



Above: Panorama from the top of the Valluga, the highest peak in St. Anton.

Right: The Arlberg may be known as the cradle of modern alpine skiing, but the Nordic skiing is also exceptional.

# Skiing Austria's Arlberg

A modern sport with Old World charm

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

No matter how good a skier I've become, there are still some slopes that get my attention. One of those runs is called the Valluga Nord, which starts atop the Valluga (9,222 feet), the tallest peak in St. Anton, Austria. The elevation may sound tame compared to many ski areas in the Rockies, but when I stepped off the tiny cable car at the top of this pointed pinnacle, my breath came in choppy gasps. The immense Alpen vista was indeed breathtaking, with majestic white-mantled peaks in every direction, but the real rush came when I looked down. »



From top: Historic cabin in Lech. Gondola in St. Anton. Lech village.



Above: The author by the Post Hotel in Lech.

Right: Ski trail into the center of Lech.

The top of the Valluga to the col between the Valluga and the nearby Rogspitze, the next peak to the northeast, is considered an off-piste, no-fall zone. The route is steep, like Tuckerman Ravine, but with more side-hill and a couple of distinct bends around rock outcroppings. If a skier were to fall, he or she would inevitably crash into the rocks.

“Let’s do it!” announced Marcus, my guide, carefully placing his skis on a narrow ledge of snow by a small opening in the railing surrounding the cable-car terminal’s viewing platform. He clicked into his bindings, then pushed slightly to the side.

My friend Ian and my husband Jack followed, crowding onto the narrow ledge. I was last. Setting my edges firmly in the wind-blown snow, I watched Marcus make several flawless turns down the slope. Ian followed, muscling his way past the first rock outcropping and then pausing to pick a line for his next few turns. Ian had skied the Valluga several times before. What he lacked in finesse, he made up for in strength and confidence.

My heart pounded faster when Jack pushed off. He had never skied the Valluga before or anything like it. After a couple of tentative

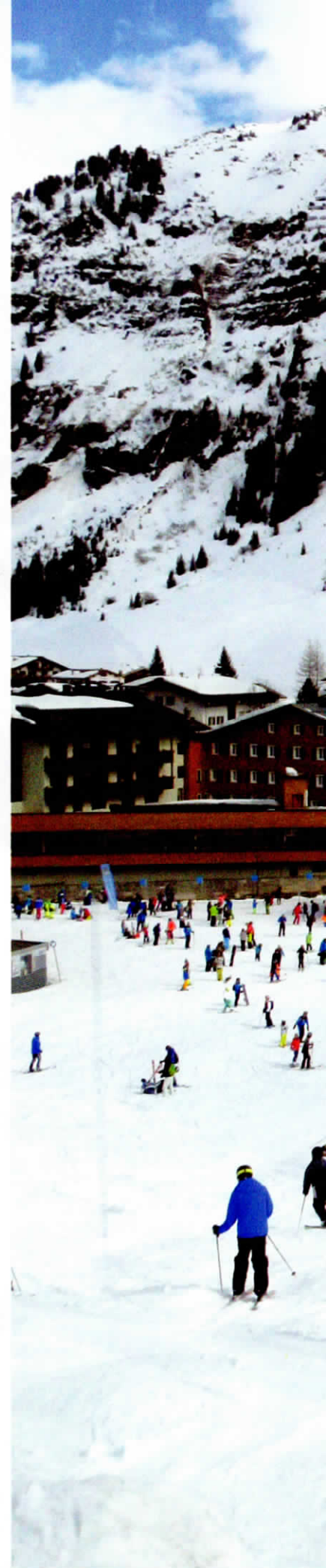
turns, picking his way down the impressive pitch, he followed Marcus and Ian like a pro.

My turn. Jack’s skillful negotiation of the slope chased my own anxieties away. I followed, pivoting around each pole plant and then setting my edges against gravity’s pull. The snow was cut up by other skiers, but dry and grippy. Soon I was beside the other three, standing on the saddle between the Valluga and the Rogspitze. “Well done!” exclaimed Marcus proudly. “How about some lunch?”

