

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Club helps young skiers gain skills

By STU LEWIS

Stripes Travel reader

The Sitzmarkers Ski and Board Club, open to skiers and snowboarders in grades seven through 12 in the Stuttgart, Germany, military community, is the only club of its type in the U.S. military community in Europe.

The club, in existence for 38 years, is a private organization based at Patch Barracks in Stuttgart. Its main goal is to provide opportunities to learn and develop skiing and snowboarding skills, to learn safety on the slopes, to lead and participate in a responsible manner in organized group activities and to develop individual responsibility.

The club recognizes that due to the cost, travel and logistics, snow sports are frequently a family activity, and if the parents do not ski or snowboard, their children probably don't, either. Sitzmarkers makes it possible for these kids to get out on the slopes by conducting three- or four three-day trips to the Alps each season.

Trips are planned on school holidays and chaperoned by up to five adults and three teen leaders who help in guiding youth members on the trip. The chaperones say that despite the tremendous amount of work that



Sitzmarkers Ski and Board Club member Tanner Ivie, 15, executes a jump on his snowboard during the club's trip to Ötztal in the Tyrol region of Austria in November.

goes into planning and executing these trips, the ultimate reward is seeing the kids come back with smiles from their adventure in the Alps and a sense of accomplishment from learning new, challenging skills.

The Sitzmarker's first trip of this season was to Ötztal, in the Tyrol region of Austria, during the first weekend of November. It drew 47 of the club's 98 members, including 17 first-time skiers and snowboarders, and produced the requisite number of smiles.

As one mother wrote to the trip leader: "Thank you for taking the kids on this trip, my

daughter enjoyed it immensely. She hasn't stopped for a breath since she came home, she is still chattering about her adventures. We definitely want to sign her up for more!

"This was her first trip away from home for more than one night, so I think I was more the worse for wear than she ever was. Additionally, I think the trip gave her an opportunity to experience things outside of her comfort zone, which is a great thing as she tends to not venture too far from it. ... I can see the growth involved with her. So thank you for that opportunity."

Mark Moreno, 14, a freshman



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANDREW LEWIS/Stripes Travel reader

Richard Pastore, 16, shreds a box while snowboarding in Ötztal.

at Patch High School and a new club member, summed up the trip a bit more succinctly. "It's just fun," he said.

Sitzmarkers works hard to be active in the Stuttgart community. Sally Ann Jaeger, the club's volunteer coordinator, organized members' participation in the German American Women's Club's annual Pfennig Bazaar, support for the Stuttgart Community Spouses Club's thrift shop and at a face-painting booth at the spring Stuttgart Bazaar.

Besides the intrinsic value of volunteering, club members want to give back to the organizations for their financial support

that has, among other things, subsidized lessons for beginners, which helps keep them safe on the slopes.

A main emphasis of the club is safety. Helmets are mandatory and buddy groups of three or more people are required on the slopes, allowing for one to remain with an injured member and another to get assistance.

For information on the club, including the season's planned trips, see www.sitzmarkers.org, or the ski listings on Page 14.

Stu Lewis is an officer on the the Sitzmarkers Adult Advisory Council and an experienced trip leader who led the trip to Ötztal.

Zillertal: Enjoy ski and spa pleasure in the Austrian Alps

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family-run boutique inn that has helped define the Austrian spa concept known as the "wellness hotel."

A river runs through this Heidi-worthy setting of pastures bounded on both sides by soaring slopes that gain in snow cover until their icy tips finally tickle the stratosphere itself.

The houses of Zell are timber affairs. The town center is a warren of balconies overlooking small curving streets, shop windows displaying bread and chocolate, and cafes with sidewalk seating even in the winter.

The Hotel Theresa (www.theresa.at) sits at the edge of town a block from the river. A spa occupies a modern wing, with brightly lit windows facing the peaks above. The dining rooms, lounges and bar are in the older Alpine wing, a nest of carved woodwork and stag-head decor.

