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The hills are alive

Austria's Salzburg province is attracting ski-lovers seeking second homes in spite of tough zoning rules, says Haig Simonian

Fed up with France; irritated by Italy; squeezed out of Switzerland? Austria is now the alternative for foreigners seeking their dream property in the Alps.

That, at least, is the message from estate agents scouring Europe for something fresh and affordable that doesn't require backpacking to Bulgaria or a pilgrimage to the Pyrenees.

For European skiers, Austria is familiar ground. Britons on charter flights, Dutch in private cars and Germans in their busloads are well accustomed to the Tyrol and beyond, attracted by the fair prices, agreeable family skiing and general cosiness that have for years distinguished Austria from France or Switzerland.

Admittedly, some resorts, such as Lech and Kitzbühel, are every bit as glitzy as Courchevel. But, generally speaking, Austria's reputation rests on smaller, less glamorous towns and villages from Alpbach to Zell am See that have earned loyal followings for those looking to ski in friendly surroundings without breaking the bank.

Visitors interested in establishing a more permanent presence via a second home, however, are likely to encounter a less accommodating reception. In spite of the fact that Austria has been in the European Union since the mid-1990s, rules on holiday homes are almost as complex and restrictive as those of the neighbouring Swiss.

Like Switzerland, Austria has a federal system that devolves much power from the central government in Vienna to the nine federal states. Although not as extreme as Switzerland, the states themselves pass on significant powers to individual towns and villages. Policy on planning and home ownership is very much a local affair.

As in other countries, elaborate zoning rules apportion land to specific uses, whether it's resi-



Slope off to Austria: Salzburg province has much to offer in winter sports

dential, commercial or farming. But in Austria's best known tourist regions and especially its most famous mountain resorts, the allocation for second homes is virtually nil.

For years such severe restrictions meant most developers and agents had given up on Austria for holiday homes. But recently improved transport links have prompted some to take another look, with Salzburg province in the foreground.

Although far less famous for its skiing than for the culture of its famous capital, Salzburg has much to offer in winter sports. Schladming is a popular family resort on most tour operators' lists. Obertauern, less developed but lying much higher, is as busy. Smaller areas, such as Filzmoos, Annaberg, or the three valleys linking Flachau, Wagrain and St Johann im Pongau, fill out the picture.

Greatly improved access has raised the region's profile for for-

eigners. Salzburg always had good road and rail links, particularly via its sometimes notoriously congested motorway to Munich and points north. But the arrival of budget airlines has transformed its once sleepy airport, leading to improved international connections. Much of the skiing is within an hour's drive.

The modalities differ depending on the deal struck between developer and local authority. Some require rental through a

tour operator; others leave it up to owners to find a local agent, offering more control and even enabling owners to rent to themselves for additional weeks, strange as that sounds. "It is controlled. But it depends on where you are and the attitude of the local council to development", says Thomas Schatzl, a Salzburg province notary.

places anyway to help cover the mortgage and running costs", says Simon Malster of estate agency Investors in Property. "And that ensures someone is keeping an eye on their places in their absence."

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At Alpendorf village, a group of chalets above Annaberg in the Dachstein West ski area, owners are obliged to rent out through a Netherlands-based tour operator. While that might seem an imposition, the development is both attractive and astonishingly good value compared with similar schemes in France or Switzerland. Under the deal, owners have exclusive use for four weeks each year – probably more than enough for most – and can stay longer for a fee.

Scattered around a steep hillside and virtually on the piste, the project, now 80 per cent completed, offers two- and three-bedroom chalets of about 90 sq metres at €225,000-€250,000, excluding value added tax, which can be reclaimed. The complex includes a clubhouse with reception, bar and restaurant, and an attractive indoor pool.

"It's what you'd pay for two garages in Switzerland," jokes Malster.

This year's conventionally cold winter has left plenty of snow on the ground, even though Alpendorf lies under 1,000 metres and the highest point in the entire ski region is only about 2,100 metres above sea level.

Those wanting greater snow security could try Obertauern, the purpose-built resort at the top of the Tauern pass, situated at about 1,700 metres altitude. Attractive, if somewhat artificial, Obertauern lacks a real centre but the atmosphere is pleasant and the skiing is extensive, with 26 lifts and about 160km of pistes. The resort's snow record is one of the best in the Alps.

On the village outskirts, heading north to Salzburg, Savills Alpine Homes is marketing a new development of ski-in, ski-out flats called the Zehnerkar Mountain Resort.

An initial phase, comprising 11 apartments, has been completed and is now renting as holiday flats. The similar sized second phase, due for completion by December, has been fully reserved, meaning attention is now focused on the much more ambitious phase III, with three stepped buildings in chalet style.

Guy Taylor, a British architect, has teamed up with Michael Elimer, the local developer, to move Phase III upmarket. The new apartments, priced between €199,000 for one bedroom and €550,000 for a three-bedroom luxury penthouse, promise finishes to the highest standards and integral fitness and spa facilities. Better still, there is no obligation to rent out the properties.

Admittedly, few of the Austrian locations now coming to the market can match established Swiss, or even French resorts, in terms of prestige or range of skiing. But with keen prices, good workmanship and improved accessibility, Austria looks set to move up the ski property league.

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