

ROCK ME AMADEUS

There's a secret symphony of slopes just waiting to be discovered in Austria – with 25 resorts covered by one lift pass, Ski Amadé should strike a chord

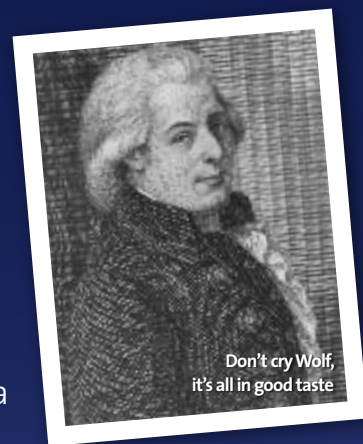
Words Dave Watts

THINK OF AUSTRIA, and its big name western resorts such as St Anton, Kitzbühel, and Söll probably come to mind. But head just a little further east and you'll find a huge number of great resorts within an hour's drive of Salzburg airport, which very few Brits have discovered. What's more, just one lift pass covers them all. Spread over five regions and with a total of 270 lifts and 860km of runs, Ski Amadé (named for Salzburg's favourite son, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart) is almost half as big again as France's Trois Vallées. And the Ski Amadé pass allows you to tour as many of its 25 resorts as you like for little more than you'd pay to go to just one.

All the resorts have ideal intermediate terrain, but their characters vary widely, from friendly tree-lined pistes in the

Salzburger Sportwelt region to high open slopes above the village of Sportgastein. Experts will find plenty of interest too – try the Hochkönig region's huge off-piste bowl above the village of Maria Alm or, in the Schladming-Dachstein region, Schladming's famous downhill race course.

Within each region bus services are good, but buses between regions are less frequent. A good option is to rent a car, choose a base from one of the contrasting resorts featured overleaf (which vary from unspoilt hamlets to world class spa towns) and visit two or three regions. Most are within a 15-minute drive of one another, and the resorts within each region no more than five to 10 minutes apart. ▶



Salzburg – quite a base village



SCHLADMING -DACHSTEIN

For lively nightlife, snowsure slopes, and a world-class downhill course, make for Schladming-Dachstein

The slopes

Schladming's four local linked mountains form the biggest ski area in the Schladming-Dachstein region, with great, mainly tree-lined, intermediate cruising pistes. The slopes are largely north-facing with snowmaking throughout, so good snow is virtually guaranteed. The resort has a long ski racing history and has hosted World Cup events for many years – don't miss the steep black-run finish to the men's downhill course. The mountain restaurants are some of Austria's oldest and best – the atmospheric Onkel Willi's Hütte has live music, indoor nooks and crannies, and a terrace.

As well as the four linked mountains local to Schladming, there are other areas easily reached by car or bus, including the snowsure Dachstein glacier above the village of Ramsau. Ramsau is also one of Austria's best areas for cross-country skiing and there are 400km of trails in the region.

Where to stay

Schladming is the best-known resort in the region and a working town with an industrial area on the outskirts. However, the centre is a large, pleasant, tree-lined, traffic-free square, prettily lit at night and delightful to wander around. For a much smaller and quieter option, consider Haus, next door to Schladming.

How to go

Stay at the four-star hotel Erzherzog Johann in Schladming from £610 per person with Crystal (0870 405 5047; www.crystalski.co.uk), including flights, car hire and half board.



Rohrmoos

Key facts

Slopes 750m to 2700m **Lifts** 85
Pistes 167km, 30% blue,
60% red, 10% black

Tourist office

0043 3687 23310
www.schladming-dachstein.at



Conducting on skis can be hard work

SALZBURGER SPORTWELT



The biggest region in Ski Amadé, Salzburger Sportwelt has two separate areas of slopes, and eight resorts that cater for everyone from pros to families

The slopes

The Flachau/Wagrain/Alpendorf/St Johann area is the largest in the region. It has rolling hills and some powerful lifts, and most pistes are fairly gentle, suiting intermediates well.

