

Cradle of SKIING

Modern skiing bloomed in Lech, Austria. A century later, other resorts are still trying to catch up.

I wake up to a full moon etched in a dark blue night. It's early still. Hours yet before anyone else in the hotel will be up. But I'm drawn to the window. The light outside is surreal—a pre-dawn wash that bathes everything in a glow of freshness.

I stumble out of bed and traverse the room. Lean out the window and drink up the familiar smell of the Alps; a rich blend of wood smoke, cut hay and fresh juniper. All around me, classic Arlberg farmhouses—pine and stucco—cut sharp-edged shapes out of the sky. Below, a river gorges over smooth-washed rocks, wearing its lazy way through the village. An old man walks slowly across a wooden bridge nearby, a weathered felt hat slouched over one eye. His steps reverberate against ancient planks.

Photography by Scott Markewitz
BY MICHEL BEAUDRY



FOR ALMOST A CENTURY, SKIERS HAVE TAKEN TO THE SLOPES ABOVE THE CLASSIC VILLAGE OF LECH. SKIER: GORDY PEIFER

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PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL LOCATIONS I'VE EVER VISITED," SAYS THE WELL-TRAVELED DAVE SWANWICK, WHO IS FLANKED BY THE AUTHOR AND WENDY FISHER.

And there, across the snow-covered meadow—so near that I could almost touch it—is the legendary Omeshorn. At least the north face of it. Rising straight out of the valley—steep and forbidding. Brooding moodily over the village as if reluctantly gives way to day. I've been in Lech for less than eight hours and already I'm smitten.

Welcome to the Source

No one who has any bit of romance flowing through his veins can help but feel inspired by Austria's Lech. An Arlberg. After all, the village lies at the very heart of the region known as "the cradle of alpine skiing"—the place where it all began at the turn of the last century.

Just down valley, for example, is the little burg of Stuben, where Hannes Schneider first put on skis in 1906. It was Schneider's revolutionary Arlberg technique that would eventually change the face of skiing. And it was in Lech and nearby Zürs where Schneider honed the new downhill style that would make him one of the most celebrated skiers of the 20th century.

But Schneider was only the beginning. For the Arlberg

has produced more acclaimed skiers than just about anywhere. Moreover, Lech has the distinction of being the only mountain village in the world to have spawned four Olympic gold medalists: Patrick Ortlieb in 1992, Egon Zimmermann in 1964, Othmar Schneider in 1952, and Trudi Jochum-Beiser in 1948 and again in 1952. More startling is the fact that they all still live and work in the Lech Valley—a testimony to the quality of the skiing, the way of life and the strong family ties here.

But it goes even further than that, for the ambience of the place speaks directly to the modern skiing experience. As the archetypal high-alpine village—the quintessential ski-in/ski-out resort—Lech is what the rest of the ski world has been trying to emulate for decades. In America, in Japan, in Canada—in Chile and Argentina, even: Mini-Lech, mass-Lechs and Disney-Lechs dominate the modern ski industry.

To date, nobody has done it better. And nobody has done it longer. For nearly a hundred years now, skiers, hikers and climbers have been making the pilgrimage to Lech to play on its storied slopes. And it's had a profound effect on the local lifestyle. What was once an isolated, high-mountain village where life was a constant struggle

for existence was transformed by the mid-1950s into an alpine playground for the crème-de-la-crème of European enthusiasts.

And it still is like that today. In the narrow streets of the village, high-end Mercedes jockey for position with BMWs, Bentleys and Range Rovers. Silver-haired patriots escort their younger female companions to pricey boutiques and tea shops. The place fairly reeks of privilege and money. Old money.

