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OFF DUTY TRAVEL

A Ski and Spa Getaway That's a Trip Back in Time

This classic luxury spa hotel in the Austrian Alps is as charmingly old-fashioned as it gets, from fondue feasts to toboggan rides



Hotel Jagdhof Published Credit: Michael Huber/Relais & Chateaux PHOTO: MICHAEL HUBER/RELAIS & CHATEAUX

Dan Crane

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Is it your first visit to the hotel?” said a well-groomed man, towel loosely draped over his loins. The man, who appeared to be in his mid-60s, hadn’t broken a sweat; but he had broken the sauna’s silence. Given that my wife and I were also basically naked, it sounded not unlike a pickup line. A perceptive one: It was indeed our first day at the Jagdhof Spa Hotel in Neustift, Austria, when we found our way to the Wilderer sauna—one of 20 different “bathing experiences” in Vitality World, the Jagdhof’s vast spa complex. The man informed us he was

from Belgium and had been returning to the hotel every winter for the past 16 years. “Now I am here with my grandchildren.” he said, proudly. We soon understood why he kept coming back.

My wife and I had arrived at the Jagdhof on a whim. When planning a post-Christmas vacation, we knew we’d be departing from Yorkshire in northern England, where her family lives, and so our first inclination was to escape the inclement moors for warmer climes. Instead, I proposed we “lean into winter.” My wife ran with it: “I want a cozy cabin! I want fondue!” Above all, though, she craved a luxe spa. I said I wouldn’t mind a little skiing. Anticipating a week of intense Christmas overindulgence, we knew that we should sign up for a health retreat teeming with downward dogs and entirely devoid of carbs. But when we googled “Austrian spas,” the unstringent Jagdhof beckoned and we stumbled into the best vacation of our marriage.



The Spa Chalet. PHOTO: MICHAEL HUBER/RELAIS & CHATEAUX

After a half-hour shuttle from the Innsbruck airport, we were greeted warmly by the staff—the men in suits, the women in period dirndl. Hotel owner Armin Pfurtscheller, whose family opened the Jagdhof in 1977 and whose ruddy glow suggested untold hours in the sauna, welcomed us. Throughout our stay, he and his wife, Christina, could often be found in the bar or lobby chatting with guests, lending the place a folksy air.

Our spacious room was invitingly, simply decorated in traditional Tyrolean style, with carved oak paneling, a heated-floor bathroom, a balcony with a view of the daunting Stubai glacier 10 miles south. But why stay inside when you can ski on a glacier?

After donning our ski boots (heated overnight in ski lockers), we hopped in the free shuttle for the ride to the Stubai glacier, which offers an incredibly long ski season—from October to June. I grew up skiing in Colorado and, though the easily conquered Stubai terrain suffers by comparison (with only three black-diamond runs out of 35 total), I’ve never observed a landscape as remarkable as its jagged, rocky summit. From the Top of Tyrol viewing platform at an altitude of 10,532 feet, you can see all the way to the Dolomites. Just take care a gust of wind doesn’t hurl you down the mountain as a particularly aggressive breeze nearly did me.



Hotel Jagdhof Published Credit: Relais & Chateaux PHOTO: RELAIS & CHATEAUX

Ascending the mountain inside the high-speed gondola, I was transfixed by the sight of a mountain goat perched precariously on a cliff’s edge. Après ski, I mentioned this animal’s moxie to Stefan, the hotel’s affable bar manager, and he vanished. Moments later he returned with piquant slices of mountain goat sausage, which we chased with a local blackberry schnapps poured from a crudely labeled glass jug.

Heaven.

Another day, after spa treatments, we lunched at the hotel bar. “I’m eating truffle pasta in a bathrobe like some sort of sultan,” my wife texted her friend. Since the bar is en route from the spa to the guest rooms, many of our fellow sultans were lounging about in robes, sipping a local Gewürztraminer, as were we. The giddy gluttony spilled into other meals too. For dinner, the main restaurant, Hubertus Stube, serves a five-course meal that changes nightly. Every morning at the strudel-laden breakfast buffet, we were handed a daily newsletter suggesting activities such as snowshoeing, ice skating and tobogganing (exhilarating if terrifying, as it turns out).

One snowy night we dined at the convivial and warmly lit Hot Hat or “Tatarenhut,” where we feasted on fondue with a group of 14 other guests. Most evenings, we’d wander over to the piano lounge after dinner to hear campy renditions of songs like “Jump” by Van Halen. This was the Jagdhof’s particular take on wellness: informal, fun and luxurious in a seemingly effortless way. It all felt a bit like a time warp, but after a week of five-course meals, saunas and schnapps, I can assure you my wife and I felt very well indeed.

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