

# Nearing Narnia

**I**T'S early December and we're cantering through pristine snow. It's silent except for the squeak and crunch of hooves on powder snow. It's clear and still and we climb and climb through the tall pines — it's a magical, sensory experience and as close as I'm ever likely to get to Narnia.

I'm indulging in four delicious days of riding Lipizzaners and relaxing in a spa at the Posthotel Achenkirch in Tyrol in the Austrian Alps. But getting here has not been without incident.

From London, it's a two-hour flight to Innsbruck, but the airport — nestled in a steep-sided valley — is notoriously tricky to land at. After one abortive attempt, we're diverted to Munich, Germany. There follows a two-hour wait for coaches and a further two-hour journey back to Innsbruck, where my still-smiling driver is waiting to take me the final half-hour to the hotel.

Back at the stables after the reviving ride in the snow, I gear up for my first dressage lesson in the vaulted indoor arena. Guests can choose lessons or hacks, which last from 45 minutes up to half a day. There are placid Haflingers for anyone wanting a quiet ride.

Not for me. Siglavy, the 15-year-old Lipizzaner stallion offered instead — who was bred at the hotel and spends summers covering the stud's mares — isn't schooled to the standard of his Viennese counterparts. But with Magda the instructor — who speaks good English — we work to encourage him to soften his neck, which is short and powerful — typical of the breed.

Afterwards, it's time to investigate the spa.

The hotel signs are in German but it's soon apparent that those in the spa's inner sanctum say "no talking" and "no clothing".

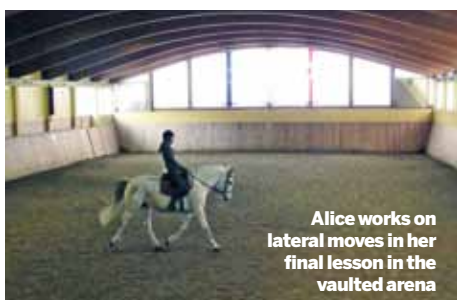
With my British prudishness — and the rest — cast off, I find myself deep in the spa's warm hazy maze of dim, twinkling lights. Doors to the left and right lead to saunas, steam rooms, wet rooms and steamy alcoves.

There's a central dome surrounded by beds and waterbeds, lit by a flickering flame and filled with the sound of trickling water. The pervading smell is of sweet and spicy citrus, like a sexy version of Vicks Vaporub.

It's like another world. And it's wonderful.

## The cold and the hot

**AFTER** the sleep of kings in my vast junior suite — bigger than my flat, with a heated stone floor in the bathroom and floor-to-ceiling bedroom windows — I put the thermals back on and join three other guests for a horse-drawn carriage



Alice works on lateral moves in her final lesson in the vaulted arena

Drawn to Austria by the lure of riding Lipizzaners, *H&H's* dressage editor **Alice Collins** finds it's not so much what she's taken on as what she has to take off that's tricky



From a canter through pristine snow to a carriage ride to the picturesque village of Achenkirch, Alice's trip is full of magical experiences

ride to the nearby picturesque lake Achensee where, in deepest winter, there's ice-skating on the lake.

It's another crisp, bright day and the harness jangles sharply in the stillness. We stop by the lake for some warming glühwein and admire the sensational views, before trotting the 4km back to the hotel via the village of Achenkirch.

Back at base, I have an appointment at the beauty centre where 20 beauticians are on hand seven days a week to offer guests luxury treatments, massages, traditional Chinese medicine, baths and facepacks. I'm directed into a bath of brown liquid and am left with the jacuzzi bubbles on.

Absent-mindedly I fiddle with something with my toe. It's only once the bath's half empty that I realise it's the plug. I lean forward to refill the bath, but as I do, the jets — which are massaging my back — shoot over my shoulder and spray the back of the door.

I lie back — fast — just before the beautician flies back in, concerned about the water seeping under the door. It's not the most relaxing spa experience I've had, but it's my own fault.

Dinner is a buffet, but not as you know it. The fabulous, varied food includes giant fresh prawns, a 60-strong cheeseboard and caviar blinis served from a swan ice sculpture and dress code is fairly formal. The village is quiet at night, but the hotel often lays on entertainment — one night a roulette table, another a live band — everyone gets into the swing.

## So many options

**ON** my last day, I'm given another lovely Lipizzaner for a dressage session in the arena. I'm keen to give my sitting-trot stomach muscles a workout after eating so much

fantastic food.

My visit's too early in the season for skiing, but winter guests

enjoy one of Austria's snowiest resorts. At 950-1,900m above sea level, the 59km of slopes offer nursery to black runs.

It's the horses that drew me to this unique hotel, but plenty of the guests seem unaware they're there. There are so many options for filling time here — tai chi, tobogganing, pilates, ice climbing and the exquisitely named smovey walken (Nordic walking).

It doesn't matter what you're into, you'll never be bored. **H&H**

## ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

**ALICE** travelled with The Riding Company which specialises in tailored packages.

- ▶ Prices for six nights at the five-star Posthotel Achenkirch start at £636 per person (based in two sharing) with full board and transfers from Innsbruck (flights excluded). High season (5 February -12 March and 16 April-30 April) £736.
- ▶ Price including three private lessons and two hacks from £785 — £885.
- ▶ Sleigh/carriage rides: £55 for up to four people.
- ▶ Children over the age of 14 are welcome, but the hotel is not suitable for younger families.
- ▶ Flights are available from a number of UK airports and start from £37 one way.

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