The matriarch of the Egger family, Theresa Egger started the hotel in 1964 with just four rooms. It's a 70-room complex now, but still with a family-run, small-hotel feel.

"This is our life. We rarely leave," said Theresa Jr., the tall brunette daughter who oversees reception. By night, in an embroidered peasant gown, she is a warm Snow White. "We don't like to travel much; we really like our clean, safe valley."

The Zillertal is almost eerily tidy. The Austrian passion for

The Zillertal

A single electronic smart pass allows access to all gondolas in the Zillertal and more than 170 ski lifts: Passes range from \$110 for two days (\$88 ages 15-18, \$49 ages 6-14) to \$530 for two weeks (\$423 ages 15-18, \$238 ages 6-14). See www.zillertal.at.

order is on display at every hand, from the walls of firewood stacked with geometric exactitude outside many houses to the precision signage at every intersection.

I began my conference-spouse routine, breakfasting with the doctors' wives, discussing the day's plans over muesli and yogurt. One new friend was agonizing over a blue wool coat she'd found in Mayrhofen, two tram stops away. I lodged my go-for-it vote, then headed out to ski.

The ski areas operate as a consortium, letting you buy tickets for one or all in various day-pass combinations. I went for the most flexible, the \$305 Super Ski Pass, a smart card that gave me scan-and-go privileges on every gondola and lift at every ski area for five days.

I rode up to the biggest park, Zillertal Arena, which is also closest to Zell. A bus, stopping at the Theresa dropped me at the gondola station in three

minutes. That first ride up gave me plenty of time to judge the local norms. I saw a lot of very fast skiers on very steep slopes, blurry figures in tight Austrian tucks. And those were just the little kids.

I breathed easier to see plenty of moderate alternatives: wide and winding trails with family groups, and snowboarders enjoying less radical runs. I would find the Alps laced with all manner of trails, from training-wheel greens to suicide blacks.

Only in one place did I feel outmatched by any of the available routes down, and that was at the top of Hintertux, a glacier park at the very highest reaches of the Zillertal. I rode the gondola down from that one, sheepish but alive.

The network is so vast, it was easy to spend all day up high, breaking for lunch at one of the warming

hut restaurants where Austrian oompah-pop music (oompop!) blared over crowded decks.

It was at day's end that the great unwinding would begin. At the heart of the Theresa's wellness spa is a complex of pools and saunas and steam rooms so involved that you practically need a sherpa to navigate them. Here's how I progressed, once

I traded ski pants for swim trunks:

Step One: 20-minute soak in the outdoor salt pool, a 10-person heated

and jetted saline tub with a killer view of the evening Alps.

Step Two: maniac 12-second jog, dripping wet, back across the patio in 25-degree air.

Step Three: 10 minutes in the menthol steam room.

Step Four: bake in the traditional cedar dry-heat sauna.

Steps Five, Six and Seven: various combinations of the high-seat steam room, the infra-red sauna and the elegant mid-heat dry sauna with Greek busts in the niches and naked Austrians draped along the long tile bench (the interior steam complex is co-ed and clothing-free).

Step Eight: a defibrillating plunge into the outdoor Icelandic cold pool.

The next day, I would do it all again. Ski, rinse, repeat.

Friend Michael and I reconnected at dinner. On one of our last nights, I was well into the Tyrolean lamb on polenta and he was still working on his curd strudel with spinach. We

were chatting with a pair of Australian doctors when one of my breakfast mates came to our table.

"I did it!" she said, twirling slightly in her new blue coat.

"Don't you love it?"

"I do, I do," I said. "Good call."

She twirled off, and I found Michael giving me an odd look.

"Just what do you do all day, anyway?" he asked.



There are 411 miles of pistes in the Zillertal region of Austria. This skier was enjoying the Hochfuegen ski area, with altitudes of 4,921 to 8,202 feet, ensuring reliable snow conditions throughout the season.

COURTESY OF BERND RITSCHEL/Zillertal Tourismus