



Photos provided by Saalbach Tourism

# SURFING THE SLOPES IN AUSTRIA

From gourmet food to spectacular snowfalls, the town of Saalbach in Austria is ideal for those seeking a pared-down, laid-back snowboarding haven. **Daniel Scheffler** goes exploring.

**N**ot everyone seeks the glamour of St Moritz, the celebrity haunts of Saalbach's neighbours or the culture of Austria's capital city of Vienna. For those looking for pristine slopes, lots of snow and an adventure off the beaten tracks, Saalbach is an ideal destination.

Landlocked by Hungary, Germany, Slovakia, Switzerland and Italy, Austria is often overlooked by tourists searching for snowboarding and skiing opportunities. But the modest town of Saalbach, regarded as one of the country's premier snow resorts, has a wide range of runs — on and off-piste — and a snow record that boasts perfect conditions.

Officially known as Saalbach-Hinterglemm, the area forms part of the Zell am See district in the Pinzgau region of Salzburg. Just the right amount of tourism in the area means that slopes are spacious enough to snowboard and plenty of gondolas (brightly coloured bubbles floating above the slopes) and demarcated routes allow for easy access. Almost hip-deep undisturbed powder explodes as boards traverse the slopes — perfect for adrenaline junkies.

The popularity of snowboarding dates back to 1960s America when it was known as “snurfing”, but it only became an Olympic sport in the late 80s. It's been around since the 1920s though, when skiers who were looking for an alternative sport tied their skis together and headed downhill — usually with hilarious results. Pioneers like Tom Sims (founder of Sims Snowboards) and Mike Olsen (founder of Gnu Snowboards) took the sport in a new direction with new board designs, and the sport has come a long way with hi-tech versions made from materials like fibreglass and polyethylene.

Snowboarding has its own language too, with terms like jibbing, freeriding and freestyling. One of the common styles, jibbing involves riding on obstacles that can include anything from trees and rocks to walls and vehicles. Freeriding uses the random flow of natural terrain, and freestyling includes spins, flips and grabs. What makes snowboarding so different from skiing is that the learning curve is steep but once you have the basics a bit of practice will send you down any colour of slope — imagine yourself as a James Bond wannabe in the famous snowboarding scene from *A View To A Kill*.

When you've had enough of the slopes, the après-ski at Saalbach is just as much fun. With a number of lively bars and restaurants, it's the perfect place to spend a holiday. Stories abound of tobogganers heading down the slopes after a few beers or dancing the night away at the Hinterhag Alm — all part of the cheer Austria is known for. Good food (including apple strudel and cream, of course!) and a local wine selection all add up to a memorable holiday.





Eva Village hotel



The restaurant in Eva Village



### When to go

The best snowfall — and therefore conditions for snowboarding and skiing — is from the end of January until early April. Temperatures drop below freezing but there are still enough hours of sunshine to keep you smiling.

### How to get there

Fly to Munich International Airport ([lufthansa.com](http://lufthansa.com) or [britishairways.com](http://britishairways.com)) and then taking a relaxed three-hour train ride to Zell Am See ([bahn.com](http://bahn.com)) and of course a short taxi ride to Saalbach's hotels. Another option is to take the overnight sleeper train from London via Paris to Zell Am See ([raileurope.com](http://raileurope.com)).

### Where to stay

The unpretentious Eva Village Hotel ([eva-paradise.at](http://eva-paradise.at), +43 6541 6262) in the middle of Saalbach is close to the first slope, albeit a training one, and has easy access to endless skiing and snowboarding routes. The hotel prides itself on attention to detail, which includes four-course meals with local ingredients and a relaxing spa. The hotel is the social hub of the village when the slopes close and it's time for après-ski.

If you prefer something a little more unusual and out of the way, head up the mountain to Hinterhag Art and Ski-In Hotel ([hinterhag.at](http://hinterhag.at), +43 6541 6291). Owned by artist Evi Fersterer, the hotel is like a magical castle on the hill. Made from wood and glass, it has panoramic saunas, organic kitchens and a daily après-ski dance with live music.

### The equipment

The Snow Academy ([snowacademy.com](http://snowacademy.com)) in Saalbach rents out boards, boots and helmets, and is the best place in town to book snowboarding lessons. With highly trained and officially certified professionals the school takes everyone from blue-slope beginners to the more advanced black slope enthusiasts. Clothes (padded jackets, pants, thermal underwear and goggles) are available at Ski Pro ([skipro.at](http://skipro.at)), directly opposite Eva Village Hotel, and you'll even score a discount if you're staying at the Eva.