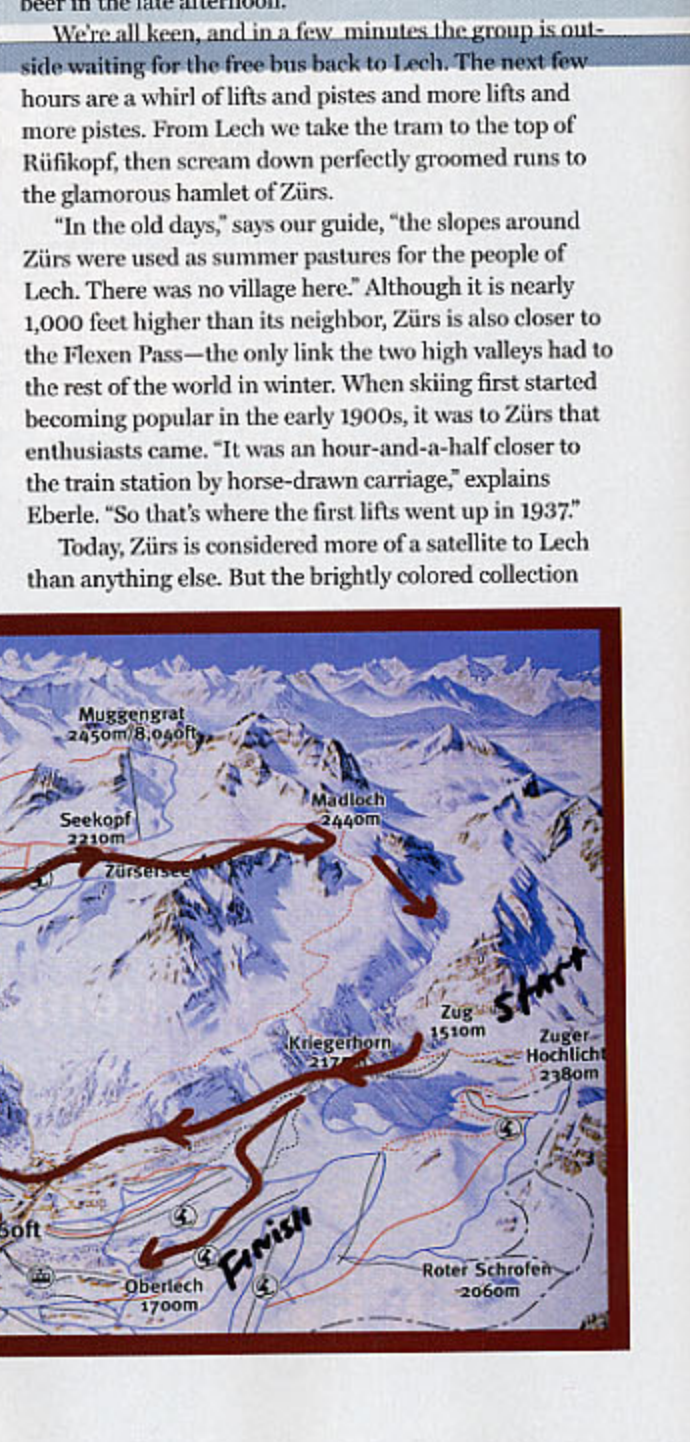
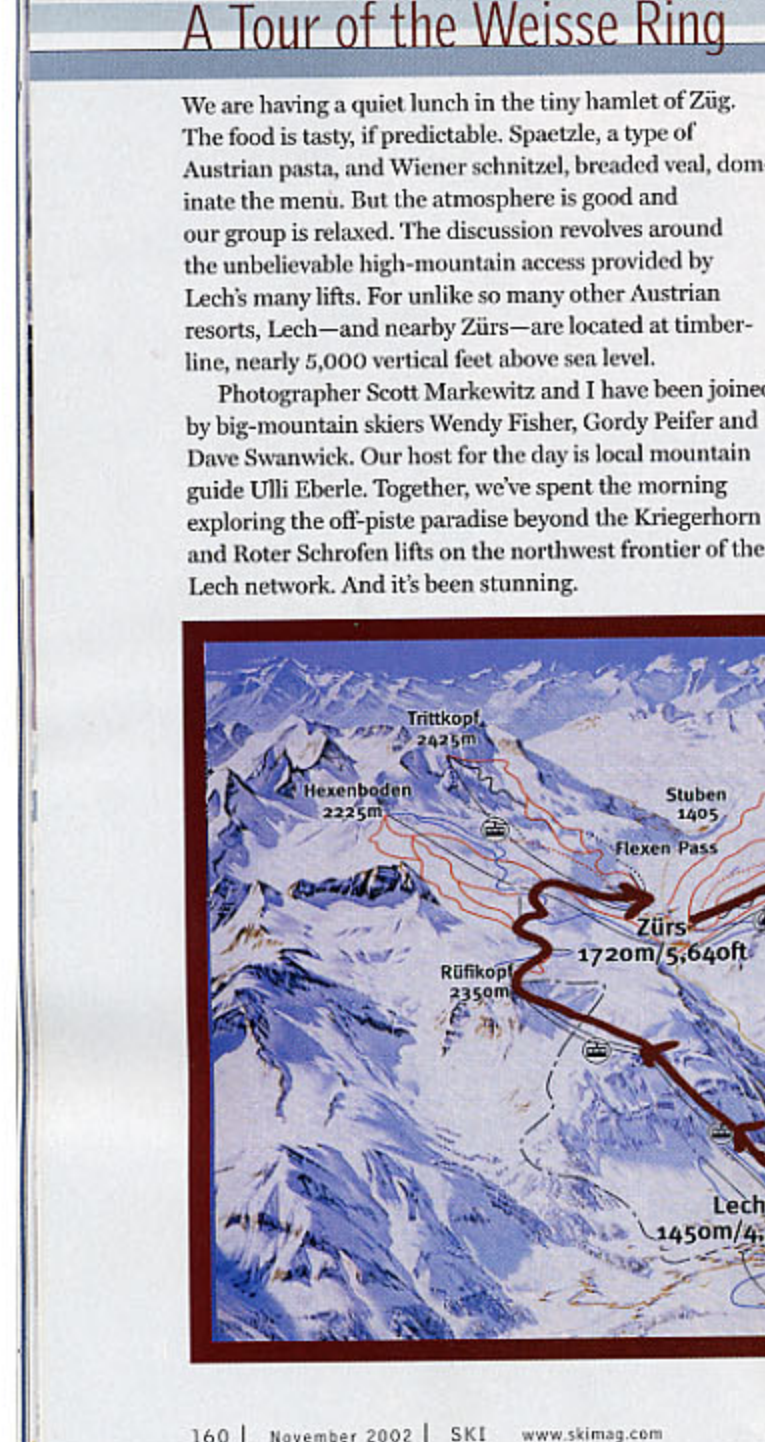
Yet the feel of Lech is still that of a small, intimate mountain village. "We have no big hotel chains in the valley," says Hubert Schwartzler, the former director of tourism here. "There are no Hiltons or Sheratons. Or anything like that. The people of Lech still own the hotels and pensions and guesthouses here. And that makes a huge difference."

