

# Salopettes and saddlebags

Splitting her time between skis and saddle, **SOPHIE MONTAGNE** indulges two of her favourite sporting passions

**T**HE moon had breached the mountain tops by the time we gathered in the Schlosswirt Hotel bar at 11pm, wearing ski kit, riding hats in hand. While other guests slept, we plotted our moonlight ride in muffled tones, like Enid Blyton children meeting for a midnight feast.

Our horses were unperturbed at being turfed out of their stables so late and mine skipped across the icy path in the Hohe Tauern National Park, north-west Austria, like a four-legged Torvill and Dean. As we crunched through the snow on the riverbank, the moon illuminated a scene from Narnia, and Orion's Belt looped itself around a white peak.

Wrapped up against the -8°C cold, with a hip-flask of sloe gin to keep the chills at bay and a day on the pistes to look forward to tomorrow, the Schlosswirt Hotel had some extremely satisfied customers.

Kat Tiefenthal's The Riding Company has been organising riding and skiing holidays in the Austrian Alps since 2006. The hotel has 12 Haflingers stabled on site and is also used



Above: The ponies' anti-balling snow shoes  
Right: Sophie (left) and Ginny (right) on the trek



Riding guide Manuela and her dog Arun lead the way along snow-covered mountain paths



The Heiligenblut slopes are great for beginners and intermediates or try your hand at ski-touring

as a base for ski-touring and ice-climbing expeditions. Kat works in conjunction with hotel owner and experienced mountain guide Toni Sauper, and his father Hubert.

I wasn't sure what to expect from this trip. Friends thought I'd be riding small ponies with skis attached to my feet in a new extreme sport. Others questioned how one could ride through deep snow without accumulating a small snowman under each hoof.

The answers soon became clear: after a morning relishing empty slopes, I traded skis for riding boots in the afternoon. Then grasping a hoof, I discovered rubber inserts underneath the ponies' shoes that stopped snow from balling, and extra road studs for grip on the ice. Problem apparently solved.

I shared my holiday with a group of 12 fun-loving 30- to 40-somethings from south London who, on the whole, had more ski experience than horse sense. But this trip would appeal to couples or groups, old or young, novice or experienced riders.

My companions raved about the moonlight ride: "That was incredible. I've never done anything like it before," enthused Tim Riddell,

an analyst and skiing fanatic.

Ginny Sutcliffe, who suggested the trip for her group, said: "Most of us ski a lot so we thought the riding would add another dimension. It's ideal because non-riders can ski all day and the rest of us can mix the two."

The ski resort of Heiligenblut is tiny with a handful of shops, two bars and a lift terminal.

Its 12 pistes are great for intermediate and beginner skiers with a mix of wide red and blue slopes and fantastic views of Austria's highest peak, the Grossglockner (3,798m).

Advanced skiers are attracted to the resort for its ski-touring (guided off-piste involving a climb with synthetic "skins" attached to the skis, which are removed before skiing down).

Staring at a blur of consonants masquerading as a menu in a mountain restaurant, I came to the conclusion that the resort doesn't see many tourists. With no translations, selecting food is a lottery, and be prepared to banish cravings for tartiflette in

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mounted for the two-hour descent. Initially I'd thought riding and skiing the ideal blend for adrenalin junkies, but you needn't have jumped round Badminton or salomoned for Austria to enjoy this holiday.

If you're after sensational views, skiing with style and riding with a difference, the Schlosswirt has got it all. **H&H**

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## THE BASICS

■ **What to wear:** the riding is Western style so I rode in thermals, ski kit and ski gloves with a solid pair of boots.

■ **The ski resort:** Heiligenblut is a 20min bus ride from the hotel. Ski and boot hire costs £68 for four days

■ **Food and drink:** €5-8 for a main course on the mountain, €3 for a beer.

■ **Getting there:** the nearest airport is tiny Klagenfurt. Fly from Stansted with Ryanair, or Manchester with Thomsonfly.com.

■ **Cost:** four nights half-board in the Schlosswirt Hotel costs £365, including ski pass and two rides.

■ **Contact:** www.theridingcompany.com. Tel: 0207 846 0033 or 07808 864747



Ski all morning on empty pistes then switch to horse power for an afternoon trek through the snow