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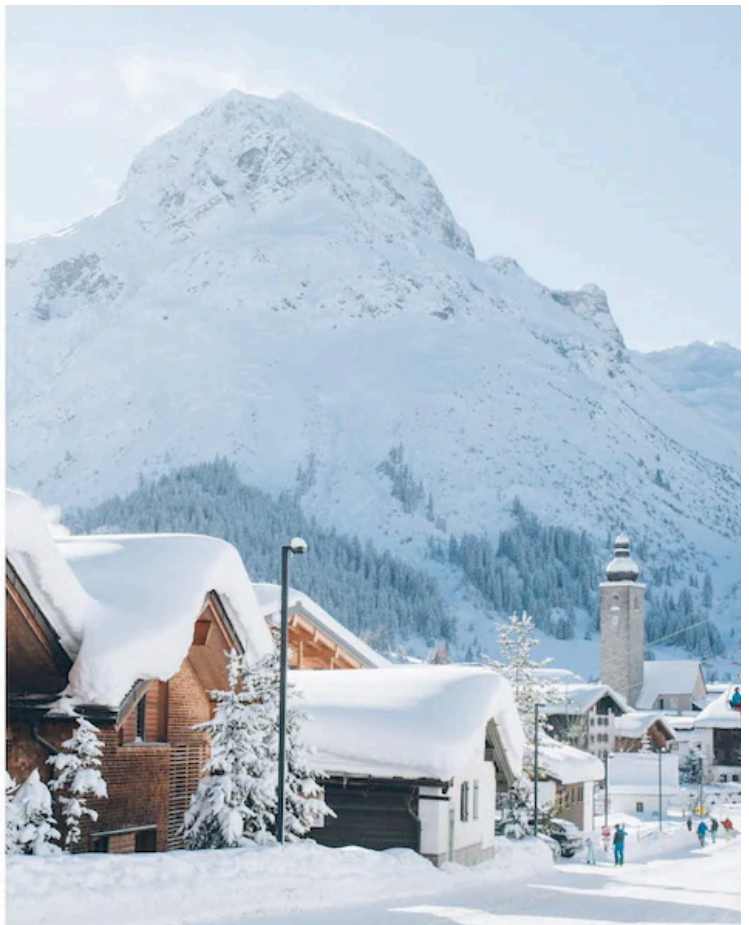


I've visited almost 100 ski resorts in Austria – and this one is the best

The Austrian mountains have it all, but which resort reigns supreme? Our veteran skier makes his choice







Dave Watts (left) has visited Lech on several occasions during the past 40 years

Dave Watts

11 November 2024 8:00am GMT

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I first visited the Austrian ski resort of Lech in the early 1980s and immediately loved the chocolate-box charm of the village, the great snow and the fabulous skiing on offer. A lot has changed in the past four decades, but the place retains its charming atmosphere and the ski area has improved beyond recognition.

Yes, it's expensive by Austrian standards and has a reputation as the nation's most exclusive winter destination. But it's worth the money to be set in the midst of Austria's biggest ski area. Here's what sets Lech above the rest.

Picturesque setting by the river

The charming village centre is scattered with traditional chalet-style buildings along a gurgling river with crystal-clear water, and paths and bridges usually covered in snow.

As is expected in a resort of this calibre, hotels are mainly four- and five-star. But there are plenty of three-stars, guest houses and apartments to choose from too.

Ski lifts rise up both sides of the valley from the village centre, which enjoys a sunny setting, surrounded by attractive scenery, including the Omeshorn (2,557m), looming up to the south. One cable car that runs till the early hours takes you up to Oberlech, a small traffic-free satellite village, 200m higher, home to more luxury hotels and chalets set on the piste, but also a great base for families looking for ski-in/ski-out access.



Ski lifts rise up both sides of the valley from the village centre, which enjoys a sunny setting, Credit: getty

Austria's biggest linked ski area

In the last decade, Lech's ski area has more than doubled in size. As part of this transformation, it has been linked by new lifts to Warth to the north and St Anton and Stuben to the south. Together they now form Austria's biggest lift-linked ski area – the Arlberg – and Lech is in the midst of it.

The 185 miles of pistes and 125 miles of off-piste ski routes and itineraries keep skiers and snowboarders of all standards happy for a week. Many of Lech's most popular off-piste descents are routinely groomed and closed if conditions are poor or if there's avalanche danger – in my view they should be classified as pistes.

The local slopes of Lech and neighbouring Zürs are great for intermediate cruising and the 13-mile-White Ring circuit shows you the best route around. But my favourite runs are off the circuit: the lovely away-from-all-the-lifts red from Muggengrat down to Zürs (750m vertical) and the north-facing runs from Saloberkopf down towards Warth, which often have the best dry powdery snow.

Experts can enjoy wonderful off-piste and the only heliskiing allowed in Austria. Neighbouring St Anton and Stuben are famous for their steep off-piste terrain too. Beginners have good areas both at valley level and up at Oberlech.

Fast facts | Lech, Austria

Resort height	1,450m
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Total ski area size	305km (Arlberg)
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Slope height	1,450-2,450m
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Number of lifts	88
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Lift pass price *	€401 (Arlberg)
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Nearest airport	Innsbruck (116km), 90 minutes; Friedrichshafen (130km), 95 minutes; Zurich (196km), two hours and 15 minutes
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Nearest station	Langen am Arlberg (15km), 20 minutes
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* six-day lift pass price for 2024/25

Excellent snow and much-improved lift systems

This is a famously snowy area – on average Lech gets almost twice as much snow in a season as St Anton, and three times as much as Kitzbühel. And normally it falls as lovely dry powder. The downside of this is that the access road (the Flexen Pass) can be closed for days after exceptional snowfalls – but Lech's not a bad place to be marooned.

