



# The hills are alive... with the sound of polo!

***The Dienstl Equestrian Estate is set in the beautiful surroundings of the Austrian lake district, with the medieval, Hochosterwitz Castle providing a breathtaking backdrop to the estate's well-manicured polo fields. Fiona Rafferty (schnapps in hand) immersed herself in the spirit of the place, and sends us this fascinating report.***

The equestrian trip to which I was invited was organised by The Riding Company. Its website states: 'We promise you that after 8-10 polo sessions ('stick and ball') you will be addicted to this great fun sport, the oldest team sport in the world.' I was fortunate that I had previously played polo (not very well, but I had played) and already knew that I was addicted.

Breathing in the clean, fresh Austrian air I began to relax and gradually the stresses of everyday life back home disappeared. The transfer is just 45 minutes from Klagenfurt airport and takes in some spectacular scenery en route to the four-star Dienstl Estate Hotel. Everything about the

hotel is perfect and on touring the stable yard there wasn't even a piece of hay out of place. The hotel offers 56 en-suite bedrooms and the room I stayed in was extremely large and very comfortable with dual aspect views.

## Cross-country trails

The 400-year-old Estate is owned by Brigitte Kulterer and whilst primarily marketed as a polo centre there is much more on offer. There are over 1,000km of riding trails with plenty of opportunities for both fast and cross-country riding. Whilst some of the fences may look a shade of their former glory, the Dienstl Estate has an impressive

cross-country course, which was host to the 2002 Young Rider European Championships, the year Zara Phillips and Toytown won Individual Silver. It is not often that the 'everyday' rider has the chance to pop around an international cross-country course.

For those who like to take life at a slightly slower pace, one particularly glorious ride is to the fairytale castle of Hochosterwitz, followed by a picnic lunch. The castle is considered to be one of Austria's most impressive mediaeval castles and is perched on a 160m Dolomite rock. It definitely shouldn't be missed during your stay.



One of the cabins used for the children's camp



Accommodation inside the cabin



Young riders looking forward to playing polo



**“ The ponies at Dienstl are finely-tuned and know the game inside-out. ”**

The Dienstl Estate Hotel offers so many opportunities for all the family. In addition to the equestrian centre there is an eco-friendly swimming lake, tennis court, beach volleyball area, bicycles, and six golf courses all a short journey from the hotel. Considered the jewel of the Austrian lake district, Lake Worth, is just nearby where the visitor can just swim, or relax. The cultural town of Klagenfurt and the walled city of Friesach are also well worth a visit.

### **Intensive dressage**

The equestrian centre has an excellent riding school and during my visit a German family took the opportunity to enjoy some

intensive jumping and dressage lessons in addition to afternoon chukkas. The horses are well schooled and capable of movements up to Advanced Medium. There is a fantastic 70m x 80m outdoor arena, which is great for jumping, and just in case it rains there is also an indoor arena.

If you have a pony-mad child, look no further! During the summer and Easter holidays, Dienstl runs an international pony camp. Suitable for 7–14 year olds the camp offers the opportunity to own a pony for the week. With daily hacks, theory and practical sessions, as well as plenty of fun and games, the seven-day camp sounds like enormous fun. The children sleep in

bunk beds and share small wooden cabins (very Hansel and Gretel), which are built around the campfire, just next to the hotel. Accompanying adults can enjoy a full riding programme of their own or just “chill out” in the tranquil surroundings of the Carinthia region.

### **The wooden horse!**

Whether you are starting from scratch or just brushing up on your polo skills, the Dienstl Estate course offers a great-value and an extremely intensive yet civilised course. Depending on your previous experience, the course will include the wooden horse (an opportunity to hone your



The large outdoor school



Retail therapy in Klagenfurt – we have just raided the chocolate shop



At last I am playing a chukka



stick and ball skills). And there is more stick and ball, this time on horse-back. In the unlikely event of rain, practice takes place in the indoor arena with a larger, softer ball. My advice is to practise hard, as nothing beats the thrill of your first chukka!

The ponies at Dienstl are finely-tuned and know the game inside-out. While you are still thinking about where the ball is I can guarantee that your pony will already be in hot pursuit. Two sets of reins and a polo stick may at first appear a lot to



Dienstl Estate Hotel

### That was the week that was...

The polo week costs £985 (excluding flights, but including transfers) and includes seven nights' accommodation, half-board, with 10 polo lessons. The week includes three massages and free use of the sauna and steam room. A five-night break as above costs £683 and includes eight polo lessons and one massage.

Ryan Air has regular flights from Stanstead to Klagenfurt.

**For more information visit:  
[www.theridingcompany.com](http://www.theridingcompany.com)**

handle, but once you master the gear changes you will be away. And for those more experienced riders, the opportunity is there to play an extremely fast and very thrilling game within the view of a medieval castle. **lr**

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