



Mountain highs

How do you turn a family of urban couch potatoes into hiking, yodelling, muesli-eating von Trapps? **Anne McElvoy** packs her knapsack and heads to Austria's Kinderhotel to find out

We went to an Austrian children's hotel for our holiday, a revelation that elicits a mixture of sympathy and puzzlement from our more stylish friends. Almost everyone asked why and the true answer is that, like Withnail, we found ourselves 'gone on holiday by accident'. We had been looking for a child-friendly

hotel in Mallorca but, thanks to the random wonders of Google, ended up looking at a Kinderhotel in the mountains above Salzburg.

In the deep dark of midnight two weeks before departure, it didn't look like a bad way to entertain three under-tens whose fondness for the kids' clubs of the Mediterranean is declining as they get older and stropier. As a veteran au pair in Germany myself, I was aware that the local tendency is to treat small creatures as the centre of the parental world. This scares British working mothers, who favour a regime of benign neglect. In German-speaking countries, though, there is a far higher number of educated stay-at-home mothers, who invest their prodigious mental energy into child rearing, while we scramble our brains at work and thaw out M&S suppers.

So when I had previously swapped tales of our family holidays with German friends, ours would go, 'Found a hotel with a nice kids' club and a very good-looking Slovakian tennis coach'; theirs would start, 'Cycled around the Matterhorn, did a bit of white-water rafting, hiked in the Black Forest'. Or in one memorable case from former East German buddies: 'Drove our Trabant all the way to the Caucasus...' You will understand, then, why we never elected to join forces. However, two medium-size boys and a small pouting girl demand more activity than frazzled parents can reasonably provide. And the Kinderhotel in Zell am See sounded like a very pleasant boot camp, with a kids' club and a bouncy castle, so off we headed, rucksacks on our backs, to the alpine uplands.

The hotel is just a couple of hours outside Salzburg, all floral window boxes and tidy pavements. Some ski resorts in summer

Edition: 01
Date: 25-09-2009
Type: General Consumer
Frequency: 300 Per Year
Circulation: 424177
Page: 48,49,50

ArticleId: 27929998



can look a little forlorn but Zell seems perfectly at ease with itself - prosperous (judging by the local airfield and Porsche garage), but defiantly unchic. Kinderhotels are the brainchild of hotelier Siggie Neuschitzer, who realised that a new generation of German-speaking parents had joined their Anglo-Saxon peers in



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wanting time off, so you find the franchise, at different price levels, across Austria and southern Germany.

We were greeted by a vast statue of Pongo, the totemic resort monkey of the hotel, which was worrying. Kinderhotels assume a fair amount of organised activity but, to my mind, this beats the saddy kids' club elsewhere, where there are never enough interested children and hopeless staff supervise zombie pre-teens hogging the computers. Instead, our four-year-old was promptly swept up into the Pongo club, to perform the hokey cokey in German – the Pongo-Tanz. 'All jump to the left,' a person (I presume) in a large monkey costume shouted. She immediately jumped right. And so on, because, as she sharply discerned, 'they speak a different language'. But the good-hearted Austrian staff do try their best and shout parallel commands in English: the older children get used to reading film subtitles for their James Bond fix, which I like to think of as beginners' German, next stop Goethe.

It's jolly Austrian. Everyone is achingly polite and at precisely 6pm the pool empties, as if an alarm had rung: very convenient if you're British and therefore by definition inclined to do things at times other people don't.

The compensation is grade A facilities that put the big children's resort providers in the shade. The only reason more Brits don't chance it is that we are too averse to Teutonic travels for our own good – Hitler's Berchtesgaden is just down the road if you want a history lesson.

The children tried pony school, sailing, BMX bikes and water polo. When there were a spare five minutes, they begged

to cycle round the lovely Lake Zeller below the hotel. *Jawohl*: our London couch (or rather, computer) potatoes were turning into the new generation of von Trapps. Indeed, so thoroughly alpine and healthy is it all that when I sang 'Doe a deer' while riding along the

grassy paths (cycle lanes everywhere), they joined in voluntarily.

In case you're thinking it sounds a little hard going, there is a decent spa, and yoga and Pilates for the parents – just as well once we settled into the hearty routine: a vast breakfast with fresh breads, cheeses and frothy coffees, buffet lunches and really excellent dinners.

But no one said the Austrians were into nouvelle cuisine. There was enough veal to make Sarah Brown boycott the place and some thoroughly retro cordon bleu touches. My favourite dish was delicious Austro-Hungarian Palatschinken (pancakes) with blueberries and chocolate sauce. You'd be hard pressed not to find something you (or any fussy offspring) really like on the menu: the food is a real selling point for a family hotel. We couldn't help noticing that Germanic children are very quiet compared to ours and we marvelled at tables of toddlers spooning up their yoghurt in near

silence. We drank Austrian wine and, for upwards of £20 a bottle, drank very well indeed. The other delight of the Kinderhotel is that once you've paid your whack, the extras are very modest: nothing is extraordinarily expensive or a shock.

The kids' club works through lunchtime and can occupy smaller children for most of the day if you fancy an excursion with your older von Trapps – or indeed without them. We headed up a nearby glacier, largely by ski lift, and then scrambled towards the chilly heights and finally whitewater-rafted on a clear river with one of those scarily hearty professionals: 'Now I am going to throw the children into the current, but it will bring them up on the other side. OK?' Err, if you say so.

Back at Camp Kinder, we were in mild trouble for turning up to dinner late; they called us at 8.20pm to make sure nothing was wrong. I had forgotten after years out of the Germanosphere, how late we Brits eat, or rather how early they do – but you don't argue with a waitress in a dirndl. Ten to nine is absolutely Schluss here, which makes dinner a bit of a rush, but

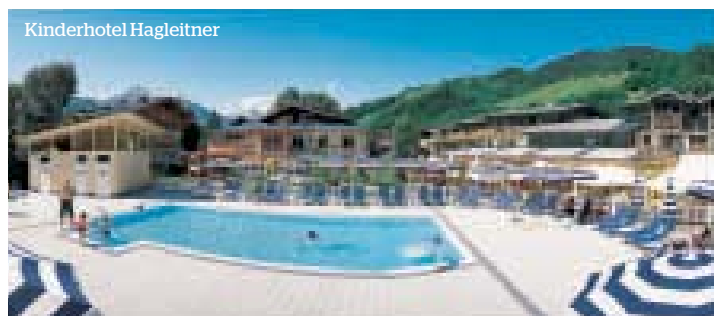
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you can herd your youngsters off to watch *Star Wars* auf Deutsch and collapse with digestifs on the terrace.

On the last day, our own small Aryan said she really wanted to do the Pongo-Tanz again. 'And I didn't know,' added her brother, 'that James Bond is Austrian.' Well, now we do.



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Lake Zeller

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