Lunch on this trip was usually around 2pm and typically marked the end of our ski day. It was a big meal, outdoors if it was sunny, and usually involved a bottle of wine. An Arlberg lunch sounded like the perfect reward for surviving the Valluga unscathed. We headed down from the col, a more reasonable drop into the Pazieltal (Paziel Valley) and on to Zürs, another resort in Austria’s Arlberg region, where wienerschnitzel, spätzle, and apfelstrudel awaited us.

#### ARLBERG—NEW ENGLAND CONNECTIONS

The Arlberg is technically a mountain range between the federal states of Vorarlberg and Tyrol in Austria, though skiers know it as the





From top: Historic Lech. The author making turns down a sunny slope. Horses beyond the covered bridge in Lech, ready for rides.



The view from the platform atop the Valluga.

enormous interconnected ski region that encompasses the resorts of Lech, Oberlech, Zürs, Zug, Stuben, Stubenbach, Warth, St. Christoph, Klösterle, and St. Anton. The name is likely derived from the Arlenbush, a common local shrub. It is among the oldest destination ski regions in the world, and it has a connection to New England.

Hannes Schneider, the legendary ski instructor credited with inventing modern ski techniques, was born in Stuben in 1890 and began teaching skiing as a teenager in St. Anton. In 1938 when the Nazis invaded Austria, Schneider refused to endorse the Fascist regime and was arrested. A year later, international financier Harvey Dow Gibson negotiated Schneider's immigration to the United States to help run Gibson's new ski area, Mount Cranmore in North Conway.

Schneider is not the only prominent skier to come to New England from the Arlberg. The Ski Club Arlberg has produced more than 50 Olympic and world champions since it was founded in 1901. One of those Olympians, Egon Zimmermann from Lech, married American ski racer Penny Pitou and settled in Laconia for several decades. (Zimmermann has since returned to Lech.)

However, it wasn't legendary ski instructors or Olympic champions that attracted me to the Arlberg. It was the place. Men still wear boiled-wool jackets and women wear dirndls in the quaint mountain villages. The steeples of 16th century churches proudly touch the sky above modern ski lodges, both with an Austrian flare. Old World charm melds with modern sport here. And there's a hefty 65,000 skiable acres served by 84 lifts! St. Anton alone has 5,400 skiable acres—larger than Vail, Colorado. It's a skier's nirvana.

#### DER WEISSE RING

We stayed in Lech, which was the starting point for each day's skiing adventures. It's also the start and finish of Der Weisse Ring (The White Ring), a series of 13 lifts, 14 miles of ski trails, and 17,850 vertical feet of downhill skiing that allows skiers to sample Lech, Zürs, Zug, and Oberlech in a single day. Like the Valluga, skiing Der Weisse Ring was a "must do," so we asked Marcus to take us.

We met Marcus shortly after the Rufikopf Bahn, the tram from the center of Lech to the top of Rupikopf peak, opened. From there, we skied the entire White Ring, which took several hours. My legs were tired at the end of this lengthy loop, but it was more relaxing than the Valluga, all on marked trails and without death-defying headwalls.

"How about lunch?" asked Marcus as we came to a stop near the river in the heart of Lech. I now recognized his daily question about lunch as a signal that our ski day was over.

About halfway through a dumpling the size of a softball, Marcus posed a different sort of question. "Would you like to race?" he asked. I nearly choked on my knödel. "Race you?" I coughed.

"Not me, Der Weisse Ring," he chuckled. "For the last 10 years, there has been an annual race to see who can ski Der Weisse Ring the fastest. Patrick Ortlieb has the course record." (Patrick Ortlieb was the 1992 Olympic downhill champion. He now owns and runs a hotel with his family in Oberlech.) "No thanks," I replied. "I was happy to simply ski it."

And the rest of the Arlberg too. It's a skiing destination that offers terrain as challenging as any skier could want, more mileage than one can ski in a week, and full immersion in Austrian ski culture and history. 🍷



Skiers in the no-fall zone on the Valluga.



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