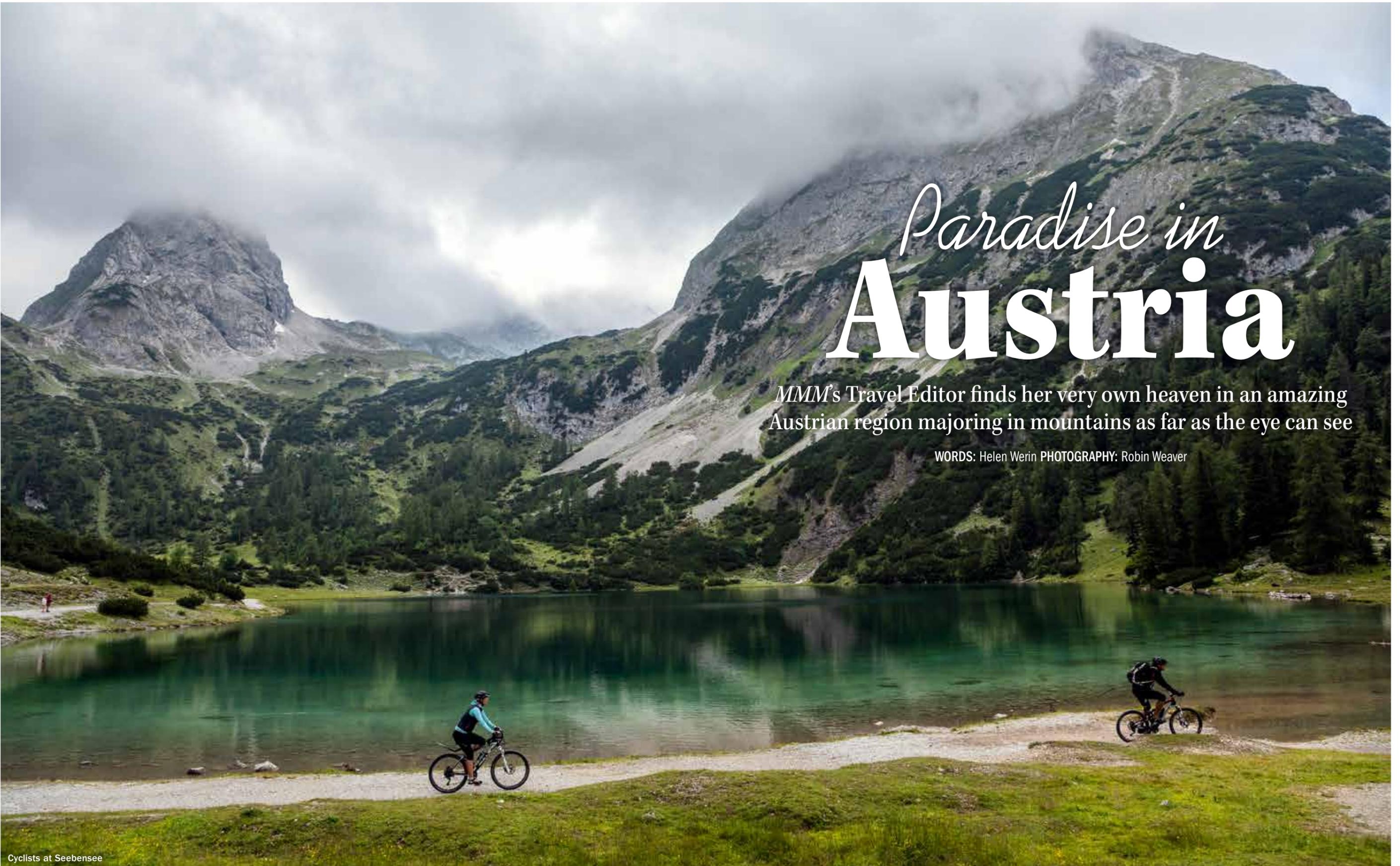


Paradise in Austria

MMM's Travel Editor finds her very own heaven in an amazing Austrian region majoring in mountains as far as the eye can see

WORDS: Helen Werin PHOTOGRAPHY: Robin Weaver



Cyclists at Seebensee



Helen Werin...

