

Sunrise on the *Summit*

The sun rising over the Alps from a 7000ft summit in the Austrian Tirol is a magical memory that will last **Clive Nicholls** a lifetime

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS

“In a world where most people get their entertainment online it’s good to know that something as simple as watching the sun rise can give so much pleasure... and being in the beautiful Tirol helps”

IT'S STILL dark when I arrive at the cable car station, but by the time the gondola has whisked me up to its final stop at 6000ft (1850m), the sky has already started to lighten.

I need to press on: I've got about a mile to walk and 1000ft (300m) to climb before I'm where I need to be. It's hard not to keep stopping to take pictures, but I'm on a deadline – I want to be at the summit. I make it just in time.

Looking to the east, the wild Emperor Mountain range releases the dawn sun and its first rays dash across the valleys and hit me with a warm and wondrous light.

The summit of the 7000ft (2128m) Wiedersberger Horn lights up like a beacon. It's crowded up here. Not crowded like a London tube in rush hour but pretty crowded for a mountaintop. There must be 50 to 60 people – oh, and a couple of Labradors, who like me, have got up early to see the sun rise over the Alps.

It is a special moment. Couples are hugging, most are taking pictures, some are enjoying time for reflection. It is so, so worth the early start and a memory that I'll cherish for years to come.

Some went down soon after the sun cleared the distant range but I think they were locals who had to get to work. I stayed a bit longer before walking down the other side of the mountain to the top of the cable car station. Breakfast calls.

Scrambled egg mixed with chopped bacon and onion, topped off with cheese and ham rolls at the café 6000ft up in the Alps... perfect.

In a world where most people are getting their entertainment online it's good to know that something as simple as watching the sun rise can give so much pleasure. I have to admit that being in the beautiful Austrian Tirol helps enormously and it's a credit to the people of the small town of Alpbach, who open up the lifts at 4am three times a year to make it possible. It happens once in July, August and September so it's worth



Clockwise: Spectacular sunrise at the summit of the Weidersberger Horn; historic Rattenburg and the Kisslinger Glassworks; a swan is shaped from molten glass and cycling in Alpbach. With ebikes and beautiful scenery, bike riding doesn't get much better than this





◀ planning your visit around one of those dates.

After breakfast it's time for my next treat, ebiking. These are just like conventional bikes but with a small electric motor to give you a bit of a push. It's like riding downhill with a tail-wind the whole time. Even the hills around Alpbach are easy and, with a mixture of roads with almost no traffic, and off-road tracks winding through glorious countryside, it's very safe and it's hard to imagine anywhere better to rekindle an appetite for two wheels. Turn the power up and you'll feel like the 'king of the mountains'.

En route there are plenty of places for refreshment, the rough-and-ready glass of red wine on a farmer's veranda or fabulous restaurants (not expensive) providing a

Clockwise: Planning laws in Alpbach ensure that all homes are beautiful; the church for all religions in Alpbach, the Museum of Tyrolean Farmhouses in Kramsach; the view from Restaurant Jakober: great food, great view and farmhouse sleeping arrangements were basic

wonderful lunch. I tried both and loved them equally for different reasons. I can recommend the prawn spaghetti at the Jakober. The batteries on the bikes will last a full day so you can really cover some ground; I ended up in the small historic town of Rattenburg.

Set in just a few acres on the banks of the River Inn, and with a population of just 400, Rattenburg dates back to the 14th century. Although it's small, it has a castle, museum and many historic buildings, but for me it's the coffee shops and glassworks that make it special.

At Kisslinger Glass you can watch the craftsmen producing everything from gaudy trinkets to stunning works of art. In a matter of minutes a glass swan is fashioned from a molten ball of crystal, and next door the engravers are personalising goblets for a customer. The shop is full of tempting glassware at prices that didn't seem expensive, but anything too fragile has to survive the flight home so I left a beautiful vase sitting on the shelf.

The outdoor cafés are brilliant for people watching and an hour or so with a



couple of cups of cappuccino seems time well spent.

Back in Alpbach I take an evening stroll. This is a smashing place with a real local community; 2500 residents live here so it's much more than just a holiday destination and is equally attractive in summer or in winter. Strict planning laws mean that homes must be built in wood from the first floor up and must have balconies, and window boxes are compulsory.

It works – it's a picture-postcard village. No wonder it's won many awards for being 'Austria's most beautiful village' and also 'Europe's most beautiful flower village'. At an altitude of 3300ft (1000m) it's surrounded by the Alps; its origins date back 1000 years but it thrived from the 15th century due to copper and silver mining. Nowadays farming and tourism are the mainstays, with the tinkle of cowbells providing the music in the mountains. An attractive touch is a small chapel, built with local money, to serve as a church for all religions. Described as 'a place of stillness' it is just that, and it is a peaceful spot whatever your religious persuasion.