The lift system has improved beyond recognition since the 1980s. Most recently, two notorious bottlenecks on the local Lech-Zürs circuit have been eliminated: three seasons ago, two long, slow, 50-year-old, two-person chairlifts were replaced by a fast six-seater chairlift and a 10-person gondola.

That followed three new gondolas in the last decade, linking Lech's ski area to St Anton's (which used to be linked only by road) and to Warth (the road to there is closed in winter).



A much-improved lift system now links Lech to St Anton's and Warth Credit: Daniel Zangerl /Lech Zürs Tourism

Good restaurants and bars

Back in the 1980s and '90s, Lech's mountain restaurants were no great shakes. But there are plenty of excellent places now. My favourites include Balmalp, at the top of the gondola from Zug (modern, lively, panoramic views); Rud-Alpe, on the lower slopes above Lech (rustic, good traditional Austrian dishes); Kriegeralpe, on a blue run down from the Hassensprung chairlift (charming rustic hut, good for a snowy day with amazing *Kaiserschmarren*). Plus the sunny terraces of the hotels at Oberlech – a great place for mixed-ability groups (including non-skiers) to meet up.

In the village, the top gourmet restaurants are in hotels – the highest rated is the Rote Wand, a taxi ride away in Zug. Of the few non-hotel restaurants, Hus Nr 8 is a traditional woody *stube* in one of the oldest buildings in Lech, serving simple local dishes.

Après ski is quiet compared to St Anton and many other Austrian resorts. But I like the woody Schneggarei at the foot of the slopes for a quiet drink after the lifts close – so do many ski instructors. It serves good pizzas and other dishes at lunchtime and in the evenings too. It's a shame that the Tannbergerhof in the

main street stopped doing its fabulous tea dance discos of the 1980s, but it still has a lively outdoor après-ski bar, as does the nearby Krone.



Lech's lively après-ski scene is best found at the foot of the slopes Credit: Alamy Stock Photo

Non-skiing fun

The half-mile floodlit toboggan run from Oberlech to Lech is great family fun, walkers can enjoy 25 miles of prepared winter trails, and there's a Skyspace structure above Oberlech that provides beautiful views and an amazing natural light show via an opening to the sky. And don't miss the amazing seven-story Strolz shopping emporium – complete with a bar and expert boot fitting, including its own Strolz customised boots – unlike anything I've ever experienced in any other European resort.

Essentials

[Ski Solutions](#) (020 3944 7124) has a good selection of hotels, apartments and chalets in Lech. The four-star, ski-in/ski-out Monzabon is right in the centre of the village and near the main chairlift out. A B&B stay for seven nights costs from £1,595pp, including flights and transfers.

[Explore Lech further with our expert ski guide.](#)

The runners-up

St Anton

Notorious for its lively and loud après-ski on and off the mountain. The main local slopes are great for experts and strong intermediates, but too steep and crowded for more timid intermediates and beginners. Read more in our [St Anton ski guide](#).

Kitzbühel

A delightful medieval centre to what is now a town rather than a village. A good-sized ski area that suits intermediates best. But, because of its low altitude, snow quality can be poor in warm weather. Read more in our [Kitzbühel ski guide](#).

Ischgl

A traditional Tirolean-style resort with a high, snowsure decent-sized ski area and a marvellous lift system. Best for intermediates, but there are no easy runs back to the village. Read more in our [Ischgl ski guide](#).

Plan the perfect ski holiday

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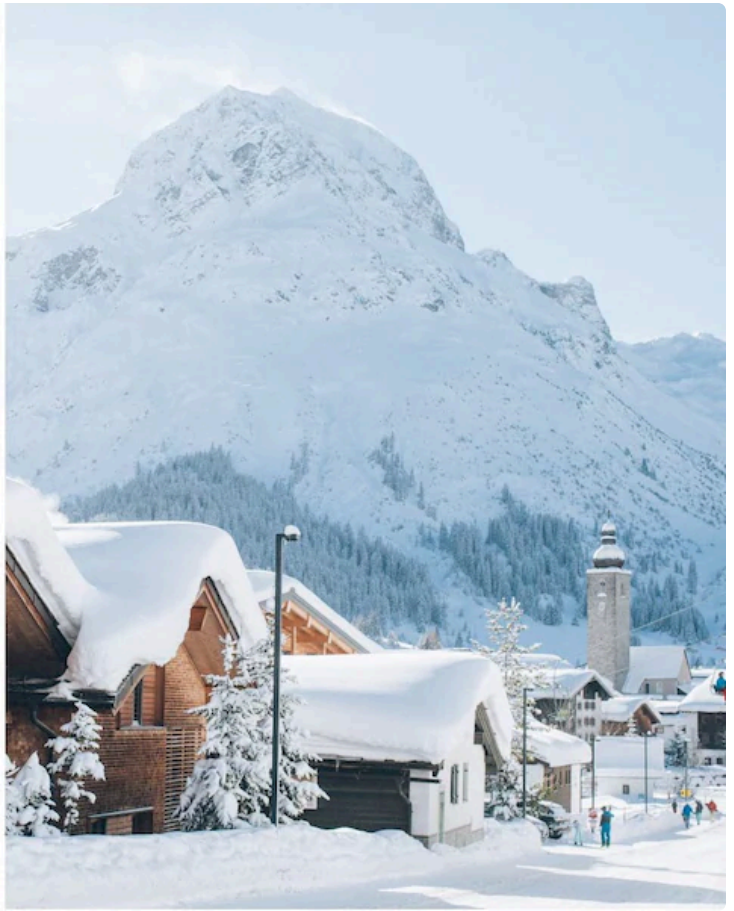
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