

## Austrian Alps a heavenly haven for hikers, bikers and sightseers

By **ANNE KAZEL-WILCOX**

SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

Updated: 12:57 p.m. Friday, Nov. 25, 2011

Posted: 10:27 a.m. Friday, Nov. 25, 2011

“You have it in your heart,” said my Austrian guide, Peppo, regarding Kitzbühel. “If you are from here, you can never move.”

I had just descended from hiking glorious alpine meadows — where the dewdrops of glaciers linger amid edelweiss and alpine roses; the air is so clear it’s almost ethereal, and only the soft tinkling of cowbells breaks the silence.

It was summer in the Tyrolean Alps; to Peppo, like heaven on Earth. But come winter, Kitzbühel rings differently with the swoosh of skiers, the beating of hooves in snow-polo fields and the bling of Russian oligarchs who have discovered the allure of this posh resort town.

When the snow falls, Kitzbühel beckons as one of the most elite ski resorts. But the entire Tyrolean region is rich with natural beauty — from Kitzbühel to Innsbruck to the Oetz Valley —and one season seems more stunning than the next in these Alps for all seasons.

Tirol is situated in the western part of Austria. It’s bordered by Germany to the north, Italy to the south, and Vienna and Hungary due east for a confluence of influences on the culture, cuisine and lifestyle of the region. At the center is picturesque Innsbruck, the largest city in the region, where I began my alpine journey.

Innsbruck has twice hosted Winter Olympic games, so it’s fitting that its high, swooping ski jump stands out as a landmark amid the mountain scenery. There, decks offer sweeping views of the city marked by baroque spires, with charming chalets tucked into the nooks of surrounding mountains. Nearby is the Panorama Museum, new in 2011, with its circular walls wrapped with an enormous century-old painting depicting a great Hapsburg battle. Featured in it is an ancient monastery still located down the hill where, amusingly, I had just witnessed dozens of schoolchildren circling in song led by monks in white flowing robes — like a scene from the Sound of Music brought current with them chanting Singing in the Rain.

More sedentary were those standing guard in a church by Innsbruck’s Old Town. The “Black Men” are 28 enormous bronze statues designed by Emperor Maximilian as a giant funeral procession of great leaders he envisioned at his funeral, King Arthur included. The “procession” is a daunting artistic feat. Adjacent is the not-to-be missed Tyrolean Folk Art Museum, which sheds light on the region’s culture and customs including historical rooms depicting centuries past. Innsbruck is filled with charming offerings, but even a simple walk through Old Town, with its bustling shops selling dirndls and lederhosen, and pretzels and schnitzel, makes for a delightful day. To see the more modern side of Innsbruck, I head above the chic shops of Rathaus Galerien to 360°, a glassed-in lounge with stunning views.

Then I venture west to the picturesque Oetz Valley. I join a morning hike up the mountains, stopping for a hearty breakfast in a hut for offerings of homemade cheeses and sausages. Even though it’s shy of noon, I also quickly learn that it’s always “schnapps-o’clock somewhere” in Tirol, where you will find liqueurs infused with local fruits for continued hiking inspiration.

More rigorous is the new Area 47, open spring through fall. This park for adrenaline seekers features water slides, a freestyle waterski and snowboard ramp, and canyoning and climbing among other daring options. I survive a high-ropes course, barely, above the Inns River.