

Flying high: a new view of Serfaus-Fiss-Ladis, a trio of Alpine villages on the sunniest plateau in the Tyrol

# Mountain tot

'Family holiday'? Contradiction in terms, thought new dad Guy Procter – until he discovered the very civilised appeal of a Kinderhotel in Austria

As soon as I found out I was going to be a dad I began to lament the loss of my life of adventure. The fact I'd never done anything particularly adventurous when I did have time and independence didn't matter. The knowledge I would not be able to join an expedition to an unclimbed Himalayan peak or follow the next Touareg migration, should I be asked, I now felt as keenly as bereavements. One minute everything was possible. The next, my future spread out before me as flat as a fen, punctuated only by traumatic engagements with baby-changing mats, tedious meetings with other grown-ups, and increasingly dispiriting visits to the cash machine.

I emerged from this slough of despond when my son was seven months old. By this time I knew a baby was just as capable of reshaping my social life as I had always feared. But I also now knew that I didn't mind half as much as I thought I would. Cohabiting with a baby was like living in a 24-hour David Attenborough documentary about a strange, sometimes disgusting but always compelling new species. The world turned inside out: Toby's bedroom became the universe, and the world beyond it a TV screen I no longer cared to watch.

Sometime around seven or eight months though, you and the new species are ready for some adventure. My thoughts turned immediately to travel, and mountains. A little light Googling then turned these ideas into a destination: the Austrian resort of Serfaus-Fiss-Ladis, a

triplicate of Alpine villages on what they say is the sunniest plateau in the Tyrol, one of them also a family-friendly outdoor destination. And yes, the phrase 'family-friendly' did sound about as appealing as a cup of cold tea, but by seven months I knew better than to go anywhere lacking an advertised tolerance for food-throwing, shouting and public self-soiling. I also knew (from the hate-beams I had directed at bawling infants myself in the past) that the flight would be a shaming ordeal. But I hoped that something about the destination would make it worthwhile. I was right on both counts.

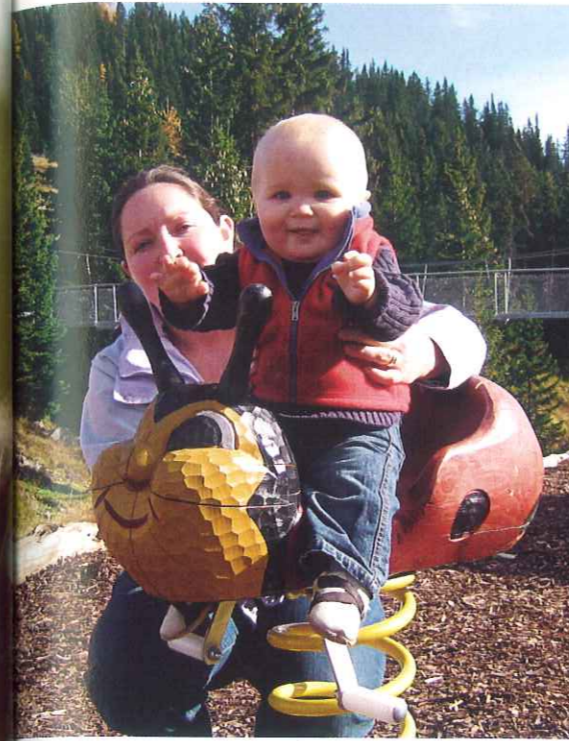
We touched down in Innsbruck to be met by smiling Thomas, the only taxi driver in the village where we would be staying. Thomas didn't speak much English, but compared to us, his monoglot clients and their non-o-glot son, he was a Rosetta Stone. He and Toby shared certain Germanic syllables (notably of the Ja! Da! Ha! family), and prattled happily as Thomas checked the straps on the car seat (the same highly *Which?*-rated item as we had at home, we noted with paranoid-parent pleasure). 'You are ready?' asked Thomas finally, and, by the time the taxi left the airport, our normally insomniac son was asleep.

