



## NOT BAD AT ALL

**From next month, Bondholders will be able to sample the splendours of the Kaiserhof in Bad Gastein, Austria thanks to HPB's year-long property swap with European counterpart Hapimag. Donning his Lederhosen, editor Jonathan Broom took a quick trip to "BG" to give the place (accommodation and location) the once-over on your behalf.**

Descending into Salzburg on a brutally early flight from Stansted, I reflected – not for the first time – that my knowledge of Austria was scant. I knew it to be popular with skiers, the birthplace of Mozart, and he-whose-name-should-not-be-mentioned, but beyond that all I knew about the place was gleaned from the Sound of Music – a 45-year-old movie, all Dirndl, green mountains and Edelweiss. And singing, obviously. Surely Austria – 21st-century, industrial Austria – couldn't be like that? I was prepared to be disappointed.



I wasn't. The country is, apparently, quite heavily industrialised in parts; but Austria's biggest industry is tourism – and I am bound to say the 95-km drive south from Salzburg to Bad Gastein is an absolute beauty.

As is the 130+-km version. Reader, I'm afraid that, as per usual, I got lost. Instructed to head for Lofer, I did just that, but the promised signs from there to BG were conspicuous by their absence. Forced to draw on my Combined Cadet Force orienteering expertise, I continued roughly due south. All I can say is I'm glad I wandered off-piste (the expression seems apposite). Surrounded on all sides by green, majestic mountains (I'm sorry, but that's what they were; there's no other

word for them), up any one of which Julie Andrews could have sprinted before bursting into song, I followed the twisty, turny 159 through a succession of picture-perfect towns and villages. Finally sense prevailed, and I stopped in St Johann im Polgau to ask directions. A mistake, as I ended up in Zell-am-See (stopping off for a look at lovely Viehhofen en route) – but that, in itself, was worth the extra 30-odd kms. What can I say? Sometimes – whether by accident or design – it pays to go off the beaten track. And my meandering progress certainly beat the boredom of the A10/E55 Autobahn.

### *And so, finally, to Bad Gastein*

A town of close to 6,000 inhabitants, BG has three distinct "zones". The lower part, down in the valley, is very pretty, with a wonderfully positioned 18-hole golf course (Golf Club Gastein) running through its centre. Lovely – in an Alpine village kind of way with which, if you take the route I took, you will by now be familiar. The upper part (if you like) near the station is a bit frayed round the edges. Downmarket, even; or as downmarket as Bad Gastein ever gets. But the middle bit is magnificent. Perched around and across a deep, vertiginous ravine, with a mighty waterfall cascading straight through the middle, this part of town most clearly encapsulates BG's glorious past. The scenery – both natural and manmade – is simply breathtaking. To look at the architecture hereabouts is to wonder "why?" and "how?" – but finally just to marvel and be grateful that the place ever got built. It has hardly fallen from grace since, though the number of visitors since the town's turn-of-the-(19th)-century heyday has diminished.

The Kaiserhof, Hapimag's Bad Gastein home, is roughly midway between the lower and middle areas of town, looking down towards the golf course, and up towards all that splendour. Not that the Kaiserhof is exactly splendour-free. Built in 1900 at the height of the Belle Époque, the listed Hotelpalais was the summer residence of Kaisers, chancellors and the cream of European society, all of whom flocked to BG to take the famous curative waters. The building's exterior, and "public" spaces, look much as they ever did, but Hapimag has developed the interior into a range of holiday apartments, and added to the site with the construction of three new "houses". In total the complex comprises 157 units of various sizes, of which HPB has use of 12, in the so-called "green" house. ►



*The Kaiserhof, Hapimag's Bad Gastein home*



### So, the \$64,000 question: how does Hapimag compare with HPB?

The short answer is that it doesn't, not really; the differences between the Hapimag and HPB offerings are such as to render most comparisons meaningless.

Some of these differences are down to culture; Hapimag brings a European sensibility to the design and layout of its properties, HPB a British one. There are, for example, no baths in Hapimag's Bad Gastein properties, only showers. Very good showers, though!

But the biggest difference is one of emphasis. Hapimag's apartments are self-catering – and indeed, you *could* cater for yourselves; but not easily. They do not offer prearranged food packs. The kitchens – kitchenettes, really – are very small and, by HPB standards, basically equipped. Altogether, the Hapimag experience is much more hotel-y. Yes, you might rustle up breakfast from time to time, but there's an implicit expectation that you'll eat out, for the most part.

