Austria's Fab Four

Whether you're new to skiing or returning to the slopes after a season away, this winter four resorts in Austria's beautiful Tirol are calling your name

Austria



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Nestled in western Austria and bordered by Germany, Switzerland and Italy, Tirol is easily accessible from across Europe.

While the regional capital of Innsbruck has palaces, Baroque architecture and candy-hued homes like jars of Loveheart sweets, the snowy peaks that surround the city are the region's main draw.

When the sun is shining and the sky is azure, escape to the mountains to meet locals, sample regional cuisine and inhale the aroma of pine, spruce and larch on a skiing trip to remember.

Not sure where to go? Then take your pick from these four resorts.

Zillertal

Situated 50km east of Innsbruck, Zillertal is a delightful valley that's also easily accessible by public transport.

The Zillertal Superskipass grants access to about 40 bus routes to four ski areas: the Zillertal Arena, Hochzillertal-Hochfügen-Spieljoch, Mayrhofner Bergbahnen-Mountopolis and Ski and Glacier World Zillertal 3000, so you can travel sustainably. Valid from December to April, it also gives you free entry to 180 cable cars and lifts and 544km of slopes.

Once you've settled in the valley, learn the basics or improve existing skills at one of 25 ski schools, where magic carpets transport learners up gentle inclines. Children and beginners can practise stopping and turning and have fun with waves and curves at funslopes, while more advanced skiers explore the fun parks.

Zillertal's beginner slopes start at 630m and extend to 3,250m if you've got what it takes. Early birds can also take a morning gondola and be rewarded with empty, groomed slopes glistening in the first light of the day.

Families can take advantage of Zillertal's 28 childcare facilities, some of which accept three-month-old babies. Older children meanwhile can enjoy ice skating and sliding down slopes on tyres – guaranteed family fun.

With 460km of snowshoeing and winter hiking trails, 113km of cross country skiing tracks and 48km of toboggan runs – half of which are illuminated at night – there's always something to do in Zillertal.

SkiWelt Wilder Kaiser-Brixental

Comprised of nine ski resorts – Brixen im Thale, Ellmau, Going, Hopfgarten, Itter, Scheffau, Söll, Westendorf and Kirchberg – SkiWelt Wilder Kaiser-Brixental is one of Austria's largest ski areas.

It's also one of its greenest, as visitors are encouraged to arrive by public transport, and 16 reservoirs collect water pure enough to drink - reducing the need for electricity to purify it. The resort has also been using 100 per cent renewable hydro-electric power for more than 20 years.

With 270km of groomed slopes – including 114km blue and 120km red runs – there are routes for all abilities. Beginners can choose from 22 ski schools, while intermediates can ski in Austria's largest night skiing area.

Toddlers can have fun in the resort's childcare facilities – just one of the services that makes SkiWelt Wilder Kaiser-Brixental family-friendly. If your child is under three, parents can share a single lift ticket. Children up to 15 meanwhile can ski for free when one parent buys a ski pass valid for three days or more (8 to 22 December 2023 and 16 March to 1 April 2024). The whole family can have races at funparks, or watch each other on film recorded in Söll.

For a break from skiing, hurtle down toboggan runs day or night, explore 148km off cross country skiing trails and admire ice sculptures and igloos at Alpeniglu village, home to a fondue restaurant with tables made from ice. You can also cosy up inside one of 80 gourmet huts, or shop for handicrafts at Europe's highest Christmas market around Bergkaiser restaurant (1-2, 8-9, 15-16 December 2023).



@SkiWelt Wilder Kaiser Brixental, Tim-Marcour



@St Johann in Tirol, Mirja Geh

St. Johann in Tirol

Just 10 minutes east of SkiWelt Wilder Kaiser-Brixental by bus, this region has three ski resorts: St. Johann in Tirol, Kirchdorf and Erpfendorf.

With just 40km of slopes and 18 family-run inns, it's compact, which will suit families and visitors keen to interact with locals. By day two, you'll feel like one of the villagers.