... is MMM's Travel Editor and loves nothing more than following in the tracks of readers who have inspired her with their motorhoming tales. To know more about writing for MMM's travel pages, email Helen at mmmtravel@warnersgroup.co.uk

I emailed a friend saying we had just arrived in paradise. I quickly sent pictures of our extraordinarily beautiful Alpine surroundings. "Wow! I see what you mean," came the reply.

And the name of this Austrian eden? Strangely enough, the Tiroler Zugspitz Arena. Since it sounds more like a sports stadium than a marketing 'tag' for a group of charming villages, I wasn't sure what to expect when an acquaintance urged that we "absolutely had to go" there as part of our two-month summer tour in Europe. Her recommendation turned out to be among the best advice I've ever been given.

Even more rhapsodies found in internet ads couldn't prepare me for the gorgeous reality of the Tiroler Zugspitz Arena: 'dream destination', 'mountains as far as the eye can see', 'a paradise for hikers with 150 trails', copywriters gushed. As someone who hates flat landscapes, loves walking and gets a thrill from gliding up mountains in cable cars, I could almost feel the magnetic pull of the Tiroler Zugspitz Arena dragging me away from my desk. And, as a bit of a cynic, I had to see if all these superlative claims were true.

My teenage daughter, Sophie, was inspired by pictures of the longest summer toboggan run in Austria and of mountain carts and scooters. Leaning over my shoulder as I investigated further, she enthusiastically pointed out that, with the free guest cards, buses are free within the region. We could save more money by buying Z-Ticket summer cards (see Top Tip) to include the cable cars, carts and other activities that she was so keen to enjoy...

Springing out of Roly onto our roomy, terraced pitch at the Zugspitz Resort, I took in the view of the Wetterstein range – including the Zugspitze – plus the

pointy Sonnenspitze (2,417m/7,930ft), the Grubigstein (2,233m/7,326ft) above Lermoos and the Daniel (2,340m/7,677ft).

Behind me, gondolas glided up the mighty Zugspitze. This is neighbouring Germany's highest mountain at 2,962m (9,717ft) but, on this Austrian side, the Zugspitze looms over the campsite and a string of picture-book-pretty villages of timber chalets and onion-domed chapels down in the valley below.

Half an hour or so before, on our way to the site, I'd been lounging in the back of our hired motorboat on Heiterwanger See. Enveloped by mountains, I was dazzled by the sparks of the sun's rays glinting off the sharp peaks and bouncing off the smooth surface of the lake. With Sophie steering, we'd floated under the bridge to Plansee. It felt blissful and, with hindsight, could not have been a better introduction to our new-found paradise.

We'd come here from Schwangau in Germany with the scenery quickly becoming lush and greener, then far more mountainous. Families played around Heiterwanger See. Gently rocking three-seater swing chairs with canopies invited



ABOVE View across the valley at Lermoos towards the Zugspitze

LEFT The Zugspitzbahn

INFORMATION

The Tiroler Zugspitz Arena is a 'tourism merger' of seven holiday villages

zugspitzarena.com

For the mountain carts, toboggan run and bike hire

sport-schoenherr.at

a snooze in the afternoon heat. As we drove up to the campsite just below the Zugspitzbahn cable car station, the sense of anticipation was exhilarating.

At night, what looked rather like a string of fairy lights indicated the gondola going up the Grubigstein on the other side of the valley. The beautifully clear sky, canopy of stars and the only sound that of owls hooting, added to the magic.

In the morning we shivered as clouds laid like a fluffy white ceiling above the resort, but soon gradually cleared to reveal those fantastic views again.

It's just a few minutes' walk from the pitches to the Zugspitzbahn (free with the Z-Ticket; conditions apply). Only a few other tourists were in the 100-seater car as we sailed up to the summit station in about seven minutes with our ears popping over and over. My eyes almost popped out at the sight of the challenging path up the mountain. At the top station we saw the exultant faces of the climbers who had trudged stoically for about six hours, having set out at dawn.

Sophie and her dad joined a few other far more surefooted souls than I to climb to the summit (on the German side) and to pose by the cross at the top. My legs turned to jelly just watching as Sophie and Robin

negotiated a rope ladder and a vertical ladder across the shaly limestone.

Although we had to strain to see the Lechtal Alps, the Valluga (which we were to visit later in our trip) and the Allgäuer Alps, the weather was far kinder to us than it was to Josef Naus. In August 1820, Naus became the first person to climb to the top of the Zugspitze, but had to make his descent in a thunderstorm and through snow flurries!

