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- Spend the night
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- Activity and adventure
- Snow and ski
- Message boards
- Supplements
- Ultratravel
- Travel Offers

## It's the tops

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**Ötztal: drink to an area that's one of Austria's highest and most snow sure. By Nathan Henry**

The new Top Mountain Star is the gleaming decoration at the peak of the sparkling Christmas tree that is the ski resort of Obergurgl. A stunning new ski bar perched at 3,080m, with architecture designed to mirror the jagged white peaks that surround it, the Star reaches into the bright blue skies.

From here you have a 360-degree panorama across the Ötztaler Alps and as far as the Dolomites. Obergurgl is one of the twin gems of the Ötztal, an area that towers above the rest of Austria. Obergurgl is, at 1,930m, the highest parish in the country, only accessed by going as far as you can up a dead-end road in the Ötztal, 20 minutes past the area's other ski centre, Sölden.



Obergurgl is a good place to relax with a drink

Once there, there's no traffic and rarely any crowds. Just a serene ski village, although its little suburb of Hochgurgl (with its own hotels) is even higher, at 2,150m. The area has its fair share of history. It became famous in 1931 for the unexpected landing of Auguste Piccard on the Gurgler glacier, marking the end of the first high altitude balloon flight.

A replica of the balloon still brightens the traffic-free streets of Obergurgl. In 1991, the glacier gave up the body of Ötzi the Iceman, a 5,300-year-old hunter. There have since been more Neolithic discoveries.

With its height - the slopes don't drop below 1,800m - the ski area is one of Austria's most snow sure, but even then there's plenty of snowmaking to make doubly sure. There are 110km of pistes, a third of them nice and easy, half intermediate, making it a great place for learners and for families. Decent skiers head for Festkogel in Obergurgl and on the Schermerspitze in Hochgurgl.

Experts go for the long, steep slope down from the Hohe Mut in the former, or the moguls of Top-Wurmkogel in the latter. The longest run is a more than decent 8km from the top of Wurmkogel - site of the Top Mountain Star - down to the Hochgurglbahn.

Obergurgl's height means it is one of the earliest non-glacier resorts to open in the Alps - this year's opening day is November 17. It is a

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party-packed week, with live music and much more. Obergurgl is always lively at the end of the ski day, with a choice of busy bars later on. The resort has plenty of good hotels - many with spa - and there is a great selection of restaurants.

Sölden, a busy mountain town, is the starting point for the big three lift-connected 3,000m peaks. Head up the Rettenbach glacier to 3,370m Schwarze Schneide, then across the Tiefenbach glacier to Tiefenbachkogel (3,309m). Sweep back across the Rettenbach and down to the valley ready for a journey up the Gaislachkogel (3,058m).

The route that takes in them all also passes three viewing platforms with the most spectacular panoramas - as well as a good selection of huts and restaurants for a well-deserved break. Most of Sölden's skiing is for good intermediates - fast, long and above the treeline, with some that can stretch an expert. From the top of Gaislachkogel to the town is a drop of almost 1,700m, so plenty to get the legs burning.

The other base station of Giggijoch is connected by regular shuttles. A couple of terrain parks test boarders. This is Austria's largest area of glacier skiing - 20 sq km - and, apart from lifts, the glaciers are also connected by a 170m tunnel. Millions of pounds have been spent in recent years on fast lifts to get you to the glaciers quickly.

The winter season starts on October 1 (there are ski and snowboard competitions here from late October) while April, when many lower areas are closing, has long been rated one of the best snow months, with the season not ending until May 1. Fun involves a party night every Friday on the Giggijoch slopes, night skiing every Wednesday - including a ski school spectacular - and, in April, theatre on the Rettenbach glacier.

The busy town has a wealth of après-ski and a selection of restaurants centred on the lively main street. You can also stay in ski-in ski-out Hochsölden, or pretty Längenfeld, where there's more modern architecture, this time the Aqua Dome, the Tirol's only thermal spa.

Travel tips

- Perfect packages: 7 nights B&B with 6-day lift pass in a pension from £275, in a 4-star hotel from £410, excluding high season.
- [www.obergurgl.com](http://www.obergurgl.com), tel: +43 (0)5254 510 100; e-mail: [info@obergurgl.com](mailto:info@obergurgl.com)
- [www.ötztal.com](http://www.ötztal.com), tel: +43 (0)5254 5100; e-mail: [info@otztal.com](mailto:info@otztal.com)
- British Airways ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com), tel: 0870 850 9850) flies from London Gatwick to Innsbruck, an hour's drive from Ötztal, eight times a week (starting Dec 17).



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