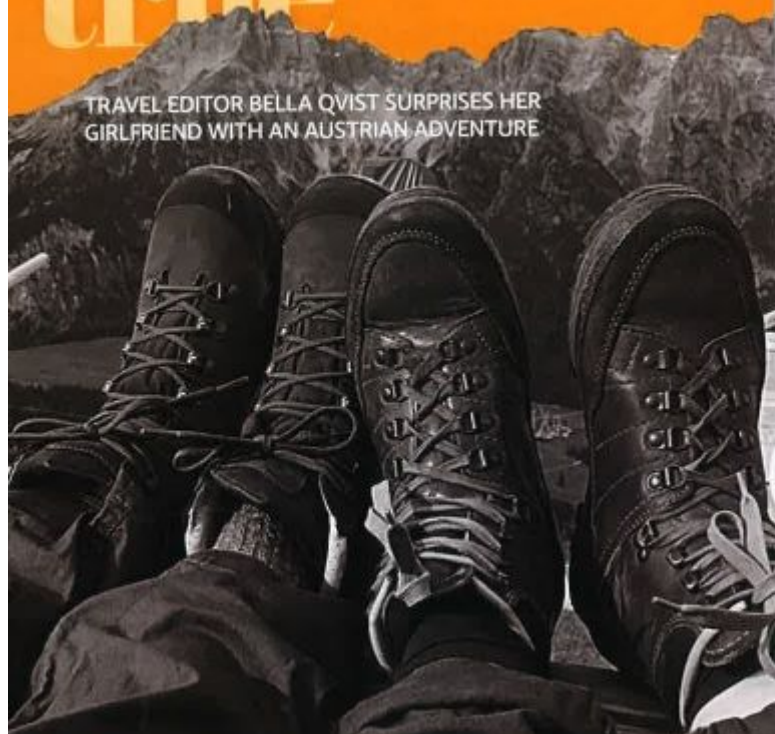


| TRAVEL | A ROMANTIC GETAWAY |

The hills are alive with the sound of dreams coming true

TRAVEL EDITOR BELLA QVIST SURPRISES HER
GIRLFRIEND WITH AN AUSTRIAN ADVENTURE



“L

et's go hiking in Austria one day." It's been one of those things my girlfriend Cyd and I have said, and dreamed of, over the years. Probably ever since I plucked up the courage to speak to her on a university organised walk in the Peak District some eight years ago. It never happened – despite her being the biggest Sound Of Music fan I know. But when Cyd was due to finish her PhD, and I was thinking of ways to celebrate her efforts, I decided it was time.

I organise everything in secret, and it isn't until we get to the airport that I reveal our destination: Salzburg. You should have seen her face – actual hearts for eyes. A few hours later and we are toasting with champagne inside a very comfortable British Airways flight when the clouds below start breaking up. A stunning Alpine landscape reveals itself and the picturesque city of Salzburg, surrounded by mountains and split in two by the river Salzach, appears below. High above the Altstadt – the baroque old town that is also one of the most beautiful UNESCO heritage sites in Northern Europe – the magnificent Hohensalzburg Castle makes Austria's fourth largest; city look like something out of a Disney movie. Our land and our trip continues by car into the Austrian countryside. We travel along green fields with grazing cows, rippling rivers and traditional country houses, decorated with beautiful paintings and intricate wooden rooftops ready to hold vast amounts of snow. It is September and, instead of being covered in white dunes, the hills are alive with autumn colours. Every shade of red, green, yellow, brown and orange appears on the mountains either side of us and the 90-minute journey flies by. In the district of Leogang, our driver takes us up the HÜTTEN mountain range, where we reach our destination.