Herr Schwartzler is our host this week. And like most of Lech's innkeepers, he takes his job seriously. He is recently retired from his tourism post, and he and his

wife, Bolde, run the Haldenhof Hotel, a beautifully appointed lodge on the edge of the old village. "The ski world has borrowed much of its style from the Arlberg region," Schwartzler says. "We were the first in the Alps to start skiing, the first to start organized ski schools, and the first to export our expertise. With many of the big family firms in the valley, there were many sons to send out into the world. In this way, Arlberg-style skiing soon spread to other countries. And our reputation was made."

But Lech has never rested. Today, it is considered one of the most innovative—and progressive—mountain towns in the world. "Take the way we heat ourselves," Schwartzler says. "Over 175 hotels in the valley are linked by an underground pipeline to a massive pulp-wood heating plant. Pedestrian-only Oberlech [an even more exclusive burg above the main village] uses a vast system of underground tunnels to transport luggage, food and refuse. Even though we're proud of our history, we're not afraid of new ideas here. We believe

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LECH TEMPS TO ATTRACT AN OLDER, UPSCALE CLIENTELE

in finding creative solutions to difficult challenges."

With his neatly combed gray hair, horn-rimmed glasses and fresh-faced complexion that sings of outdoor exercise and high-mountain air, Schwartzler could easily be mistaken for a local teacher. And it wouldn't be that far off the mark: It is a part that he clearly enjoys playing. "For 40 years I have worked hard to tell the story of this valley to the rest of the world. And I think I've succeeded pretty well. Lech will always play an important role in the story of skiing. We just have to make sure we keep evolving with the times."

A Tour of the Weisse Ring

We are having a quiet lunch in the tiny hamlet of Zürg. The food is tasty, if predictable. Spaetzle, a type of Austrian pasta, and Wiener schnitzel, breaded veal, dominate the menu. But the atmosphere is good and our group is relaxed. The discussion revolves around the unbelievably high-mountain access provided by Lech's many lifts. For unlike so many other Austrian resorts, Lech—and nearby Zürg—are located at timberline, nearly 5,000 vertical feet above sea level.

