



Classy apres-ski? Waltz this way

You'll have to pack a ballgown as well as your salopettes for a winter break at this fairytale Bavarian castle, writes **Anne-Celine Jaeger**

Anne-Celine Jaeger, The Observer, Sunday January 6, 2008

You know you are exiting the real world as soon as you turn off the dual carriageway out of Garmisch-Partenkirchen on to the winding lane to Schloss Elmau. Fir trees are caked in giant snow crystals; everything twinkles and glows in the hip-deep snow like the tip of Tinkerbell's wand; and a hundred yards along, just when you think the seven dwarves are going to jump out from behind a tree, you get stopped by Schorsch - a stout bearded man, dressed head to toe in Bavarian attire, who whittles Edelweiss flowers out of wood in his Heidi hut. Far from being a tourist attraction, Schorsch is an authentic man of the mountain, and the gatekeeper to the castle.

Built in 1916 by the renowned author, philosopher and theologian Dr Johannes Muller, Schloss Elmau is still run today by the same family, and the core philosophy has remained the same: enjoy the arts, engage in thought, tire yourself out in the great outdoors, and mingle with the masters. And that goes for children as well as adults.

Throughout the year, the castle hosts a succession of cultural events, from International Literature Week and a European Jazz Festival to debates, dances, and poetry and painting workshops. But even if you didn't go to anything arty, it would still be worth coming here for the location and the skiing.

In a valley of its own in the Bavarian Alps, the castle is framed on the south side by the wondrous Wetterstein - a near-vertical rock face. To the north, east and west are wooded hills and lolling fields, and the faint sound of cowbells echoes through the trees. It's Bavaria at its picture-postcard best: nature so breathtaking it appears almost fake. Cross-country ski tracks start right in front of the hotel, or you can take the 10-minute shuttle bus to the lifts of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, with 120km of pistes and some renowned off-piste terrain. The hotel runs daily guided 'ski safaris' to help guests explore, and beginners can go to its own ski school.

After that, the apres-ski is unlike anywhere else in the world, with guests socialising with the world-famous artists, musicians and authors who are not only performing at the castle, but staying there too. You could be listening to a reading by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jeffrey Eugenides in the great hall one minute and then sitting starkers in the sauna with him discussing character development the next. Similarly, you could attend a concert by violinist Vadim Repin in the afternoon and waltz with him in the ballroom the same evening.



Every time I come to Schloss Elmau, I bless my father's fancy footwork: if it were not for his worship of the Vienna waltz, we never would have discovered this place. While doing his military service in the nearby town of Mittenwald in the mid-1960s, Dad got a tip-off about the castle. On his nights off, he'd sneak up to the Schloss and take part in the castle's weekly ballroom dancing evenings. Transformed from provisional soldier into a James Bond character dressed in black tie, he would dance waltzes with one of the many pretty Helferinnen (the students who worked at the castle and were encouraged to take part in the ballroom dancing along with the guests), then rush back to the barracks before his bike turned into a pumpkin.

Since then, most major family events - such as my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary - and some minor ones, such as me developing a crush, at the age of 10, on the Patrick Swayze-esque dance teacher, have happened here.

This time, I have come with my mother, my sister and my one-year-old son, Bobby. Unlike other five-star luxury hotels, Elmau's policy is to fully integrate children of all ages in the hotel's activities. For every cultural event of interest to grown-ups, there is a child-friendly version, plus the castle has a fantastic creche, baby phones are available to all parents, rooms are kitted out with miniature bathrobes and there is a separate family spa.

I start my day here with a close reading of 'The Elmau Experience', a six-page bulletin of the day's events, activities and dining options. I then make my way to the 50m-long breakfast buffet, with delights including homemade pancakes and seven-seed rye bread. In an agony of indecision I start eating my way through the entire display. Afterwards, thankfully, we set off on a hike. During our three-hour romp with a four-wheel buggy, my indigestion is quickly replaced by with awe. Meandering through hobbit hills we hit upon an alpine lake so ludicrously beautiful, I have to remind myself that this is Bavaria and not Middle Earth.

Upon our return, we sit engulfed in giant Alice in Wonderland-style sofas and warm up with cappuccinos and cakes round a log fire in the tearoom. Before attending a reading by award-winning author Wilhelm Genazino in the grand hall, I hand Bobby over to the smiling staff in the creche. At dinner, another culinary challenge for those with moderate self-discipline, Genazino is sitting at the table next to ours, engaged in conversation with other guests. While I tuck into my fourth starter, my sister, mother and I catch snippets of dialogue - a delicious cultural condiment to our meal.

The one thing that's always a challenge in Elmau is to digest the finger-licking, five-course meal fast enough to actually fit into your ball gown. Tonight is no exception. The first time I entered the ballroom, aged six or seven, I thought I'd stepped on to the set of Cinderella. Twenty-five years down the line, that feeling hasn't changed. At the far end of the ballroom, a man in tails plays waltzes and other traditional dances on a grand piano. The dress code is, and always has been, black tie with a boho twist. It doesn't matter if you've never danced before; there will always be someone to guide you. The live music, the swish of ballgowns and the grandeur of the ballroom always give me a giddy glimpse of another era.

We spend the next morning reading in one of the castle's many libraries. In the afternoon, we head to the recently opened spa. Clad in our multicoloured bathrobes, we look like a Haribo pick'n'mix. Usually the little log-cabin-cum-sauna by the stream with its natural ice pool gets our vote but we decide to try the new spa. We swim in the heated rooftop pool, looking out on to the imposing Wetterstein, with the snowflakes melting on our skin. In the new sauna, the view of majestic mountains from the huge windows inspires me to sweat a little longer. I feel utterly removed from my normal life and self, the silence of the snow adding another layer of peace. I decide there and then - again and for the millionth time - that I never want to leave this place.

Three days later, however, it's time to return to the real world. We pile into the snow-encased car and drive back up the castle lane. We turn to take one last look at the castle. It's still there. But after the next corner, our little secret will disappear. And like any good fairytale castle, it will only come into existence again when we next conjure it up.

Rooms at the Schloss Elmau (+ 49-8823-180; www.schloss-elmau.de) cost from £136 per person including half-board, ski guiding, free admission to the spa and all festivals, concerts, readings, dancing and debates. Easyjet (easyjet.com) flies from London Stansted and Edinburgh to Munich from £50.