



VIRGIN Snowboarder

Alan McMonagle learns to snowboard in the Austrian Alps.



I'm legless again. Buried up to my numbskulls in a meringue of powder snow. It's so comfortable I'm happy to collapse onto the flat of my back and stare up at pure blue sky and the jagged thrust of the Sleeping Virgin – the curvaceous Alpine peak that watches lazily over the mountain village. Kicking up my snow boots, sprinkles of fleecy snow fall away from my snowboard and soothe my lobster-red face. The board hangs momentarily in the air, awaiting my next move.

Call me Goofy, by the way. That's right – Goofy. It's because I prefer to lead with my right foot. Just picture yourself running into a skid along a stretch of ice. 'Regulars' will lead with the left foot. Actually, after my first run down the nursery slope I'm starting to think I may have two left feet. And when I finally work myself out of the snow, I've forgotten that my feet no longer control my destiny and down I go again. Sarjo, my instructor, glides over. "Hey Alan, your first powder experience. Let's try again," he encourages with the aura of a man who can float on water.

I'm in the tiny mountain hamlet of Hinterthal,

one hour south of Salzburg staying at Haus Salzburg, Carl and Sandra's four-level chalet replete with timber-beam bar, rustic vibe and an apple studel that's worth the visit alone. It's Carl and Sandra's second winter here and they've quickly integrated into this quirky little village.

It's an ideal location for learning to snowboard. The nursery slope 'Points Pass' allows you to hone your skills at your own pace. With

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little or no lift queues, it's so quiet you can tumble to your heart's content. And there is powder snow everywhere – guaranteeing a soft landing when you fall. Which is why the first thing to master is balance.

I wonder about my equilibrium at the best of times, but Sarjo has some useful tips. Pick yourself up from a kneeling position, he tells me. Edging the board with the toes comes more

naturally as you lean that way when you bend your knees. Edging controls your speed as you find your balance. Also, try to resist leaning back when you pick up speed – when you lean back you fall. Rising from a sitting position is trickier as you've got to edge with your heels as you lean into the slope. But I find it's a good idea to alternate – it helps spread the pain.

After much discouraging tumbling Sarjo coerces me on to the lift one more time. I'm too tired to resist but after a little further progress we call it a day. Actually, I lie. You see they have an infectious desire to reward a little sweat and toil in the Austrian Alps, which is why I

find myself in the log-cabin Alm Bar, right by the ski-lift, for my first burst of Après Ski.

Margit, the owner's mum, has a sympathetic smile as I jelly-leg to the bar and she invites me to join her Euromillions syndicate. Sascha, her son, has a better idea. He draws an unlabelled bottle from the shelf. Its fiery contents go down like a match and I'm introduced to the area's second-favourite past-time – the Nail Game.



BOARD GAMES

Getting There:

Ryanair fly Stansted/Salzburg. Transfer from Salzburg to Hinterthal one hour by taxi €120. Car hire also available.

Accommodation:

Haus Salzburg: one week per person sharing from €399 full board including five-course gourmet meal.
www.elevationholidays.com

Costs:

Nursery Slope Points Pass (valid for 25 runs): €27
Snowboarding Lessons: 3 Day Course €97
6 Day Ski Pass €171; children €87 (valid for 25 locations covering 860kms of snow and 270 ski lifts)
Board & Boots hire from €28 daily; Children (up to 12) €23
Children €14.
Under six ski for free
www.ski-hinterthal.at



Next morning upon reaching the top, I plant myself in the snow and buckle in my left boot. Aware of the effort ahead, I purposely take my time, taking in the unravelling forest slopes and glacial scenery.

Sarjo reaches me and congratulates my achievement. And he's quickly into a masterclass on drift turns – zigzagging down the slope. There's more edging, more bending, some swearing, lots of falling. Sarjo demonstrates patience that would warp a saint. But come lesson-end I'm sliding over and back, across the slope and feeling pretty chuffed with myself.

"You must be making an effort then," a contagious Geordie tells me in the Alm Bar when I reveal to him that I feel like a crash test dummy.

Once you've mastered turning on the edge of the board – carving – you're ready for the pistes. This is the real goal and Sarjo has determination for both of us. "Let the board ride flat," he tells me. "Bend the knees, edge, swivel, and look up as the board begins to swerve." I obey as best I can, but my eyes seem compelled to the board, as though I still don't trust it.

"Look up Alan," Sarjo calls. "Look around you." Completing a wobbly turn, Sarjo implores me to try for the opposite direction. I make an earnest attempt but it's not to be. It's hard going for the first couple of days. You'll fall, you'll ache, you'll forget much of what you've already learned. Edging slows you down but confidence comes with practice. With each run you'll find yourself

going for it that little bit more and the board responds in kind.

Then something wonderful happens. All that technical slush is suddenly replaced by an instinct that kicks in when you least expect. Inhibition flees, the board takes over and as I weave left and right, it hits me that what I'm doing is none other than what Sarjo has been trying to hammer into me for the past three days.

I'm told the typical snowboarder goes to France, stays in a catered chalet, eats at a long-bench table and suffers endless lift queues for a distant slope that is too steep to reap the full benefit of winter snowfalls. Here, novice though I am, it is obvious that a far more enriching experience is on offer. The tree-lined routes break up the endless white slabs. Off-piste is irresistible, and begs you to create your own safari.

For the fast learner with an adventurous spirit, there are 150kms of mountain snow to explore. Most of all though, Hinterthal is a snow-hole, and so there is powder snow everywhere. Stashes and stashes of it. Up to twice as much as some of the more fabled resorts, in fact.

That evening the air glints with miniscule diamonds of evaporated moisture. Bursts of snow powder the evergreens. Village chimes tinkle in the play of winter light. Dinner includes a rack of pork ribs as long as my board. Carl and Sarjo swap snow stories. Their passion is infectious, and their natural tale-spinning takes you right onto the black-run pistes, face-to-face with sudden rock walls and encounters with the 'white devil' himself. However, I can't sit around chatting – I've got my first piste to carve. **oe**