If you stay in Alpbach, you get a free Alpbachtal Seenland Card which gives free access to the cable cars, local bus transport and many attractions. It's a real bonus. After an evening sampling some of Austria's fine wines – the whites were particularly good – and fine dining at the Böglehof I had a more leisurely start in the morning. ▶





Clockwise: Sonja, our inspirational wild flower expert, leads the barefoot walk across the high moor; Markbachjoch, where paragliders take a leap of faith; an insect-eating plant takes breakfast, minus the apple strudel; the beauty of the Spotted Orchid and gold medal cheese maker Johann Schönauer

Passport to the Tirol

■ Thomson Lakes & Mountains - tel: 020 8939 0740) - offers 12 summer resorts in the Austrian Tirol, including Alpbach in the Alpbach Valley and Niedereau in the Wildschönau Valley. A week's stay at the four-star Hotel Alphof costs from £509 per person (based on two sharing), including flights from Gatwick and resort transfer. Direct flights are available from all major UK airports

■ In summer, easyJet (www.easyJet.com) flies direct four times a week from London Gatwick to Innsbruck. Affordable resort transfers are bookable online through Four Seasons Travel: (www.transfer.tirol.at).

About half an hour away in Niedereau I meet Sonja Seisl, my guide for the morning walk through the pine forests and high moorland.

Starting from the village, we soon go off-road onto a mountain track. Sonja is pointing out wildflowers by the dozen: the beautiful purple flower of the Spotted Orchid, the Himalayan Balsam that Hitler tried, but failed, to kill off, an insect-eating plant (that was actually having its breakfast), herbs and grasses.

Her enthusiasm is contagious and I soon realise that, with a bit of knowledge, I can better appreciate what nature offers those who are prepared to take a bit of time to look more carefully at their

surroundings. We reach the high moor. "Time to go barefoot," briefs Sonja. Shoes and socks off, we set off across the peat bog. This is definitely back to nature. I've been nursing a bad heel but the slightly squelchy soft walking works wonders. I'll cancel that physio appointment - nature is a better (and cheaper) healer.

It's a remarkable feeling walking on wet, spongy ground sometimes with peat squeezing between your toes. Definitely recommended.

Down from my magical walk, it's time to go up again. The Markbachjoch cable car takes me from Niedereau to the station at 4800ft (1465m) for a spot of lunch. I can't resist a basic but tasty schnitzel and chips.

Entertainment over lunch is provided by the paragliders queuing up to launch themselves off the mountain. I've never tried it but the feeling must be spectacular as the thermals catch you and lift you off to soar with the eagles. Maybe one for the bucket list, but for today I'm just an interested spectator. A touch more mayo on my schnitzel, I think.

After a long and leisurely lunch (that's what holidays are about) I visit the Schönanger Alm Dairy. Master cheesemaker Johann Schönauer, who won numerous gold medals in the Cheese Olympics, processes 2500 litres of milk every day during the summer. The dairy works as a co-operative for 25 farmers whose

cattle graze the mountainside in summer. His herb cheese was particularly to my taste; I did bring a 1lb block away with me.

Johann is very busy during the summer, but during the winter, when he's just watching his cheeses mature, he has a second job as a masseuse. I couldn't work out if the twinkle in his eye meant that he was having me on with that tale. One thing's for sure, he's a charismatic character and his cheese is excellent.

Farming in the Tirol has been the mainstay for centuries and the Museum of Tyrolean Farmhouses in Kramsach recreates life from times gone by. Ancient farmhouses, hundreds of years old, have been found in villages in the Tirol. They've been taken

apart, timber by timber, and painstakingly rebuilt in this country park. Archive footage of timber mills is shown in one of the buildings. It's scary stuff, as lumberjacks leap from log to log on the fast flowing river. Where were the health and safety people when they were needed?

The museum is interactive and there's plenty for children (and adults for that matter) to get involved with. You can even build your own mini-farmhouse from pre-cut timbers. What is surprising is that although life inside the farmhouses is dramatically different in the 21st century, the outside appearance has changed little.

The scenery in the Tirol is magnificent. Whatever the weather or time of year, it is

always dramatic and hauntingly beautiful. In summer it is warm and the walking can be as easy as you want it to be. Cable cars can get you to the mountaintops with little effort, but if you want a challenge, the choice of walking trails is almost endless. The ebiking may seem lazy to the purist cyclist, but it is a great way of seeing so much of the countryside without uphill sections knocking the stuffing out of you.

Holidays are about memories and seeing the sunrise over the Alps from the summit of the Weidersberger Horn will last me a lifetime. It was a very special experience shared with likeminded people on a beautiful mountaintop.