

The high LIFE



Nestled into the Bavarian Alps, the majestic Schloss Elmau is an ideal winter-wonderland retreat. Think snow, spas and sleigh rides...

Words: LEO BEAR

Steam is rising from the surface of Lake Ferchensee and the whole valley is submerged in a Narnia-esque blue-grey mist. Hanging from the ornate, arched doorway of the isolated shoreside tavern we've just lunched in, 18-inch icicles threaten to drop at any moment – yet we feel completely safe, cushioned by the pristine snow all around. It's blissfully quiet. Towering fir trees sheathed in ice faintly murmur and crackle, their branches occasionally collapsing under the weight of their burden and dumping a load onto the ground with a gentle thud. Beyond that,

the air is still, the sky is bright and our bellies, filled with spinach dumplings and poppy-seed strudel, are keeping us warm.

As we make our way down the 4km snowy trail back to our hotel, tinkling bells ring out in the distance. Through the fog, two shaggy-maned shire horses emerge pulling a wooden sleigh laden with rosy-cheeked passengers, huddled under blankets. They wave as they pass, and the driver stands up to salute; sporting a full moustache, woolly hat and green apron, he looks like something out of a Dickens novel. But this isn't a scene from *A*

Christmas Carol. Heck, it's not even Christmas. This is Bavaria.

"Bavaria" itself throws up quite a few question marks, as we discovered before setting off. "Is it Austria or Germany?"; "Is it a country or a county?"; "Is it the Black Forest?" were just a few of the queries we got from baffled friends. In answer, Bavaria is a state located in the lesser-trodden parts of south-east Germany, about two hours from Munich. Densely forested and dotted with storybook castles, eccentric German princes and tales of derring-do, it's also home to one of the swishest family-friendly hotels in Europe: Schloss Elmau, our chosen digs.

Originally built in 1916 by a liberal philosopher, Dr Johannes Müller, as a shelter for intellectuals and artists, the likes of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears would stay for several months at a time, drinking, dining and dancing. Today, its cultural legacy lives on with a roster of musical events to rival the Royal Albert Hall. Famous authors often drop by to give readings (Ian McEwan among them) and when it's not hosting the literati, presidents and prime ministers are jetting in to discuss matters of global importance: earlier this year, the hotel was the chosen venue for the G7 summit thanks to its secure location and five-star sensibilities.

We were a gang of five that encompassed three generations. For little ones, it's all laid on: colourful bathrobes and slippers are provided in the rooms, a grand buffet dinner is served from 6pm each evening with all sorts of weird and wonderful breadstuffs – think bauernbrot, vollkornbrot and pfund kurs brot (great for Scrabble) – and there's a top-notch kids' club manned by pretty blondes skilled in moulding dolphins out of plastic beads. There's no need to hush your children or plead with them not to run in the corridors; the staff positively encourage it, and

'Staff will happily help tie shoelaces and play the role of Prince Charming'

will happily help tie shoelaces, fetch extra parmesan and play the role of Prince Charming should it be required... Yes, one of our party left nursing a broken heart.

Equally, the hotel knows how to look after its grown-up contingent.

It has a Michelin-star restaurant, weekly classical music concerts and complimentary afternoon tea each day.

One word of warning: this isn't a dainty, boutique hotel. It's big and, following a fire in 2005, is built to last. Heavy doors, wide hallways and large swathes of wood, glass and limestone give the interiors a functional Germanic look, but our suite in the main house (one of 120 rooms) suited us down to



OPPOSITE The hotel illuminated at night. CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Leo Bear's daughter and niece take a ride on a husky-drawn sleigh; the children perfect their tobogganing skills; guests head to the alfresco lounge area after a day of activities

RIGHT Rooms at Schloss Elmau come with a stunning alpine view; guests can travel on horse-drawn sleighs. BELOW The hotel is renowned for its cultural events



the ground. It came with two double bedrooms, a bathroom, separate loo and a walk-in closet for us to stash away all our snow gear, as well as a lovely aspect overlooking the majestic Wetterstein mountains.

Skiing is, of course, an option. The hotel happily shuttles guests (or ski-schoolers) to and from Kranzberg, a family-friendly ski resort 15 minutes away, but there is so much to do within the hotel's grounds, you needn't bother. For starters, there's a picture-perfect tobogganing slope and a private ice-skating rink. My lot were in their element, charging up and down the hill with sledges and building snowmen, but the squeals of delight reached new decibels when a heavily bearded man pulled up in a van and unloaded eight icy-eyed Siberian huskies.

I admit, I was nervous watching the girls being squeezed into what looked like a terribly flimsy

sleigh, with the dogs howling wildly and straining on their leashes, but before I could utter the words "I'm not sure about this...", they were off, tearing down a narrow 3km track circling the perimeter of the property. Needless to say, they returned 10 minutes later, round-eyed, breathless and begging to do it again.

For something tamer, breathtaking nature trails criss-cross the area, many of which lead to rustic Bavarian inns sporting checked tablecloths and century-old wood burners. Ellmauer Alm (a steep climb) and Gasthaus Ferchensee (mentioned earlier on the lake) both offer a warm welcome, a traditional menu and are a comfortable hour's stroll from the hotel (even for small legs).

Whatever you do, make sure you set aside time for Schloss Elmau's spa. Spread over four floors, it has a 25-metre rooftop pool, an outdoor saltwater pool heated to 35°C (where naked swimming is permitted...), a dozen treatment rooms and endless places to flop out next to a crackling log fire. It's all world class and, like the rest of the hotel, smashingly well organised. To top it off, there's a separate family spa, where your little ones can flick ice chips at each other and bounce off giant floats into a heated pool.

Really, everything you can think of has been thought of. And, while I'm confident that the leaders of the free world enjoyed every moment of their stay in the springtime, it's a shame they didn't see it as we did: covered in a magical blanket of snow.



● Two-bedroom family rooms at Schloss Elmau start from £520; schloss-elmau.de EasyJet flies from London Gatwick to Innsbruck (an hour's drive from the hotel), from £28.99 one way.