We'd come on the mountain well prepared for all weathers but inside, in the schneekristall (snow crystal) display, restaurant and exhibition – which offers some very interesting history and old pictures of the Zugspitze – we felt rather overheated. Outside, on the panorama platform, a chill wind whipped my hood off; though, in the lee of the building, I was comfortable, reading from signs about what I should be able to see on a clear day and already mentally planning a return visit.

We returned to the bottom station by the gondola. However, our next activity was not nearly so smooth. While Sophie shot confidently on a mountain cart down the scenic Marienberg in Biberwier I had to ask Robin to follow me down the winding track in case I got stuck, rolled over and/or took a short cut through the bushes (as Sophie had done the last time she rode such a cart). >



Trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

2002 five-berth Roller Team Auto-Roller 41 with Fiat 2.3-litre diesel engine. 'Roly' has lots of lockers and storage space, which soon fill up when travelling with a teenager



THE JOURNEY

As part of a two-month summer tour, we spent five days in early July in the Tiroler Zugspitz Arena before continuing to Bavaria. We used free buses once on site and visited Heiterwanger See en route

THE COSTS

Fuel average 26mpg.....	£154.98
Ferry Dover-Dunkerque, return via Calais.....	£144
Site fees (€148.20).....	£136.93
Tolls vignette for Austrian motorways (€9).....	£8.31
Attractions two adults, one teen: Z-Tickets (€168).....	£155.22

2002 Roller Team Auto-Roller 41

756 miles

Total £599.44





ABOVE CLOCKWISE
Sonnenspitze mountain from the campsite; a boat trip on Heiterwanger See; the Gamsalm restaurant is a welcome lunch stop while walking at Ehrwald

TOP TIPS

On 22 June fire sculptures upto 200m (656ft) tall decorate the peaks around **Ehrwald, Lermoos** and **Biberwier** to celebrate the summer solstice
zugspitzarena.com/en/news-events/mountain-fires

The Zugspitz Resort offers campers free bike hire. Vespa scooters and electric mountain bikes can also be hired for a fee

Free guest cards give free use of buses within the **Tiroler Zugspitz Arena**, free guided hikes and some events, plus discounts on cable cars, pools, summer tobogganing and other activities.

zugspitzarena.com/en/info-service/guest-card

Fortunately I didn't achieve either of the latter two, but I did manage the first – embarrassingly so, several times over. Of course I knew that I needed momentum to roll over the few flat and the even fewer ever-so-slightly uphill spots, but I preferred to tell those who were waiting very patiently for me at the bottom that I had been taking my time, savouring the views!

Nearly 20 minutes after whizz-kid Sophie's arrival in one piece and having had to have quite a few pushes from Robin (and several other people who had taken pity on me after my unconcerned husband had shot past me in a cloud of dust), the cart operator diplomatically said, "We missed you." As she pulled my creaking body from the cart, I stumbled out, laughing, exhilarated and vowing that, next time, I would make like Lewis Hamilton down that track.

I felt confidently in my element on the summer toboggan (on the same site). At 1.5km this run is the longest in Austria and so much fun. The ride in the chair lift up the Marienberg seemed to go on forever and was part of the joys of the experience. The journey down on the tiny cart was far more swift. I zipped around 40 curves, pelted down the long straights and through a tunnel like I was on the Cresta Run (slight exaggeration there, reckoned Sophie).

All this rather juvenile fun is yet more

fuel to my yearning to return to the Tiroler Zugspitz Arena. I wished that we could have spent the rest of the afternoon on the toboggan – and the carts – but my stomach was rumbling loudly and the delicious, hearty food served in the cosy restaurant at the Zugspitz Resort was calling...

Rain beat down overnight and we were worried that our plans to go up the Ehrwalder Almbahn would be ruined.

By mid-morning the clouds had lifted, the sun flickered through and we rode a small cable car up the Ehrwald, soaring above pine-covered slopes, to the top station at 1,500m (4,921ft).

What has now become my favourite (and great value) Austrian lunch – goulash soup and chunky bread – at the Tirolerhaus next to the mountain station set us up for a three-hour-long hike on a good path to Seebensee and back.