ALPINE DREAMS

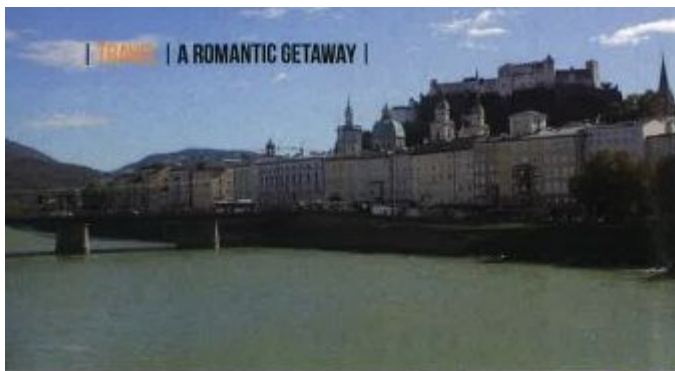
Forsthofalm (forsthofalm.com), a romantically rustic designer hotel and spa, sits 1,050 meters above sea level, but is submerged in stunning nature. The rooms are made from wood cut during a particular winter moon phase, giving the whole establishment a fresh scent of pine, blending with the smell of open fires, newly baked bread and the freshly picked herbs used to create bespoke treatments in the spa upstairs. The entire place breathes a wonderful, relaxing ambience and it is with pleasure that we start our

"These moments are like medicine for the soul"

day by opening the curtains to the wild outside, nipping down for an abundant breakfast buffet (complete with freshly cooked hot and cold food, a DIY muesli station, vegan spreads and Prosecco), and spending a day relaxing in the spa and rooftop pool. The moments spent sitting in a panoramic sauna, watching the mist move through the forest, enjoying a personalised back massage in front of the brutal mountain landscape outside, and the romantic evening spent drinking champagne in a private rooftop jacuzzi lit up only by the



full moon, are like medicine for the soul. As guests here, we have free access to the full Mountain Life programme, which includes wellness, sport and social activities. We try mindful yoga with the wonderful Nika, enjoy an organic, vegan three-course dinner cooked over fire in the Noma-inspired KUKRA. ▶



restaurant (half board, excluding drinks, is included in our stay and there are plenty of non-vegan options too) and, best of all, we hike up the mountain following a trail that starts right outside the hotel. Forsthofalm sits at the bottom of a ski lift station, making it an ideal winter ski holiday location and in autumn the slope makes for gorgeous walking. Having nabbed a couple of sandwiches from the afternoon tea spread, we hike a comfortable 45 minutes up to the middle ski lift station where we slump down on a bench and admire an astonishing view. Behind us we have the mountain, on the other side of which lies popular ski resort Saalbach, and looking out over the impressive landscape we hear the faint sound of goat's bells, the greetings of the odd fellow hiker passing or cyclist enjoying Europe's biggest mountain biking park – but mostly the still sound of nothing. Oh, for a bit more time up here, where all troubles melt away.

A FAIRYTALE CASTLE

Two nights at eco timber hotel Forsthofalm and its surrounding mountain wonderland are not enough, but nonetheless we leave on the third day, this time headed for Salzburg. Here, we stay at Motel One (motel-one.com), a very affordable option, perfect for a city break like this. It's a no-frills but clean and stylish hotel which comes complete with breakfast and very friendly staff. Just like at Forsthofalm, there are no issues with Cyd and I sharing a room. *Sehr gut*, as we have no time to mess about. With just over 24 hours in town, we start with the most important thing: cake. Only, we really make sure we earn it first, by climbing the beautiful Kapuzinerberg, a large forest-covered hill sitting right in the middle of town, just opposite the Altstadt. You see, to get to grips with Salzburg you want not only to wander the picturesque old town, stopping for coffee at traditional establishments such as Tomaselli (tomaselli.at) or admiring the birthplace of Mozart, you also want to see it from above. It's a steep climb up Kapuzinerberg – but worth it. At the very top sits Franziskischlössl (franziskischloessl.at).

