

ST. ANTON, IMAGE  
COURTESY OF ST. ANTON  
AM ARLBERG AND  
WOLFGANG BURGER

# PISTE PERFECT

St Anton is fast-becoming the new go-to winter destination for Europe's glamorous elite, thanks to a winning mix of phenomenal ski schools, cinematic good looks and some of the best off-piste skiing in the world

WORDS: LEO BEAR

“Where did you learn to ski... Uzbekistan?” quips Christopher, my handsome ski guide, after watching me wiggle my way down a short run — skis on for the first time in twelve months. Not exactly the feedback I was hoping for, but as I squint into the sun and readjust my mirrored goggles, I remind myself that this is St Anton after all — or St Man-ton — and these mountains

weren't made for wimps. The latest instalment of the Bond series, *Spectre*, was filmed here and, somehow, picturing Daniel Craig slaloming through pine trees, pistol in hand, spurs me on. I vow to impress my smug guide by the close of the day; girls can be secret agents, too, you know.

Chris is taking me on a whirlwind tour of the Arlberg region, one of the largest ski areas in Austria, with 270km of pistes circling St Anton, ➔



→ Lech, Zug, St Christoph and Oberlech – together nicknamed the Weiss Ring (or white ring). Keen to keep up, I soon lose track of which mountain we're on and which lift we've taken, but who cares? I'm having the time of my life and I've got a point to prove. Several hundred feet below us, my other half is mastering the sweet art of the snowplough with one of my taskmaster's colleagues. We get regular updates via text: "He's doing well." "He's got good balance." "We're still at lunch."

Both instructors hail from the Ski School Arlberg, a world-famous establishment that has been coaxing adrenalin junkies to ever-higher altitudes since 1921. It turns out I'm ready to graduate from blue slopes to red by 11am. Not bad going.

Phenomenal ski schools, cinematic good looks and some of the best off-piste skiing in the world – no wonder St Anton is luring an ever more glamorous European elite. Duncan Robertson from the chalet operator Bramble Ski has certainly noticed a shift over the past few years: "St Anton is becoming more and more appealing to the discerning seasonaire. It's attracting people who want to experience super-luxe services as well as the amazing powder of the Alberg region." So much so, that the company has recently launched a ski instructor concierge service to look after its guests both on and off the piste. Ahead of guests' arrival, they'll do the usual things like sort out ski passes, arrange ski equipment and stoke a roaring fire, but as well as having someone on hand with insider knowledge of

the top restaurants and bars in St Anton, they also get a fully qualified ski instructor.

In nearby Lech, Haute Montagne, another snazzy chalet company, has introduced a week-long James Bond experience involving Aston Martins, paragliding, heli-skiing, and a lair of a chalet that sleeps 10 and comes with a professional chef.

The cool macho vibe doesn't stop there. In town, you can forget Hermès or Louis Vuitton, St Anton's Dorfstrasse is lined with speciality shops selling schnapps, saucisson and ski goggles. Far from the fur-clad fashion parades of Gstaad and St Moritz, here you'll find simple guest lodges, friendly cafés and appetite-satisfying steakhouses more akin to something in Utah or Canada. But luxury isn't far away.

Hotel Tannenhof on the outskirts of town has been quietly and single-handedly redefining Tyrolean hospitality. Back in 2011, dynamic Austrian duo Judith Volker and Axel Bach snapped up an unremarkable 23-bedroom hotel and transformed it into a sumptuous seven-suite retreat. Each room comes with an oak-panelled living room, contemporary fireplace and mini-bar the size of a wardrobe crammed full of homemade treats. Suite seven on the top floor is the largest. "It has enough storage for 14 days," explains Judith, "so it's ideal for guests coming in by private jet who have a lot of luggage."

While Judith looks after incoming VIPs and runs the day-to-day affairs, her partner Axel spins the real magic – overseeing everything in the kitchen. With a menu that changes daily,



#### THE ESSENTIALS

Rooms start at £1,200 a night at Hotel Tannenhof ([hoteltannenhof.net](http://hoteltannenhof.net)). Leo flew with SWISS to Innsbruck. For more about St Anton visit: [stantonamarlberg.com](http://stantonamarlberg.com)

meals are a proper adventure here, whether it be boiled eggs with chives at breakfast, delivered in a glass cup sculpted like a sea urchin, or dehydrated crows crest with sorrel tuber and parsley jus at dinner. Every dish is as nutritional as it is imaginative, with ingredients sourced from producers in nearby Landeck and Imst, and wine from a collection curated by Paula Bosch, Germany's best sommelier, served in Zalto glasses hand-blown in Austria, naturally.

Best of all, with a maximum of 16 guests at any one time, the hotel has a lovely intimate feel and service is nothing short of spectacular. Guests are assigned their own private driver for the duration of their stay to get them to and from the slopes – or, in my husband's case, to cart him back from lunch in time for a large slice of apfelstrudel. There's also a delightfully serene spa, where you can indulge in a silver quartz massage, or warm your bones in a rustic cabin-style sauna surrounded by snow.

When out on the piste, Hospiz Alm provides an ideal setting for lunch. Renowned for its Tyrolean wooden frontage and delectable steaks cooked on an open fire, there's no better place to down skis. Staff in lederhosen and bowties charge around taking orders from what can be up to 300 people at any one sitting, spread across a vast sun-drenched deck, but those in-the-know will book a table upstairs, where window boxes double as Champagne buckets and you have a clean view of incoming totty swooping down the slope.

Hidden underneath the restaurant is a former World War II bunker overflowing with

magnums of €80,000 Grand Cru – some reserved up to a year in advance by parties who return every year. No need to worry about a clumsy (ski boot) clamber down the stairs to sniff out said vintage labels, a nifty slide whisks you there in seconds... Genius.

Another must-visit is Museum, a charming restaurant-cum-exhibition set in a snowy glade just off the Galzig piste. Built in 1912 and surrounded by fir trees, it is a vision of old-world Austria, and behind its heavy doors lies a decadent menu of classic cuisine. Afterwards, patrons take a glass of port upstairs with them to pore over old ski maps, 1920s paraphernalia and portraits of the great downhill racers of yesteryear. It's all terribly civilised and one can learn a lot from this small museum, but to get a real feel for this terrific little town, you need to join the locals for a moonlit spin down St Anton's epic toboggan run. Schnapps is essential to steady the nerves – even the most courageous of 007 types have crumbled on its twisty-turny icy lanes. My husband and I decided to give it a try on our last night and were unceremoniously flung off our toboggans at nearly every corner. Pride bruised again. Plenty of laughs, though.

Thankfully, the toboggan run comes to a halt about 20 feet from the back doors of Hotel Tannenhof, where you can bet your Moncler jacket there'll be someone waiting with a hot chocolate and a cashmere blanket. Take that, James Bond. ☑