If you're new to skiing, learn the ropes at one of six ski schools. Not skied for a while? It'll come back to you after a day or so, and once you're feeling more confident you can tackle a more demanding slope.

Families can practise together on easy slopes and take selfies with the area's mascot, Yappy Yapadu, then enjoy the indoor playground Murmis Kinderland in Kirchdorf.

When you need a break from skiing, make the most of St. Johann in Tirol's two toboggan runs, 170km cross country trails and 100km of winter hiking trails, which are best explored on a guided Segway or snowshoe tour under the moonlight. You can also ice skate, boulder or soak in Panorama bathing world. Craving more of a thrill? Then fly over snowy peaks in a hot air balloon, on a tandem paraglide or 530m Flying Fox wire.

After that, you'll be ready to eat – so try the local speciality, Tirolean dumplings, in Fischbachalm, or treat yourself to apple strudel at Alpine Inn Stanglalm.

Ski Juwel Alpbachtal Wildschönau

Sandwiched between Zillertal and the Kitzbühel Alps, Ski Juwel stretches across Alpbachtal and Wildschönau valleys.

Hospitable locals, traffic-free villages and 25 rustic huts create a tranquil ambience, so the area is particularly suitable for families and new skiers.

Beginners can learn at one of 10 ski schools, while intermediates can choose from 113km of slopes.

Mums and dads, make the most of the available childcare and hit the slopes, or cheer on your little ones as they learn new moves at children's ski schools in Niederau, Oberau and Auffach in the Wildschönau and Reith im Alpbachtal and Inneralpbach. Once they're up to speed they can do tricks at Alpbachtal or Wildschönau snow parks, tackle tunnels and waves on Wiedersberger Horn's funslope or hop on a ski carousel in the new Schatzberg Zwergenland in Auffach-Wildschönau. Alternatively, how does an obstacle course in Kinderland Juppi-Do in Reith im Alpbachtal sound?

You may wish to leave the toughest slopes on the Wiedersberger Horn for another time – at 2,128m above sea level, it's the area's highest mountain.

When you want a break from skiing or snowboarding, strap yourself into the alpine coaster Alpbachtaler Lauser-Sauser and hurtle 1.4km down the Wiedersberger Horn at up to 42km/h. There are toboggan runs at the Lanerköpfl in Niederau-Wildschönau and at the Schatzberg, as well as in Reith im Alpbachtal.

After a day in the mountains, warm up with comfort food such as *pressknödel* (cheese dumplings), *käsespätzle* (cheesy noodles) and *Brezensuppe*, a beef and pretzel soup served in Gipföhit at the Schatzberg, between Alpbachtal and Wildschönau. Innkeeper Maria at the rustic Böglalm in Alpbach serves *Kaiserschmarren* pancakes dusted in icing sugar.

SUSTAINABILITY ON THE SLOPES

Whichever resort you choose, help minimise your carbon footprint by arriving on public transport – which has the added bonus of giving you more time to mingle with locals and enjoy the scenery along the way. Eating local, organic produce is also a simple, delicious way to reduce food miles, while eco activities such as winter hiking and cross country skiing help keep Tirol green beneath its layers of snow.

If you want to go the extra mile, base yourself in SkiWelt Wilder Kaiser-Brixental, which has been powered by 100 per cent renewable energy for decades. No wonder it's won the Most Environmentally Friendly Ski Operation award since 2018. Brixen im Thale's Sonnenlift was the world's first solar-powered lift; the mountain restaurant Choralpe reuses heat from from two lifts, while snowmelt fills 17 ponds each spring, which is used to make snow.

St. Johann in Tirol is also proud of its eco credentials – and thanks to its successful bike box scheme, Kaiserbachtal nature conservation area and hydroelectric power plant, it's looking forward to receiving the government sustainability stamp of approval, the Austrian Ecolabel.

Doing your bit to protect Tirol's future means you – and your children – can return year after year to experience winter, the Austrian way.



@Ski Juwel Alpbachtal Wildschoenau