An hour later our hotel hove into view across a steep village green, perfect for sledging in winter. From the front it looked the typical 1,000-trees-died-for-each-window-frame Alpine hotel. From the rear a thick blue waterslide emerged like an >

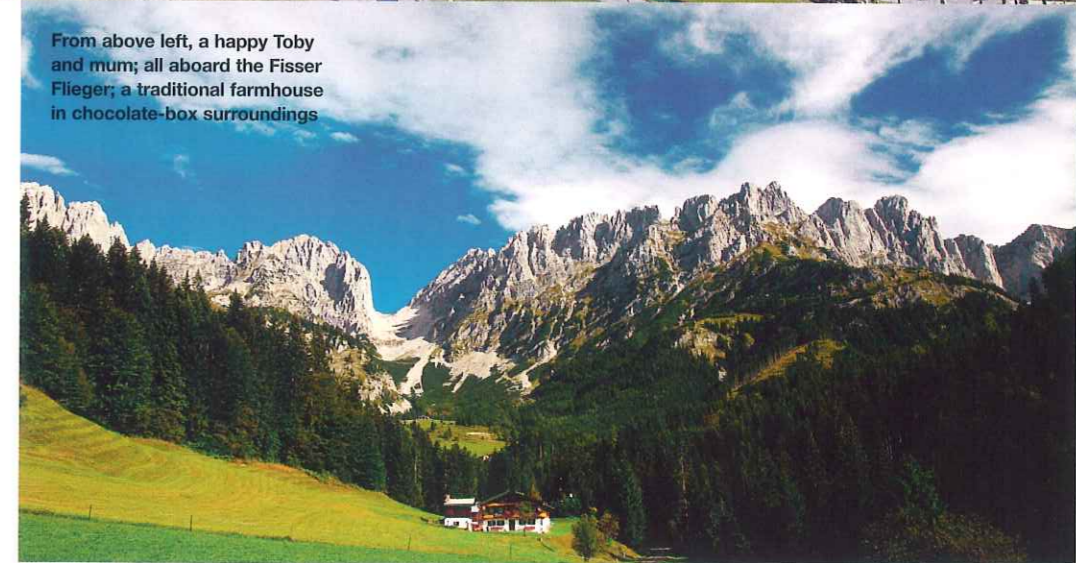
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with 'Can we keep going?'

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From above left, a happy Toby and mum; all aboard the Fisser Flieger; a traditional farmhouse in chocolate-box surroundings



exhaust. All around, mountains receded in long brown ridges. It suggested an idealised version of the Scottish Highlands rather than the Chamonix-like chasm ringed by impossibly steep, frigid summits that I thought all Alpine destinations resembled. Even the forests that girdled the slopes looked more friendly fuzz than wild wood. The streets of Serfaus were spotless; we felt we should have wiped our feet before getting out of the cab.

Hotel Bär is a 'Kinderhotel'. In fact it's the first Kinderhotel in an association (not a chain – each hotel is independently owned and can only become a Kinderhotel if it meets their strict criteria) established 15 years ago and now numbering 58 in five European countries. The majority only accept bookings from families, and they're nothing like the urine- and vomit-flecked ghettos the phrase 'family-friendly' probably brings to mind for most Britons.

The Austrians, it quickly became apparent, understand how to take the oxymoron out of 'family holiday'. Instead of searching for some spurious family entertainment involving cabaret, karaoke and fish fingers, they parse families into adults, children and babies and provide facilities and staff specialising in each. That means a baby unit capable of looking after offspring as young as seven days (yes, *days*) for up to 40 hours of your holiday week, all-day activities for older children six days a week, and six-course, waiter-served dinners, massages and saunas for adults. Best of all, the top-rated Five Smiley hotels like the Bär boast a computerised 'baby-phone' system – a mobile phone that rings you in the restaurant (or the bar, or by the pool...) should your sleeping infant become agitated. After seven months of the monastic existence that is first-time parenting, this seemed like almost

## The streets were spotless. We felt we should wipe our feet before getting out of the cab

unbearable kindness. That night we dined as two smartly dressed, table-served adults (sample dishes: three-pepper mousse with medallion of herbs and lobster; roast fillet of beef on a bed of yellow boletus mushrooms with burgundy sauce, fondant potato and zucchini) for the first time since Toby was born. We almost didn't know what to do with ourselves.