Zauchensee is the main resort in the second ski area. Its local north-facing slopes often have some of the best snow in the Ski Amadé region because of their height and orientation. There's also a good mix of easy and more taxing intermediate runs spreading into the slopes Zauchensee shares with Flachauwinkl and Kleinarl.

There are also four or five other, smaller, separate resorts in the region, including Eben, Filzmoos and Radstadt.

Where to stay

Flachau, a long, strung out chalet-style resort, is the best known in the region, and home to World Champion ski racer Hermann Maier. Or try Wagrain, a towny little place conveniently set in the centre of the lift system.

Zauchensee is a small, friendly, snowy place, at the foot of the other big linked area.

How to go

Stay at the four-star hotel Tirolerhof in Flachau from £690 per person with Made to Measure (01243 533333; www.mtmhols.co.uk), including flights, car hire and half board.

Key facts

Slopes 800m to 2000m **Lifts** 100
Pistes 350km, 34% blue,
54% red, 12% black

Tourist office

0043 6457 2929
www.salzburgersportwelt.at

Head to the Gastein region for challenging slopes, complemented by spas galore to revive aching muscles

The slopes

The villages of Bad Gastein and Bad Hofgastein share the region's main ski area of linked slopes which are spread over two big mountains. The slopes are mainly tough red runs, suiting confident intermediates best. If you're tiring, take a break at one of the many welcoming restaurants – such as the Aeroplanstadl above Bad Hofgastein (famous not just for its toilets set in a cavern but also its food and drink). Within the Gastein region, Sportgastein has a separate area of high, open slopes which generally have the best snow in sunny weather.

Over in the next valley from Gastein, the long, varied and relatively quiet

slopes of Dorfgastein link into those of Grossarl (officially the fifth region in Ski Amadé, but effectively part of Gastein because of the link).

Where to stay

If you really want the full-on spa experience, stay in Bad Gastein (enclosed in a narrow valley) or Bad Hofgastein (much more open, modern and spread out). Both have superb, recently modernised spa facilities with big pools and various saunas and steam facilities. Of the two, Bad Gastein is livelier at night; for a smaller, more unspoilt, rustic old village, try Dorfgastein.



Sportgastein

How to go

Inghams (020 8780 4433; www.ingham.co.uk) offers seven nights half board at the four-star Palace hotel (with thermal pool) in Bad Hofgastein from £550 per person, including flights and car hire.

GASTEIN & GROSSARL

Mühlbach



Key facts

Slopes 920m to 2000m **Lifts** 37
Pistes 150km, 35% blue, 55% red, 10% black

Tourist office

0043 6216 2020 27270; www.hochkoenig.at

In Hochkönig you'll find small picturesque villages, efficiently linked slopes for all levels and a large uncrowded ski area

The slopes

The region's main slopes, between Maria Alm and Mühlbach, are spread over several valleys and linked by lifts in both directions (except one way for a short distance, when there's a bus).

You'll find slopes for all standards here, including challenging red runs, ungroomed ski routes and excellent off piste. The main place to hunt down the pow is the huge bowl above Maria Alm, but there's also good stuff in the trees in several areas.

There are three other small, separate ski areas in the region, Hinterreit, Hochkeil and Natrun.

Where to stay

Set at one end of the main area of slopes, Maria Alm is one of

the largest and prettiest villages, boasting a splendid old church and a fair choice of bars and nightlife. Positioned more centrally, Hinterthal and Dienten are little more than unspoilt hamlets with a scattering of hotels but each has at least one lively après bar. Mühlbach, at the opposite end of the linked slopes, is a similar size to Maria Alm, offers a good choice of hotels and has a decent pub.

How to go

Stay in Hinterthal at the four-star Urslauerhof hotel from £585 per person, half board, including flights and car hire, with Elevation Holidays (0845 644 3578; www.elevationholidays.com).

HOCHKÖNIG

Key facts

Slopes 840m to 2650m
Lifts 47
Pistes 201km, 30% blue,
58% red, 12% black

Tourist office

0043 6432 33930
www.gastein.com



Getting steaming Bad Hofgastein style