

To the mountains

Feeling the call of faraway snowy places? Our Travel Editor sought fresh air and freedom in two very different winter wonderlands.

Fat biking
in Gstaad

ON THE SLOPES

GSTAAD, SWITZERLAND

Legend has it that when God created Gstaad, he liked it so much he placed the palm of his hand down on it, territorially claiming it his own. And it is the ski valleys surrounding this mountain resort in which I found myself skiing after eight years off the slopes.

Today, Gstaad is the upmarket heart of this stunning region, bringing together alpine tradition with luxury and style. As Julie Andrews, a long-time chalet-owner here, puts it: 'Gstaad is the last paradise in a crazy world.' But it isn't all five-star hotels, designer boutiques and posh coffee shops – although you'll find them here, too. It's also a great spot for an unpretentious winter getaway.

The first stop on our trip illustrated just that: Rinderberg Swiss Alpine Lodge – a mountain lodge, 1,486 metres and a snowmobile ride away from the charming town of Zweisimmen. With its cosy interiors, comfy beds and prime location, it's the perfect base for skiing and hiking – and is right next to the middle station of the Rinderbergbahn mountain railway.

Skiing was why we were there, though. And, as someone whose last skiing holiday ended in a trip down the mountain in a leg cast, I was apprehensive to say the least. Luckily, I was in good hands, and had a one-on-one, all-day ski lesson with the lovely Mike – an experienced instructor from Skischule Gstaad. As I moved from snow-plough to something resembling parallel skiing through the day, I rediscovered the joy of being up high. That cold-air-on-face feeling of freedom as you whoosh down the mountain soon came back in all its glory. At the end of the day I was exhausted but happy, itching to get back on the slopes again.

Our next stay was up higher still, around 2,000 metres above sea level, in fact, at Iglu-Dorf Gstaad. Nestled discretely on the mountainside, above the chalet village of Saanenmöser, this 'alfresco hotel' isn't for comfort-seekers. With temperatures remaining at

around 0°C, its ornate ice-sculpture beds and fully-stocked bar do however offer a little slice of icy luxury. We were greeted with hot chocolate upon arrival, before embarking on an invigorating snow-shoe hike at dusk – a challenge for the legs after a day's skiing! We returned to a traditional Swiss fondue, complete with fur blankets and glühwein to keep us warm. The rest of the evening was spent under a carpet of stars in the hot tub. Gstaad's motto of 'Come up, slow down' never felt so apt. After a while, I reluctantly hopped out of the hot tub, running through the icy air to the sauna, before wrapping up for the night ahead in my igloo bedroom.

I woke the next morning after a refreshing and surprisingly deep night's sleep in my thermal sleeping bag. We grabbed a coffee and headed down the mountain for breakfast at Romantik Hotel Hornberg – a feast of local cheeses, cured meats, fluffy scrambled eggs and an impressive tea selection. All this set us up for our final day of cross-country skiing and winter biking on 'fat bikes', which turned out to be much harder than normal skiing and more fun than normal cycling, respectively. I flew home the next day, wondering when I could return again to this snowy land of activity and adventure.

Rooms at Rinderberg Swiss Alpine Lodge start at £107, huettenzauber.ch. Stays at Iglu-Dorf Gstaad start at £123, iglu-dorf.com





IN THE SPA

SPA-HOTEL JAGDHOF, AUSTRIA

Just half an hour from Innsbruck Airport, at the bottom of the Stubai Valley, is the majestic SPA-Hotel Jagdhof, a five-star Tyrolean lodge. Surrounded by more than 80 glaciers and 100 peaks, the hotel has been in the Pfurtscheller family for over two generations – growing from a humble mountain café to one of Austria’s top spa destinations. It was here, on a wintry weekend in December, that I arrived from London for a few days of indulgent me-time.

I was welcomed with glühwein in the hotel’s homely, wood-panelled bar area. Looking around at its roaring fires and burgundy leather furnishings, I could be forgiven for thinking I’d arrived in a private hunting residence. Yet, this traditional charm belies the fact that Jagdhof is also home to a 3,000-square-metre spa, complete with an underground grotto of salt rooms and saunas, as well as its newer addition of chill-out and yoga rooms, with crisper Scandinavian lines and ambient lighting.

It quickly became clear that the Pfurtscheller family are purveyors of The Good Life. Everything at Jagdhof is engineered for relaxation and restoration. Guests pad around in fluffy white robes, reading and sipping tea in-between treatments, and I was soon to ➡

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Outdoor whirlpool

‘I soon noted the “unrobed” area of the sauna and – despite initially feeling coy – found it the most relaxing, peaceful place’

spa rooms to choose from – each offering a different experience, there was no chance of getting bored. I soon noted the ‘unrobed’ area of the sauna and – despite initially feeling coy – found it the most relaxing, peaceful place.

But it isn’t all about pampering at Jagdhof; it is a food and drink destination, too – and for a reason. From its à la carte restaurant, Huberts Stube, serving local and regional fare, to the award-winning 20,000-bottle-strong wine cellar – it’s easy to see why it remains the hotel of choice for so many international bon vivants. My seven-course meal proved exactly why, with dishes such as Arctic char of Stubai, pea and onion, followed by sheep’s yoghurt, gewürztraminer and cherry. If you’re lucky there may even be venison from the hotel’s own grounds on the menu. It’s this mix of local touches and faultless luxury that makes the hotel so special. From warm hospitality and fine dining, to top-end treatments and cosy saunas, my time at SPA-Hotel Jagdhof felt like a wellbeing retreat with a heart – and wine.

Rooms at Relais & Châteaux SPA-Hotel Jagdhof start at €218, hotel-jagdhof.at. It is also a member of Niche Destinations, a collection of distinctive establishments in the Austrian Tirol and beyond, niche-destinations.com

follow suit. My introduction to the luxury spa menu was impressive, and I was lucky enough to enjoy a jSPA REN signature treatment in the private spa suite. It was luxuriously long, at 120 minutes, yet felt like one of those time-stopping experiences where all concepts of minutes and hours dissipate. It started with a glass of fizz and a bath soak, before a slow Moroccan sugar body scrub (which left me as soft as a baby). Next was some quiet time in the steam cabin, followed by the most tension-melting massage I’ve experienced. The scent of Moroccan rose wafted throughout, and lulled me into a deep trance – with the body wrap and head massage at the end, sending me off into a content sleep.

My bedroom was clad in mountain pine, with a vast bed, arched ceilings and a postcard-perfect view of the Tyrolean peaks and Stubai Glacier. I spent a morning hiking the local area with my hosts – through the snow-topped trees, up the slopes and down through the river valleys. Just breathing in the crisp mountain air was enough to lift the spirits. I returned to the hotel with a cold nose and rosy cheeks, ready to dedicate an afternoon to the spa. And, with over 20 different



Private suite