The family-friendly theme spreads throughout the whole plateau on which the three villages of Serfaus, Fiss and Ladis sit. Walking trails of low to moderate difficulty abound, and for those with babies there are numerous trails marked as buggy-friendly (your Kinderhotel can supply you with an off-road buggy or a baby carrier, free of charge). We chose the newly opened

Panorama Genussweg trail between two cable car stations high above the village.

Whereas in Britain our mountains are too few for any to be defiled by too much development, in Austria they're enough of a commodity to be adapted to fit the leisure purpose the locals have in mind. And in Serfaus-Fiss-Ladis they have in mind families and wellbeing, and they've gone further, more single-mindedly, than any other Alpine destination I've seen, to achieve it. The Panorama Genussweg trail contours around the mountainsides at an altitude of around 2,000m, neither too steep for buggies nor too bland for their pushers. At one point there is a pinewood viewing station complete with recliner seats with buttons, which play one of four >



The Panorama Genussweg trail follows the contours of the mountain at 2,000m. It might be buggy-friendly, right, but it's never boring



## travel brief

### GETTING THERE

**GB Airways** (01293 664239, [www.gbairways.com](http://www.gbairways.com)) flies from Gatwick to Innsbruck, from £77. **Austrian Airlines** (0870 124 2625, [www.aaa.com/uk/eng](http://www.aaa.com/uk/eng)) and **Lufthansa** (0870 837 7747, [www.lufthansa.com](http://www.lufthansa.com)) both fly from Heathrow to Innsbruck, from £215. A taxi to the hotel (one hour) costs around £90 each way. Or **Sixt** (0870 156 7567, [www.e-sixt.com](http://www.e-sixt.com)) has five days' car hire, from £73.

### KINDERHOTELS

**Hotel Bär** (00 43 5476 6058, then press 3, [www.loewebeaer.com](http://www.loewebeaer.com)) has seven days' super-inclusive board for a family of two adults and one child, from £1,010 in summer, or £1,480 for two children (aged up to 11). This includes daily breakfast buffet, lunch, afternoon snacks, cakes and tea, children's buffet, adult restaurant meal, bottled milk, baby food and 24-hour soft drinks. There are other Kinderhotels in Austria, as well as Italy (South Tyrol) and Germany (Bavaria); visit [www.kinderhotels.co.uk](http://www.kinderhotels.co.uk).

### FURTHER INFORMATION

For more on Serfhaus, visit [www.serfaus.com](http://www.serfaus.com).



## On the trail is a viewing station complete with button-controlled recliner seats and music

classical tunes. Needless to say, Toby slept through most of it, but the feeling we were filling his lungs and ruddying his cheeks with clean Alpine air felt like a new level of parental virtuousness.