TIPS

The Salzburg card gets your free public transport and entry to lots of museums and attractions. See salzburg.info for more information. Cyd and Bella flew British Airways direct from Gatwick to Salzburg. Flights start from £74 and business class is available from £267 (ba.com). The trip was made possible with help from Visit Salzburg (salzburg.info) and Lemongrass Marketing (lemongrassmarketing.com).

at), a small, gay-owned castle, hotel and restaurant with a beautiful courtyard, rose garden and views to die for. The boutique hotel has two luxuriously decorated rooms (named after the owners' two dogs, Darius and Cyra), so beautiful they're fit for a queen, or two. What's more, the restaurant offering (including the cake – do try the apfelstrudel!) is divine and owners Toni and Wolfgang are just lovely. They host stunning weddings here and in winter they do a Christmas market. It's just delightful – and the thought that Adolf Hitler once wanted to build a big stadium and festival establishment up here, but that it now instead houses a petite, magical gay establishment, is rather cheerful too.

SAPPHIC SALZBURG

That evening we head to Urbankeller (urbankeller.com), a foodie dream establishment specialising in Austrian cuisine made with an ethical mindset. They have a full vegetarian and vegan menu alongside their usual meat offerings; they brew their own beer and they promise organic food without artificial flavourings. Situated next to Kleines Theater, the vibe is cool but relaxed and we order our spätzle, a type of potato pasta with lots of cheese, sitting comfortably by the bar. The local grüner veltliner wine recommended to me is delicious and cuts through the fattiness of this traditional Austrian dish perfectly. What's more, prices are very reasonable and Urbankeller restaurant is within walking distance of Salzburg's gay drinking establishments, of which there are six – which isn't bad for a population of 200,000. In the daytime there is Cafe Mozartwinkl and Wernbacher (cafewernbacher.at), and at night bars open to all members of the LGBT community include Mexxx (mexxxgaybar.at) and Dreistein (facebook.com/3SteinGaybarSalzburg), which we find to be quiet on a Wednesday night, but where the friendly bar staff put us in touch with Doris Posch from Salzburg LGBTQI Association, HOSi (hosi.or.at/facebook.com/hosi.salzburg). She's at a big lesbian conference in Vienna but tells us that HOSi bar is a very cheap place to drink on Wednesday, Friday and

Saturday, adding that four times a year they organise a so-called HOSi party (hosi.or.at/category/events/hosi-fest/). They also host Ladies Night on the first Friday of every month, and twice a year there's the women-only party Feminale (hosi.or.at/hosi-events/feminale-2/). In Austria, gays and lesbians largely enjoy the same rights as straight people, however same-sex marriage is not legal at the time of writing. Cyd and I, however, have no trouble holding hands in town, and the female couple depicted on one of the traffic lights in the old town makes us smile.

THE SOUND OF (SING-ALONG) MUSIC

On our last day in Salzburg, it is time for Cyd's final surprise – and the event I know she'll enjoy most: a Sound Of Music singalong tour. Hopping onto a SoM themed Panorama Tour bus (panoramatours.com), departing from Mirabellplatz, which also has a lovely local food market well worth a visit, Cyd is bursting with

excitement for the four-hour trip ahead. Along the way, we not only get to dance like Liesl and Ralph in front of the famous gazebo at Hellbrunn Palace, view the Leopoldskron Palace where the famous boating scene was filmed, but after a tour through the Salzburg Lake District, we stop for lunch by the impressive chapel where Maria and the Baron were married in Mondsee. Throughout the journey we get to sing along to all the classic tunes with tour guide Barbara, clad in traditional dirndl, and I don't think I've ever seen Cyd so happy. After all that singing, we relax with a walk through Mirabell gardens, where many selfies are taken, before strolling along the canal back to the Altstadt. Last, but not least, we take the lift up to the dreamlike castle of Festung Hohensalzburg (salzburg-burgen.at/en/hohensalzburg-castle/), where we can say a final goodbye to the magnificent city and region below. So long, farewell, auf wiedersehen, goodbye... until next time. 🍷

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