This is the lake seen on umpteen postcards, with the Zugspitze as its glorious backdrop and in which the mountains of the Wetterstein range are often reflected. It's renowned as one of the Tirol's prettiest places and it is strikingly lovely, but so is almost everywhere in these parts.

Whilst Sophie and Robin explored higher up, I walked 10 minutes down from the Ehrwald Almbahn's top station to Almsee. It may be a very small man-made reservoir ►



ABOVE The wonderful setting of Zugspitz Resort campsite

TOP TIPS

You can save money with a **Z-Ticket**, which gives free access to cable cars/chairlifts including the Zugspitzbahn, Ehrwalder Almbahn and the Sonnalmbahn chairlift at Berwang, boat trip, toboggan run and mountain scooter at Biberwier, buses, pools, tennis, mini-golf and more. Buy from the base stations of the cable cars. During low season (10 May – 1 July and 1 September – 4 November) the Z-Ticket is sold at reduced prices.

 zugspitzarena.com/en/activities/z-ticket

The Tiroler Zugspitz Arena is among the top mountain-biking destinations of Austria with more than 100 marked routes

The Zugspitzbahn and the Fascination Zugspitze museum are easily wheelchair-accessible but the Schneekristall display isn't

around, which I could stroll in just a few minutes, but it opens up a delightful vista towards the Sonnenspitze. From one of the many benches I could look right down the valley to Lermoos and beyond; the mountains just touching the clouds, their craggy faces still displaying tiny clefts of snow glinting in one or two places in the by then bright afternoon sun.

I embarked on the Wassererlebnisweg Zugspitzzi, described as a one-hour, child-friendly, waterfall trail. It took me far longer as I lingered.

All the trails are clearly marked and I followed the Gaisbach stream tumbling over rocks through a shady route with features designed to encourage youngsters to explore, including a water wheel and barefoot walk.

Passing the Shepherd's Rock I reached the Immen Spring, where a tunnel collects water from the small springs on the mountainside. The water is crystal clear as it bubbles out of the earth.

I arrived at a lookout towards one of the highest free-falling waterfalls in the Tirol, passing a wooden recliner in which I was tempted to lie and regard the tall canopy of maple, beech and spruce. Guessing that I would succumb to the relaxing atmosphere a little too much, I followed the rough path criss-crossed by gnarled tree roots to a postcard-style frame of the waterfall and a seat in just the right place to contemplate the beauty of the landscape.

Gushing water from the Gaisbach was the only sound but, as clouds started to lower above me and I feared getting caught in a downpour, I returned more quickly through a rather spooky wood.

With no one else around I was slightly alarmed by a scary-looking 'spirit' tree decorated with an evil face. Thankfully, the creepy wood opened onto a beautiful wildflower-filled meadow.

It's about a half-an-hour walk from the campsite to the Gamsalm Restaurant where we ate delicious speckknödel (bacon dumplings in a clear soup) and Robin had gröstl, a stomach-busting fry-up of potato, meat and vegetables with an egg on top. We followed this very tasty repas with peach schnapps, a traditional drink, we were told, to have on top of the mountain.

It was a warm day and the Schnapps had such a soothing effect on me that all I wanted to do was lay and doze in one of the flower-carpeted meadows to the tune of tinkling cowbells.

We were amazed by the diversity of the Tiroler Zugspitz Arena: stark mountains one side and lush pastures on the other, typically Tirolean villages, hiking for all levels, a wonderland for climbers like our daredevil daughter, cable car and chairlift rides, superb local produce, lakes and waterfalls, woods, lots of activities (a golf course, climbing wall, tennis courts and mountain biking, to name a few). Sophie now wants to come back in winter to have a go at skiing.

The Zugspitz Resort campsite is open all year and the shiny, top-notch facilities are really warm and cosy – there's even TVs and comfy seats in the superb shower blocks. Sophie's going to have to find another mode of transport if she wants to visit in the snow as Roly would need special winter tyres, an expense I'm not prepared to splash out on.

No, I'm saving that money for a return in mid-summer for the Mountains on Fire spectacle and all the runs that I plan to make down the mountainsides – on the toboggans and mountain carts, you understand! 

WE STAYED AT

Zugspitz Resort, Obermoos 1, 6632 Ehrwald

 0043 56 732309  zugspitz-resort.at

 All year

 Two adults, pitch and electric: From €33.40 (£30.86)