This is not quite as frightening a prospect as it sounds.



Having expected Austria to be expensive I found the eateries in Bad Gastein, and Hapimag's own onsite restaurant, to be surprisingly affordable.

But you've got to like meat. A lot. One thing I ordered (the German name of which escapes me) turned out to be row upon row of sausages, all different shapes, sizes and hues, with a small dollop of Sauerkraut on the side. Rank upon serried rank of snorkers and, to a take-meat-or-leave-it kind of omnivore, singularly unappetising. A Würst-case scenario, if you will.

Elsewhere on site, you'll find a shop – well stocked, not overpriced, and open every morning until 10am – a very pleasant bar, an indoor swimming pool (the water in which comes from the hot spring for which the town is named), and treatment rooms. Lots and lots of treatment rooms. While Bad Gastein no longer attracts healthseekers in the numbers the town once enjoyed, well-being is clearly still very much part of the place's appeal. At the Kaiserhof itself, you can swim, sweat, steam, wrap yourself in hay (or clingfilm if you prefer), cover yourself in mud, do pilates and numerous other exercise classes, and submit yourself to whatever degree of pummelling (sorry, massage) suits you best. Elsewhere in town, you'll find numerous "Kurhäuser", quasi-hospitals where



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similar treatments are meted out. Or, if you want to go really hardcore, you can visit the Gasteiner Heilstollen. Originally a network of goldmining tunnels, the Heilstollen failed to yield the expected reserves. Miners, however, reported health benefits from the high temperature, high humidity, and high concentrations of radon gas. The Heilstollen became, and remain, very popular with healthseekers – and, indeed, seem to enjoy some degree of accreditation with the Austrian health authorities. I am not convinced, and would not relish spending all or even part of my holiday down a mine, but clearly plenty of people are, and do.

During the summer months there is much walking to be enjoyed – though few of the walks are what we would class as easy. A combination of altitude and terrain means walking here is somewhat more than a gentle stroll; good boots are recommended, plus walking poles. But during the winter Bad Gastein is a magnet for skiers. I don't ski myself, but am happy to pass on the following: there are four or five local ski resorts, with runs starting from heights of 2,600 metres. All the ski lifts are new. There are no tolls. Snow is plentiful, but if they need more, they can

make more, and because they make it out of natural spring water it's absolutely glorious stuff – "the caviar of snow" is how it was described to me.

I trust all this makes sense, and is good news for skiing types. But for non-skiers such as myself, it's equally positive. Because the ski season is so vibrant and so popular, there's an infrastructure in place that ensures things work, whatever the weather. Trains and buses run on time. Restaurants and shops are open. There's a festive feeling in the air. And, of course, it all looks fairytale-pretty.

Returning to the Kaiserhof... With 157 units the place is well staffed, as you would expect. All the staff that I spoke to – front-of-house, bar staff, waiters and so on – had some level of English. But two you will undoubtedly encounter are Waltraud Seewald and Cordula Schlässer.

Resort manager Waltraud is, as her job title implies, in overall charge of the whole place. Her English (and I'm sure she would forgive me for saying this) is not absolutely tip-top, but that and my smattering of German were enough to get by – and she loves learning new words! She is charming, conscientious, and clearly very much on her game. All the things, in

other words, we expect of our own site managers.

Information officer Cordula... Well, I don't know when the lady ever sleeps. Cordula holds information meetings (she's planning an English-language one on Sunday mornings – her English is extremely good); is on hand in the info-center for an hour each day (sometimes two); runs all the pilates, yoga and other exercise classes; leads all the excursions; and, on Tuesday night when the restaurant staged a "viva Italia" evening, was to be found waiting on tables and working behind the bar.

And aside from Cordula and Waltraud, all the staff are helpful and polite, and will do their best to ensure that your holiday is a happy (or Hapi) one. I don't know this for a fact, but I got the distinct impression someone had had a word. "Look lively, meine Damen und Herren – the Bondholders are coming!" □



Hapimag is not HPB. This property swap is experimental and, like all experiments, may or may not work. But while the arrangement is in place I would urge all Bondholders to give it serious consideration. Austria – this part of it, anyway – is simply beautiful. Bad Gastein is friendly, fascinating, and picture-postcard perfect. And this is a fantastic opportunity to see it up close.