Photographer Scott Markewitz and I have been joined by big-mountain skiers Wendy Fisher, Gordy Peifer and Dave Swanwick. Our host for the day is local mountain guide Ulli Eberle. Together, we've spent the morning exploring the off-piste paradise beyond the Kriegerhorn and Roter Schrofen lifts on the northwest frontier of the Lech network. And it's been stunning.

"Probably one of the most beautiful locations I've ever visited," the much-traveled Swanwick offers. "A really cool place," echoes Fisher. "And it's so great to see it through a local's eyes."

Although the storm that passed nearby Ischgl only a few days before with nearly 3 feet of snow barely left a dusting in Lech, the skiing is still fun. But the weather is getting warm. It's more like April than early February.

Now Eberle has an idea. "After lunch, I'd like to take you on a very special tour. It's called the Weisse Ring or the Madloch Round. And it gives you a nice overview of the region. Who knows? If we ski fast enough, maybe we can finish the day in Oberlech. It's a nice place to have a beer in the late afternoon."

"We'll all seen, and in a few minutes the group is outside waiting for the free bus back to Lech. The next few hours are a whirl of lifts and pistes and more lifts and more pistes. From Lech we take the train to the top of Riffkopf, then stream down perfectly groomed runs of the old-fashioned hamlet of Zürg.

"In the glamous days," says our guide, "the slopes around Zürg were used as summer pastures for the people of Lech. There was no village here." Although it is nearly 1,000 feet higher than its neighbor, Zürg is also closer to the Lechen Pass—the only link the two high valleys had to the rest of the world in winter. When skiing first started becoming popular in the early 1900s, it was to Zürg that enthusiasts came. It was an hour-and-a-half closer to the train station by horse-drawn cart," explains Eberle. "So that's where the first lifts went up in 1937."

Today, Zürg is considered more of a satellite to Lech than anything else. But the brightly colored collection



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GORDY PEIFER CURVES HIS CADIN FEVIER ABOVE ZÜRGS



SWANWICK DIVES INTO ONE OF LECH'S 'SECRET' COULOIRS. PATRICK ORTLIEB'S HOTEL MONTANA IN OBERLECH IS A PLACE TO SEE—AND BE SEEN.

of four- and five-star hotels on either side of the narrow valley offers ample testimony to the comfortable lifestyle of the people who stay here. "The skiing is better in Zürg," says Eberle. "It's steeper, and there are more choices. And the nightlife is considered better than in Lech. It attracts a younger, more outgoing clientele."

From Zürg, Eberle leads us up a high-speed quad to the Zürsersee region. By this point, Swanwick and Peifer are nearly panting with eagerness. They both say they look for new skiing possibilities. To the south of us are

Muggengrat and Hassenfluh peaks—unskied, off-piste lines calling from every ridge and saddle. "We're going to have to come back here, for sure!" says Swanwick. Peifer nods. And shakes his head. "Why not now?" he asks. "Why don't we check it out while we're here?"

But Eberle is firm. We have to move on. By the time we reach the top of the Madloch, at 8,000 feet, it's already mid-afternoon. We've nearly done a full circle. Our guide points out our morning runs down the Zuger Tadel across the valley. Then he asks: "Would you like to finish off with a