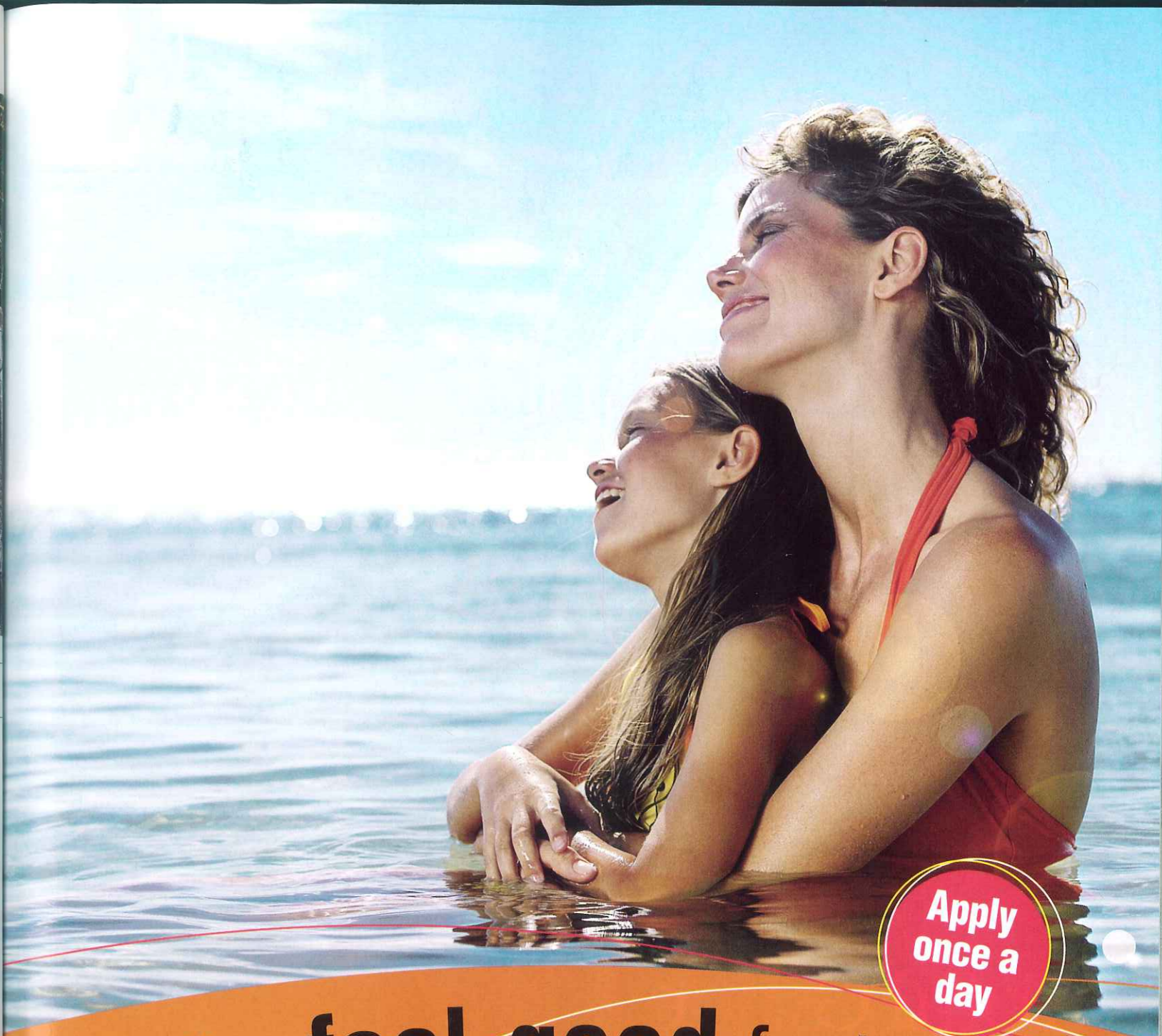
Depending on which way you tackle it, a little over an hour's walk on the Panorama takes you as far as the Mittelstation Komperdell – the hub of Serfaus' skiing activity in winter, and in summer the site of a new water park called Murmliwasser, where children can build dams, have mudfights and dodge water sprays – or to Möseralm, where the greatest array of family-friendly activities has been created. Here, your children (and indeed you) can feed ducks, ride on a tyre slide, clamber on all manner of climbing frames, or plummet valleywards on a delightfully barmy ride, like a giant hang-glider attached to a wire, called the Fisser Flieger.

Serfaus, Fiss and Ladis have seven cable-car routes between them, dozens of trails and a walkers' shuttle bus, which runs between the villages, tying up the loose ends of various walking routes. One card allows you the use of all the services and

your mountain buggy (or mountain bike) are welcome everywhere.

It's one of the mysteries of babyhood that the more and better you sleep in the day, the more and better you sleep at night. And it would seem there's nothing more soporific than Alpine air and a mountain trail. Toby spent as much time dreaming as we spent walking and eating. But that was fine.

It had all gone so well, I knew that trouble must be brewing, and I began to look forward to the flight back in the same way a chat-show host must look forward to an appearance by Tracey Emin. But you know what? He was an angel. One woman even commented on our 'well-behaved boy' – I allowed her to go away thinking that our excellent parenting was the secret. Inwardly I thanked Serfaus for teaching Toby how to sleep and me how to relax again. Does a few days' pushing a buggy along mountain trails and completing an aircraft flight without hysterics constitute an adventure? Not of the sort that's going to attract Red Bull sponsorship. But for the first time in months I felt the landscape of parenthood might not be so flat after all. ■



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