

The Lakes District of Salzkammergut, Austria

By Peggy Newland

The lake just outside my open veranda is turquoise and rippled by breezes coming off the Ellmaustein Peak as I listen to an actual Austrian cuckoo send melodic calls to the spruce forests of Fuschl, one of the lake-dotted villages of Salzkammergut. Just east of Salzburg and a world away from busy sidewalks and touring groups is a landscape that gives pause, allows calm, and offers escape to lakes, peaks, and “healing water” villages. Salzkammergut is known as the “lakes district” and with this being Austria, abundant mountains surround these turquoise gems; a picture-perfect zone of happiness.

I’ve been staying at Rosewood Schloss Fuschl, a castle turned estate-style resort, for two days, and have already watched a maypole being cut, decorated with bows, garlands, flowers, and toured Mahler’s composing hut in Steinbach am Attersee. I’ve dined on the lakefront at Rosewood Schloss Fuschl and at Beletage Groller on Austria’s deepest lake in Traunsee. Although I could stare out the window all day here at Rosewood Schloss Fuschl, visit the extensive spa, take another dip in the “refreshing” lake, or nap in feather blankets and multiple feather pillows, I have plans to hike with artists and join in for “open air” art installations at the summit of Schafberg overlooking Lake Wolfgangsee.

I meet up with artists in St. Wolfgang who have come to create new works during week-long residencies at local inns with ART Circle Austria. We take the SchafbergBahn, Austria’s steepest and oldest cog railways (operating since 1893) from the turquoise lake village up to the jagged peaks and flowered meadows of Schafberg. Being with these artists is an intercultural kaleidoscope of conversations about creating contemporary works in nature, the art scene, collaborations, and there’s laughter as we all help carry paints, buckets of brushes, easels and empty canvases along the twisting trails lining the summit. The air is crisp, the sun is warm, and the canvases soon fill with color as artists perch on ledges, precipices, within crevices, and each creation is a unique take on the panorama, the interpretation of snow on Alps, lakes, the undulating mountains.

That night, we toast the artists, enjoying local wines and cheeses at a summit hut, and then we descend to St. Wolfgang for a classic Austrian dinner at Schmankerlstube Berau.



Bad Ischl

Courtesy photo



Peggy at The Eternal Wall

Courtesy photo

Back at Rosewood Schloss Fuschl, I keep the windows open and dream of summit paintings as waves from the lake echo quietly below.

I have the most colorful breakfast of local berries, homemade granola and yogurt, fresh breads, and made-to-order smoothies, before hiking along the shores of Lake Fuschl. I pass through deep forest glades and hidden coves offering private swimming beaches and then meet up with Peter Lev at the castle fishery. We jump on a Fuschlerin, or traditional sailing boat, and glide across the lake to the shores of Fuschl village, where there just happens to be a wine festival. An Austrian Blaskapelle group entertains us with polkas as we toast to sunny skies and lakeside views, and I meet up with locals decked out in lederhosen and dirndls. Peter tells me of the hiking trails and cycling pathways surrounding this town as we dine on lake salmon sandwiches and potato salad.

After the festivities, I head over to Bad Ischl to hike the mountains and of course, enjoy the “healing waters”. Hotel Grand Elisabeth is situated in a quiet neighborhood close to the historic center, and it’s surrounded by wooden gabled cottages, timbered villas, a tiered yellow symphony concert hall, and flowered gardens with fountains. I stroll through Kurpark and over to the esplanade along River Traun and decide to have a glass of wine at a local riverside cafe. Across the river, Mount Katrin rises on one side, the wooden lookout tower on Mount Siriuskogel on the other, as the sun sets. I return to the hotel for dinner at the Grande Liberte’s outdoor garden and have pickled vegetables, beef broth with beet root, and cappelletti with spinach. Dessert is a plum compote.

My room is quiet, with feather quilts and feather pillows, and I sleep with the windows open.

The next morning, I head to the hills by taking the Katrin Seilbahn cable car up to myriads of trails that wind through flowered meadows, past distant lakes, and along ridges. I hike along Seenblick-Wanderung for views over the seven lakes of Salzkammergut and finish at an alm, or rustic alpine cafe, and enjoy a local pilsner and knackerwurst with other hikers. On the walk back to the village, I wander through Sisipark, a natural parkland of lush paths

through meadows, past streams, and picnicking huts, and then discover a hidden church on a hillside of gardens, Kalvarienbergkirche. Wooden benches line meditative paths past wooden carvings and daffodils as the church bell tolls. My final explorations are the vast grounds of Kaiserpark and Marmorschlossl, where the emperor and empress “summered.” I wander through ornate gardens with cherubic fountains, mirrored pavilions, and twisting, woodland trails.

After a long day of hiking, I make a stop (a long stop) at Eurothermen Resort and enjoy various saunas, steam rooms, garden dozing lounges, swimming pools, and deep relaxation. I almost forget to wake up for dinner back at the hotel. I dine on grilled salmon with pea, chorizo, cucumber and enjoy a glass of Grüner Veltliner on the patio before calling it a night.

I meet up with a local guide, Matthias, to hike Ewige Wand, or the Eternal Wall, in Bad Goisern. We hike through alpine neighborhoods, forest glens, and farmers’ fields near Himmelbauer and eventually amble along the cliffside ledge of a sheer rock face. We are rewarded with panoramic views of the Dachstein Alps and the verdant lake valleys near Hallstatt. Upon returning to Bad Goisern, we find Cafe Backerei Konditorei for an early dinner in the gardens.

I, of course, head back to Eurothermen spa, for a last-night-in-Austria relaxation sauna and swim.

Salzkammergut is the spring fling that you need: lakeside views, mountain hikes, friendly locals, wine and art festivals, elegant hotels, and spas that will melt what’s left over from winter. I’m returning with a bicycle.



if you go

Rosewood Schloss Fuschl. www.rosewoodhotels.com
A five-star lakeside retreat in Fuschl, with views of mountains and turquoise waters. The spa is legendary, and the grounds extensive for hiking, swimming, and sailing. Rooms are luxurious with marble bathrooms.

Hotel Grand Elisabeth. www.grand-elisabeth.at
Perfectly located near Bad Ischl town center. Surrounded by gardens, mountains, and historic neighborhoods. Spa with pool on site. Huge breakfast buffet.