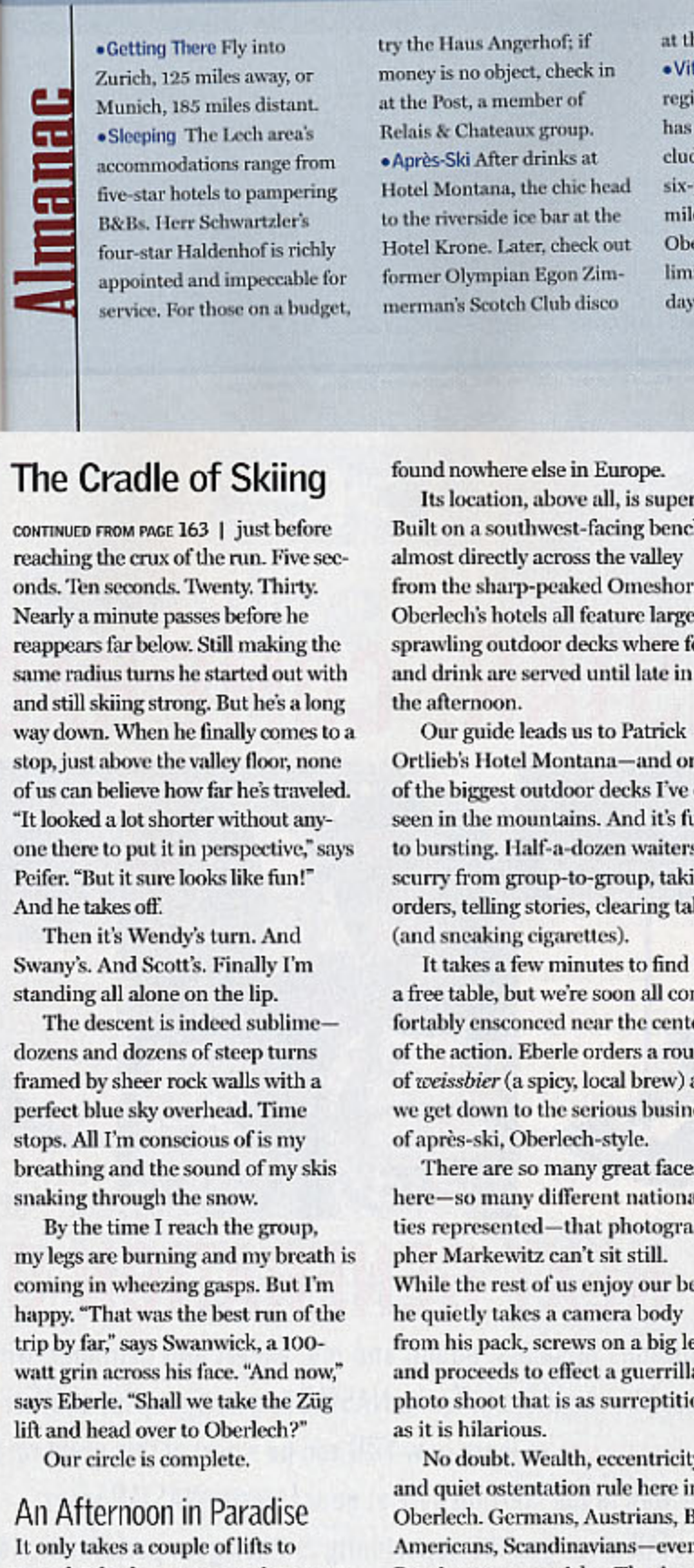
descent down one of Lech's 'secret' couloirs?" He doesn't have to ask twice. The conventional way down takes most skiers from the top of Madloch around a long ridge and down nearly 3,500 vertical of wide-open meadow-skiing below the Omeshorn back to Lech. It's considered an off-piste run but it's mainstream. Eberle has another idea following the main pass around the ridge, our guide leads us to the left and over a steep, rock-studded traverse that has me wandering about the wisdom of our choice. We slip and slide and jump our way over the sharp-pointed gneiss and finally work ourselves to the edge of the couloir.

And now I know why it is considered a "secret." A north-facing elevator shaft that drops 3,000 vertical feet directly to the valley floor, the couloir is maybe 60 feet wide at the top and quickly narrows to a dozen feet at the bottom. It's steep all the way down. And breaks. High rock walls line both sides. And here doesn't give me much confidence. Get caught in a slide, I think to myself, and you're riding it right to the bottom. My heart begins to pound just a little bit harder.

"The snowpack is safe here," Eberle says, as if reading my mind. "And the snow conditions very good. Still, we will go down one at a time." And he pushes off.

It's soon evident that he wasn't bluffing. The slope offers an icing of fresh snow on a chalky, firm base, and the first few turns to be makes leave perfect little arcs on the surface. "That looks beautiful," enthuses Fisher. "Way better than I thought it would be."

