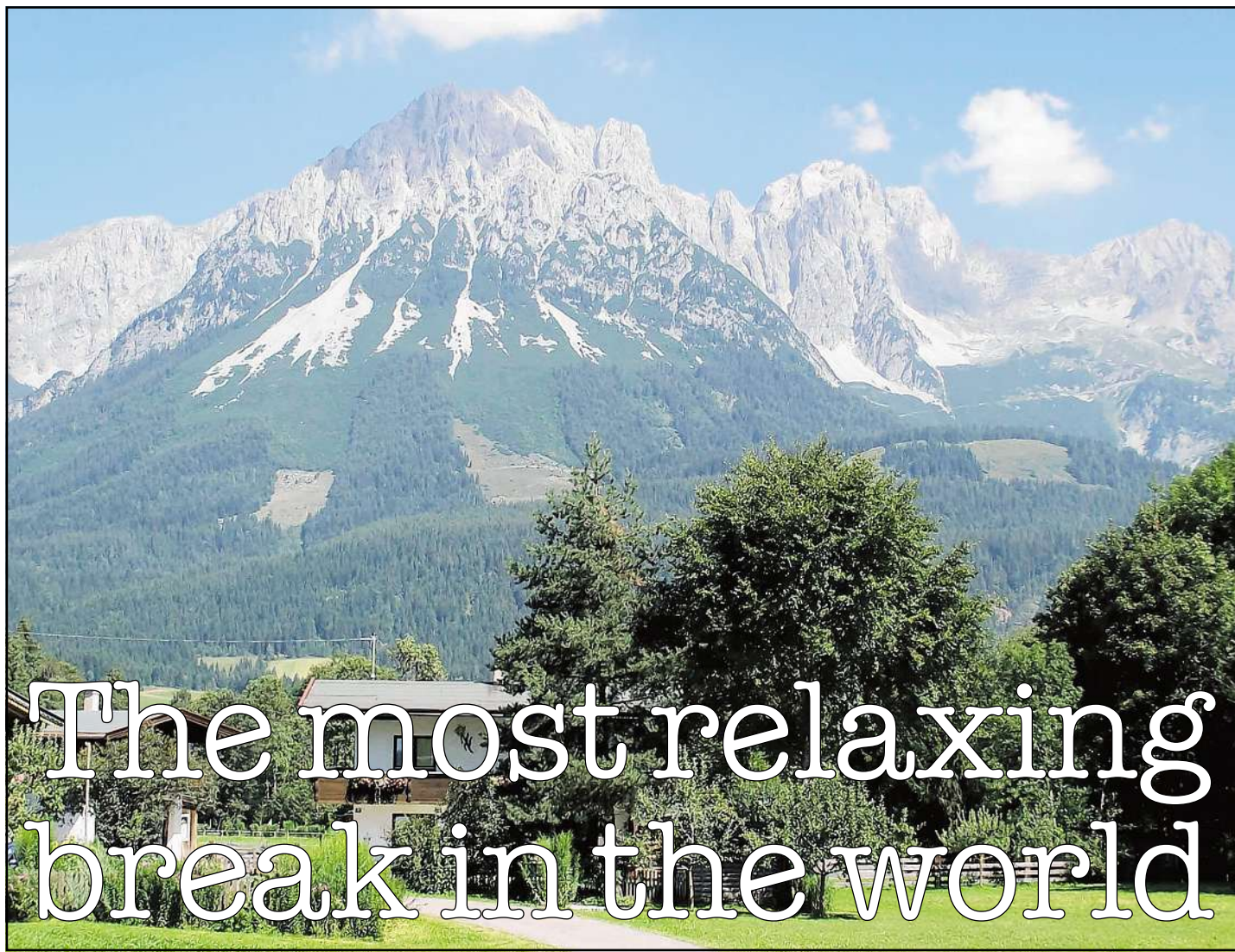


Travel



STUNNING: Austria has some of the most amazing scenery, perfect to get away from it all

CITY dwellers like me are used to the background drone of urban life as we drop off to sleep. We are accustomed to the hum of distant traffic carried on the breeze with the occasional noisy flyover from the Merseyside Police helicopter to rouse us from our slumber.

So a break to the blissfully quiet lakeside village of Pertisau in Austria's Tyrol was such a treat.

As I sat on the balcony looking out over the mountains that encircle this pretty rural retreat I could hear an owl tootit-toowhooing and the chime of church bells on the hour. And that was it.

That silence was a great introduction to the relaxing and tranquil short break that awaited us at the four star Wiesenhof spa hotel.

This is a family-run and independent hotel and it shows. The majority of guests are regulars, couples and families who return year after year to ski, languish in the thermal suite and relax. Most are on first name terms with the owners and staff.

Mary Murtagh lies back and lets the world go by on a spa break to Austria

Make sure you make a fuss of resident cat Ambrose, who likes to sit in the sun in a window overlooking the bar, and Findus the dog, who sits on the welcome mat at reception. Another unique, and very welcome, feature is the fact that rooms are charged at the same price year round meaning no school holiday sky-high price hike, a trick so beloved of the travel industry.

