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Why we should all be more Austrian about autumn

In the Tyrol, September is about embracing the last of the long days and drinking good wine

By Anna Selby

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Das Glück ist ein Vogerl

Wir sind Rückzugsort für jeden egal ob alleine oder zu zweit oder mit der gesamten Familie

Tillga Glück

Autumn might be fast approaching, but that doesn't mean it's time to batten down the hatches and head indoors just yet – particularly not if you opt for a short break in [Austria](#), where at this time of year everyone is up in the [mountains hiking](#), mountain biking and, of course, foraging.

And there are myriad reasons to do just that. Austria does autumn colour extremely well (it's not all pine forests in the Alps), and there are nuts, berries, herbs and, most prized of all at this time of year, [mushrooms](#). We Brits tend to be rather cautious when it comes to fungi, but it's in the Austrian DNA to go picking chanterelles in the woods. Indeed, up in the mountain forest above Pitztal, I came across one man with an entire sackful.



At Weincafé in Arzl, sommelier Fabian Neururer brings grapes back to his cellar from other Austrian regions to mature, blend and bottle | CREDIT: Weincafé

I was walking with the owners of the Weincafé in Arzl. The fact that there is a wine café in the Tyrol at all is interesting because this is one of the Austrian regions where vines don't grow. However, sommelier Fabian Neururer buys the first pressings in the Austrian regions where grapes do grow, and brings them back to his cellar to mature, blend and bottle for hotels and restaurants in Austria and beyond. (In fact, you can make your own blend and design your label with Fabian if you're feeling very thirsty – 600 bottles minimum).

Hiking up mountains is itself a thirsty business, so we stopped off at Fabian's family hunting lodge – actually, a tiny wooden hut with four bunk beds, a wood-fired range and an outside spring for water. Members of the family emerged, benches and a table were carried outside, a bottle of Schnapps was produced (and those chanterelles), and we had an impromptu picnic in the mountain sunshine.



I tried a spot of foraging myself in the lush, green meadows of Obsteig, the highest village in the nearby Mieming Range. This is a meadow, though, that seems to have hardly any grass. No chemicals are used on these pastures and as a result they are filled with wildflowers and herbs.

I was out picking ribwort – something most English lawn lovers would probably be swift to root out – but we were taking it back to use as a flavouring for the gnocchi I would be cooking with Elfi in her outside kitchen at the Hotel Stern. This kind of foraging is known here, rather wonderfully, as a “Mundraubtour” – literally, a mouth-robbering tour.



There's plenty to keep guests of all ages entertained at Hotel Stern | CREDIT: Hotel Stern

The Stern is a family hotel in every sense – run by the family as a hotel specifically for families with young children – and there's been an inn here since 1509. You won't find children here lounging in front of screens. They are all out hiking, biking, riding the hotel's tiny ponies and, should it rain, there's a massive indoor jungle gym and pool.

It wasn't just the kids who were active, either. The great Austrian outdoors is for all ages – I was reliably informed that many Austrians ski into their 80s and 90s, as well as being regular mountain walkers. If, however, these comparatively gentle outdoor pursuits aren't enough of a challenge, there is Area 47, close to the Mieminger Plateau, an outdoor playground for adults with everything from caving to white water rafting, high rope courses to the "Cannonball Chute" – not, I suspect, for those of a nervous disposition.



Tyrol's mountains are teeming with wildlife come autumn | CREDIT: Alamy Stock Photo

Personally, though, I am with the Austrians on this one: what's not to love about finding yourself in tranquil and beautiful natural surroundings in the early autumn? The population of the Tyrol rejoice in its steep alpine meadows, pretty villages, and snow-topped peaks (the first snow has arrived in early September and, from the middle of the month, you can even go skiing on the glacier). The mountain forests are positively teeming with wildlife, too. I spotted roebuck, wild goats and a fine herd of deer in just a few hours.

The cuisine born in these mountains – with their long cold winters and short hot summers – has remained pretty much unchanged over decades, and where its fine cheeses, speck (ham) and wurst (sausage) are concerned, centuries. It's a place where the mountains make farming on an industrial scale impossible. So, the old methods remain as do the grasses and herbs in the meadows and the old grains, some so so ancient that, when you stroll round Innsbruck's daily farmers' market, you find Ur-bread is the norm.



Expect to gorge on plenty of meat and cheese during any trip to Austria | CREDIT: Alpbachtal Tourismus

The name references the ancient civilisation of Ur (now in Iraq) because the grains used in this bread are pretty ancient themselves. Often they are made from rye, or spelt, a grain far older than wheat, unprocessed, filling and super-tasty. It's just about as far as you can get from the supermarket sliced white.

There is plenty of hearty fare in the Tyrol – gnocchi, dumplings (flavoured with spinach, cheese, herbs), rosti potatoes, apfel strudel, Sachertorte. Many people in the mountains buy their food directly from the farmers (as do most of the supermarkets in Innsbruck) and villages have honesty boxes where farmers leave produce and their customers leave their money in the box.

Sourcing your food was the norm in Austria long before the term was even coined. In fact, given how sourcing has become so popular with the rise and rise of food tourism, it seems surprising that this is one European cuisine that has been forgotten despite ticking all the foodie boxes. Seasonal – tick; regional – tick; authenticity – tick, tick, tick!



Be prepared to forage for your dinner in Tyrol

Strolling around the historic Tyrol capital, Innsbruck, you find speciality food shops everywhere. There’s Speckeria (who knew there were so many varieties of bacon?) and Kroll (strudel heaven). There are, too, an increasing number of restaurants now transforming their exceptional local produce with real culinary flair.

Oniriq, a very cool contemporary space in the heart of Innsbruck, produces an enviable tasting menu (the sorrel ice cream is not to be missed), while up in Pitztal, at the Puitalm, there were salads scattered with wild flowers, rabbit casserole and the most delicate of potato soups.

So let’s all do as the Austrians do this autumn – take long bracing walks in the long-shadowed sunshine, indulge in good wine, and feast on the spoils of the season. And where better to do so, than in the Tyrol?

Essentials

Anna Selby was a guest of [Innsbruck Tourismus](#), [Tirol Tourist Board](#) and [Wein Neururer](#), which has a three-night stay for two from £420, including a wine tasting and accommodation in an apartment with valley views, a hot tub and private terrace.

[Hotel Stern](#) has a week-long stay for two adults and two children from £1,814, including half board, kids club and mountain activity programme. Available until November 5 2023, and when the hotel re-opens for Christmas.

[Easyjet](#) flies from London Gatwick to Innsbruck up to three days a week in October, from £22 one-way.

Are you planning to visit Tyrol, or anywhere else in Austria this autumn? Let us know in the comments below

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