorarlberg, the region that occupies the north-west tip of Austria. My wife, Jane, and daughter, Mary, were accompanying me on this, their first Austrian adventure, and the Hotel Krone in the Bregenzerwald village of Hittisau – recently refurbished by its owners

Helene and Dietmar Nussbaumer, using local craftsmen working in local wood – proved the perfect base for expeditions into the fields, wood and hills nearby.

On our first day we just strolled around Hittisau, pursuing the "Wood Trail" from one beautifully made wooden house to the next, visiting the village cooper and beekeeper Peter Lässer in his resin-scented workshop, stopping in at the Women's Museum with its startling and challenging modern sculpture displays – not what you'd expect to find in a sleepy hill village, and all the better for that. Next day we followed the newly waymarked Wasserwanderweg along the jade-green Bolgenach river at the feet of Hittisau, looking for dippers and dragonflies. We passed a group of nuns, out for a walk in full habit, who all chorused "Grüss Gott!" and grinned shyly at us; then came up from the river through the yard of a flower-bedecked old watermill, up to an inn on a crossroads where we drank coffee in the seductive scent of wood smoke.

It was the time of year when the Bregenzerwald cows all walk down from the high summer pastures to spend the winter in their home villages in the valley. Hittisau's neighbouring village of Schwarzenberg held a festival day, and we went along to see the cows, their coats shining like velvet from the rich summer grass, paraded through the streets with much clonking of neck bells and clinking of wine glasses. It made us keen to see an alpine pasture ourselves. Luckily the Schwarz family's Helmingenalpe, up in the mountains beyond Hittisau, proved to be hanging onto its cattle for a few days more. Walks leader Christoph Oberhauser took us there by winding paths, past the Lecknersee and up through delectable flowery meadows thick with crocuses, scabious and royal blue gentians. Marianne Schwarz showed us her vast copper milk cauldron, her cool dairy and subterranean cheese store filled with big fragrant rounds of cheese. We sat at a long table by the window, the wooden platters in front of us piled with slabs of cheese – salty, sweet, new, mature, studded with chives – tasting and talking and sipping strong, clear perry from a wooden barrel. Now that's a civilised way to walk.

Hittisau walks

"Wood Trail" (one hour – easy): Stroll around the village admiring the old, carved, wooden buildings and architect-designed new ones; visit Peter Lässer the village carpenter (0043 5513 2966), and the Women's Museum (5513 620930; www.frauenmuseum.com).

Wasserwanderweg (two hours – easy): A waymarked trail with information boards along Bolgenach River.

Lecknersee and Helmingenalpe (four hours with farm stop – easy/moderate): From Kälberweidealpen car park by Lecknersee and Gästhof Höfle to Helmingenalpe alpine farm (5513 6117 – open May to September for cheese, but check first!), returning via Äuelealpe.

Staying, eating: Hotel Krone, Am Platz, 6952 Hittisau, 5513 6201; www.krone-hittisau.at – warm, friendly, stylish, comfortable.

More info: Hittisau Tourist Office (5513 620950); http://homes.tiscover.com/vbgtour/pdf_files/2005/Wanderlust_E_05.pdf contains excellent walks in the locality.

General information

www.austria.info