The Wiesenhof has an enviable position beside a beautiful lake with paths for walking and cycling running around the shore.

To get to the hotel you take country lanes that twist and turn through pine forests passing meadows with wooden hay lofts and villages with timbered houses. It's like driving into an episode of the TV series Heidi.

The mountains that surround Pertisau are ever

TRAVEL FACTS

THE Wiesenhof offers year-round outdoor pursuits such as skiing, mountain hiking, Nordic walking, mountain biking, sailing, windsurfing, golf, fly fishing, paragliding and horse riding.

A range of spa treatments is also available – including the three night 'shale oil superior package' including a Tyrolean shale oil bath for two for £362 (412 Euros). For more information see www.wiesenhof.at/en

changing – one night they were monochrome against a light blue sky and another, their snowy tops enveloped in cloud.

Between November and March they are a paradise for winter sport lovers. In the summer walkers take to their slopes instead.

The hotel is very comfortable with spacious rooms and fantastic food. But the jewel in the crown is the Karwendeltherme – one of the best thermal suites I have ever used.

Earmark at least half a day to take in all the different saunas and steam baths, foot spa and indoor swimming pool. Brace yourself for the ferocity of the authentic Finnish sauna and take a good book to enjoy in the relaxation rooms with heated tiled beds to chill out on or loungers in a sunroom with floor to ceiling windows

looking on to a meadow and the mountains beyond.

The 'menu' for the health and beauty treatments is unique and reflects the natural environment in which the hotel is located such as an alpine bath where you're partly submerged in a detoxing liquor produced by meadow hay soaked in water. It sounds weird but feels great.

The hotel is a champion for the local shale oil. The Albrecht family have been extracting shale oil from the nearby mountains for more than 100 years. This 'black gold' is a natural remedy for a wide range of ailments but has also been turned into toiletries. You can try some out thanks to the selection in the hotel bedrooms.

I enjoyed the only facial I have ever had where you can gaze at a mountain (if only I'd been able to keep my eyes open for long enough) and which included an impromptu eyebrow tidy.

The food is another reason to stay here. There's a delicious healthy option for every meal, catering especially well for cardiac patients, with fresh juices you press yourself, exotic salads and a wonderful smorgasbord of local cheeses and cold meats to sample. You'll never look at a 40-slice pack of supermarket cooked ham in the same way ever again. Homemade preserves, delicious salad dressings and a huge variety of fresh baked bread every day are just some of the reasons to look forward to each meal time.

Our stay there was a tonic and we came away feeling rested yet revived. Must be all that silence.



SO MUCH TO DO: The Aquapark

Turkey makes a big splash

● From Page 19

We aimed to eat early to avoid the crush (the hotel has around 3,000 guests in peak season), opting for the snack bar at lunch offering the same salads, grilled meat and fish as the two main restaurants but also serves pizza, hot dogs and grilled chicken.

For an à la carte experience, the hotel's themed restaurants levy an additional charge. We found the Chinese and Turkish menus limited though my spicy mince skewer was tasty.

There are fixed price menus of 20 Turkish lira (£9) at the Chinese and Italian restaurants and 30 lira (£13) at the steakhouse where an imported beer is about £3.30 and a cocktail £6.

Afterwards we tried the beach bar for a late evening drink, sitting on one of the sofas put out on the sand, the perfect place to admire moonlight shining on the bay.

We preferred this option rather than the evening entertainment - shows such as High School Musical, and quiz and talent contests

which, combined with a beach barbecue, were popular with families with younger children.

A wealth of history waited to be explored nearby. Ephesus, one of the largest cities of the ancient world and said to be founded by the legendary female warriors, the Amazons, was a half-hour drive away.

Enough remains to give visitors a really good idea of how it looked more than 2,000 years ago. For me, the highlights were the great theatre set in the hillside with its 22 flights of stone stairs where up to 25,000 people gathered, the facade of the library of Celsus, and streets still lined with columns.

There was another Turkish tradition we felt we couldn't miss: shopping in a bazaar.

The minibus stop to the local town of Kusadasi was right outside the hotel. Offer a third of the quoted price or less and do a deal somewhere over half, was the advice we took.

Haggling in a bazaar, like trying out the hamam, is what gives a flavour of Turkish delight to this holiday.

School holidays

ALMOST half of parents will take their children on holiday during term time to save money.

And 53% of parents are spending less on family holidays this year than last according to a poll by travel company TripAdvisor.

Of those who have taken children out of school to go on breaks, 47% claimed the school turned a blind eye while 46% said the school "wasn't happy", but still took no action.

Parents in the East Midlands are most rebellious, having taken

children out of school in term time.

The poll of 2,000 parents with school-aged children found only 7% had been fined over term-time breaks, although this figure rises to 17% among parents in Scotland.

Of those who have not taken children out of school for holidays, more than a third (36%) said they would consider doing so in the future.

Some 44% of British parents claimed government spending cuts would impact their travel plans this year.



GREAT FOOD: The restaurant at the Wiesenhof in Austria