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Hot jazz on a cold mountain: a festival on Austria's ski slopes

The Snow Jazz Gastein festival brings the sounds of New Orleans or the Lower East Side to a traditional spa and ski resort in the beautiful Austrian Alps **Ski special: read more in this Saturday's Travel section**

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Snow Jazz Gastein, Austria

"One of the things I like about jazz, kid, is I don't know what's going to happen next. Do you?" I was mulling this Bix Beiderbecke quote as I stared into the darkness outside Bad Hofgastein station. It was 11.30pm, I had no cash, no phone reception and the cab number I called with my last euro turned out to be the

home of an elderly Austrian man. I sat down on my bag and wondered what the hell was going to happen next. After a while a car pulled up. The elderly driver said, "I have a daughter," and drove me to my hotel without another word.

Bad Hofgastein, in the Austrian Alps, is spa town first, ski town second. There is so much thermal water flowing through the Gastein valley that you're pretty much cured of everything as soon as you pass within its boundaries. The towns of Bad Hofgastein, Bad Gastein and Dorfgastein also make up a ski area 220km in size, with lifts sweeping you up to 2,700m and big wide pistes allowing you to carve down with ease.

But I was there for neither skiing nor wellness; I was there for jazz. Which was weird because you don't instantly think Austria when you think of jazz. You think New Orleans and smoky bars, not bathrobes and a chocolate box atmosphere so serene people seem to be gliding around on rails.

Yet for 11 years, the three towns have played host to the 10-day Snow Jazz Gastein festival (this year's starts on 15 March) which sees some of the most creative, talented and experimental musicians in the business playing at different venues in the valley and on the mountain. Around 6,800 jazz fans descend for the festival: this year the theme is "Bella Italia", and performers include pianist Antonio Faraò and duo Musica Nuda. Do not allow the oompah band in your hotel reception to put you off. There are musical rules to be broken in Bad Hofgastein.

My own musical education began the following night up in Bad Gastein, 10km away. The steep town gets a chunk of its electricity from a huge waterfall that pours violently through the centre, occasionally flooding the bridge that connects the two halves.

From the waterfall I headed up tiny, vertiginous streets to the glittering casino, whose interior was all plush deep red curtains, chandeliers as big as houses and smartly dressed people. On the stage stood an instrument that looked pretty much like a glockenspiel. I admit it – I judged.

It took Joe Locke and the New York Explosion about three minutes to change my mind. The US vibraphonist (an instrument that looks like a glockenspiel and has the potential to be the jazz equivalent of the panpipes) created a crescendo of sound, a continuous stream of jumping notes, darting around scales like flies in a jam jar. People craned their necks to see, and packed into every space to listen.

"Jazz deserves the best," said Locke. "It's the first time I've played here and I have to say it's beautiful. I'm bummed I'm leaving tomorrow."



Brass players in Sägewerk.

Next morning, I grabbed my skis and headed for the slopes. Spring slush was fun and entertaining, although up on the wobbly 140m-long Stubnerkogel suspension bridge, altitude 2,300m, the wind whipped icily. I happily made my way to the Kleine Scharte restaurant in Bad Hofgastein to check out the Dixie Boys. The sundrenched terrace had a 180-degree view of snowy mountains – not the usual backdrop for a band with strong bluegrass vibes.

"Are you here for the music?" I asked a table of lads drinking large beers. "Nope," one replied. "But it sure helps drown out the wind."

"I'm getting frizzier and frizzier," wailed Nuka as I sat in the bar later pondering which band to see that night – favouring some New York freeform jazz over a more classical quartet in Bad Gastein. There is a lot of juice in the air in Bad Hofgastein, so you can forget about any hairstyle requiring slickness. Nuka was on the Ski Club of Great Britain's "Bad Girls" weekend, which combines skiing with spa visits. The Alpentherme spa (alpentherme.com/en) was their favourite spot, they said, a health kingdom with different zones, relax world, sports world, family world. I gave it a go, and enjoyed its outdoor spring-fed pool, with water on the cusp of being too cold, enough to keep my brain alert for what was coming. Sägewerk (jazz-im-saegewerk.org) is a gig venue in a former barn up a winding street. From cold, dark silence into heaving, throbbing musicality – it was like jumping head first into the rabbit hole. A strong New York accent silenced the crowd. The opening phrase of Mark Whitecage's alto sax heralded an extraordinary evening curated by Nu Band. People were clapping and stamping their feet, the music was building in waves, the heat rising ... I suddenly snapped back to reality and realized I was boiling alive, in my thick ski socks and long johns. I sneaked out into the cold air and the spell was broken – I was back in an

empty street, gazing at white peaks against a starry sky.

Back at the bar of the Palace Kur- and Sport-Hotel, keyboard player Bruno was deeply into an interpretative Status Quo medley. I didn't know that was going to happen. Does that make it jazz?

- *Snow Jazz Gastein 2013 (jazz-im-saegewerk.org) 15-24 March, tickets from €12 for individual gigs to €100 for a weekend pass. The trip was provided by Ski Club Freshtracks, whose Bad Girls Weekend (skiclub.co.uk/skiclub/skiclubfreshtracks/holiday.aspx?holidayID=2374#.UPRUZUTgIy4) costs £725pp including four nights' half-board at a four-star hotel, return flights from Heathrow to Munich and transfers.*