Eberle continues to work his way down the gully. But it's a convex slope, and he disappears from view | CONTINUE ON PAGE 226



•Getting There Fly into Zurich, 125 miles away, or Munich, 185 miles distant. •Skiing The Lech area's accommodations range from five-star hotels to pampering B&Bs. Herr Schwartzler's four-star Haldenhof is richly appointed and impeccable for service. For those on a budget, try the Haus Angerhof; if money is no object, check in at the Post, a member of Relais & Chateaux group. •Après-Ski After drinks at Hotel Montana, the chic head to the riverside ice bar at the Hotel Krone. Later, check out former Olympian Egon Zimmermann's Scotch Club disco

at the five-star Arlberg Hotel. •Vital Stats The Arlberg region, including St. Anton, has more than 80 lifts, including 10 cable cars and two six-packs, serving some 160 miles of terrain. The Lech-Oberlech-Zürs region is limited to 16,000 skiers a day and offers direct-to-lift access, as well as reserved parking. Lift tickets range from \$33 to \$87 a day, or \$155 to \$170 for a six-day pass, depending on the season. Contact the Lech-Zürs tourism office at 011-43-5583-211-21; 61-0; fax: 011-43-5583-211-55; direction@lech-zuers.at; www.lech-zuers.at.

The Cradle of Skiing

continues from page 163 | Just before reaching the crux of the run. Five seconds. Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty. Nearly a minute passes before he reappears far below. Still making the same rillid turns he started out with and still skiing strong. But he's a long way down. When he finally comes to a stop, just above the valley floor, none of us can believe how far he's traveled. "It looked a lot shorter without anyone there to put it in perspective," says Peifer. "But it sure looks like fun!"

And he takes off. Then it's Wendy's turn. And Swanwick. And Scott's. Finally I'm standing all alone on the lip. The descent is indeed sublime—dozens and dozens of steep turns framed by sheer rock walls with a perfect blue sky overhead. Time stops. All I'm conscious of is my breathing and the sound of my skis snaking through the snow.

By the time I reach the group, my legs are burning and my breath is coming in wheezing gasps. But I'm happy. "That was the best run of the trip by far," says Swanwick, a 100-watt grin across his face. "And now," says Eberle. "Shall we take the Zürg lift and head over to Oberlech?"

Our circle is complete.

An Afternoon in Paradise

It only takes a couple of lifts to completely change our environment. From high-stakes, off-piste adventuring, we suddenly find ourselves in hedonistic Oberlech. From being all alone in the mountains, we are suddenly surrounded by hundreds of Bogner-wearing, schnapps-sipping, sun-worshipping tourists.

And it feels good. A tight little enclave of top-rated hotels, Oberlech (German for Over-Lech) is exactly what it says it is. Situated a few hundred vertical feet above the main village, it can only be accessed by tram or chairlift from the valley floor. The resulting sense of isolation—and alpine calm—lends a certain charm to this pedestrian pocket-resort that is

found nowhere else in Europe. Its location, above all, is superb. Built almost directly across the valley from the sharp-peaked Omeshorn—Oberlech's hotels all feature large, sprawling outdoor decks where food and drink are served until late in the afternoon.

Our guide leads us to Patrick Ortlieb's Hotel Montana—and one of the biggest outdoor decks I've ever seen in the mountains. And it's full to bursting. Half-a-dozen waiters scurry from group-to-group, taking orders, telling stories, clearing tables (and smoking cigarettes).

It takes a few minutes to find a free table, but we're soon all comfortably ensconced near the center of the action. Eberle orders a round of weissbier (a spicy local brew) and we get down to the serious business of après-ski, Oberlech-style.

There are so many great faces here—so many different nationalities represented—that photographer Markewitz can't sit still. While the rest of us enjoy our beers, he quietly takes a camera body from his pack, screws on a big lens, and proceeds to effect a guerrilla photo shoot that is as rapturous as it is hilarious.

No doubt. Wealth, eccentricity and quiet ostentation rule here in Oberlech. Germans, Austrians, Brits, Americans, Scandinavians—even Russian nouveau riche: They're all here. And they all want to "be seen." I'm suddenly reminded of Cannes during the Film Festival. Only with snow and a camera for a backdrop instead of sea and sand.

Eventually, the sun drops behind the high peaks to the west of us. The high-mountain air quickly gets chilly. The decks slowly start clearing of people. "Isn't it time we made our way back down to Lech," it's getting late."

She's right. Still, it sure feels comfortable here, drinking weissbier and basking in the last light of a wonderful Arlberg day. ♦

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