

DESTINATION ♦ AUSTRIA



A cow lows, oblivious to the beauty of the scenery in Bregenzerwald, a sideboard groans under the weight of Alpine food produced right there on the mountain.

PICTURES: ISTOCK, SUPPLIED

SAY CHEESE

WILL WALK FOR CHEESE

A fairytale landscape of mountains and moors is the perfect setting for hungry hikers

CELESTE MITCHELL



SLOW FOOD

Like all good stories, this one starts with cheese. Three 25kg wheels of the stuff to be exact – the prize awarded to Austrian architects Andreas Cukrowicz and Anton Nachbauer-Sturm for the winning design of the chapel in which we’re standing.

Modest and unassuming, the tiny building has room for just three pews and an altar, completely clad and lined in silver fir – the same trees we floated over during our cable-car ride up from Andelsbuch.

“It can be seen from many points in Bregenzerwald,” our guide Cornelia Krieger says as we admire the clever use of glass, which allows natural light to beam in from the seams of the altar wall. “From here you can usually see Lake Constance in Germany.” Alas, it seems the closer we hike to the heavens today, the more the clouds encroach on our view.

Tucked up into the far western corner of Austria, in the state of Vorarlberg, Bregenzerwald is the nature lover’s nirvana you’ve never heard of.

Here, 22 tiny villages are dotted

BREGENZERWALD IS THE NATURE LOVER’S NIRVANA YOU’VE NEVER HEARD OF

throughout the Bregenz Forest in a fairytale landscape of mountains and moors – the perfect setting for those with a hunger for hiking, especially if you respond well to gastronomic reward.

CHEESE COUNTRY

It’s late spring and the snow has started retreating down the mountain, just not enough for our group to continue our walk here atop Alpe Niedere where thick ice cuts our path. We’ve not long finished breakfast at traditional inn turned hipster brunch spot, Jöslar, but we

decide to skip to the second stop on our culinary hike and retreat inside Bergrestaurant.

Cukrowicz and Nachbauer-Sturm clearly loved the prize for their chapel design. They returned after the chapel build to place their stamp on the interior of this cosy restaurant with clean lines, oak cladding, and thick grey wool curtains.

Because it wasn’t just any cheese. This is Alpine cheese country with 30,000 inhabitants and 30,000 cows. Only 3 per cent of cheese in the European Union is produced with hay milk and Bregenzerwald is the largest region, with farmers following a three-stage farming process. The cows spend October to May in the valley, then graze in altitudes of up to 1000m in June before being taken up to the highest level in July and August, and gradually clad down.

As we sit beside the copper fireplace, steaming wooden bowls of knöfle and shots of schnapps – made with the enzian flowers we spotted on our way in – are placed before us. It feels like cheating, devouring ladlefuls of the cheesy spätzle dumplings with fried onions, but I’m

not going to complain about skipping a few kilometres of hiking with a farm-to-table ethos this strong. “The cheese is made next door,” Cornelia tells us between mouthfuls. “It never leaves the mountain.”

SLOW NATURE

The ground is blanketed in heavy morning dew but the sun has already painted the sky a vivid blue the next morning in Krumbach Moor. We unlace our hiking boots and slip off our socks, leaving them in the open-sided wooden “moor room” to feel 4000 years of history under our feet.

The chill of the water squelching and spurting from the spongy ground is literally breathtaking but there’s something fundamentally invigorating about this walk.

The moors are the progeny of the last Ice Age – a bountiful landscape built by thousands of years and layers of peat and sphagnum moss, and blooming with medicinal plants and berries. In 2000, an organisation was set up to protect Krumbach Moor, so now 13 moor guides and four moor landlords are tasked with its preservation, while 14 seats are

ESCAPE ROUTE

BREGENZERWALD

GETTING THERE
Swiss International Airlines flies to Zurich via Singapore or Hong Kong with partners Singapore Airlines and Qantas. The Bregenzerwald region is a 1.5-hour drive from Zurich Airport. swiss.com

STAYING THERE
Historic hotels with award-winning restaurants are par for the course in Bregenzerwald and half-board bookings will net you the best deals. Base yourself at the 250-year-old Gasthof Hirschen in Schwarzenberg (hotel-hirschen-bregenzerwald.at) or Hotel Das Schiff in Hittisau, where the fifth-generation Metzler family have renovated and extended an 1840s farmhouse, working with local craftspeople with eco sensibilities and culinary nous (schiff-hittisau.com)

GETTING AROUND
The Bregenzerwald Guest Card provides free public transport, including mountain cable cars, and entrance to swimming pools for guests staying three nights or more in the region. bregenzerwald.at

WHAT TO DO

CULINARY HIKES
Four culinary hikes are on offer during summer, including itinerary, cable car rides, breakfast, lunch and dessert. Walks range from 3½ to 4½ hours. Prices from €45 (\$72) to €60 (\$95) a person. bregenzerwald.at

MOOR WALKS
Guided walks through Krumbach moor are available every Thursday between June and September for €8 (\$12), or free for children under 14. In summer (June 9, July 7, August 4, Sept 8), the four Krumbach moor inns invite guests to join a dawn walk and breakfast. The tour starts at 6am with breakfast ready from 8am for €25 (\$40) a person. bregenzerwald.at

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placed throughout the landscape for quiet contemplation. “You won’t find a sign which shows you a way to the seat,” our guide Petra says with a smile. “We call it slow nature. The seats, they want to be found.”

Afterwards at Schulhaus restaurant, a breakfast spread by Vorarlberg’s most decorated chef, Gabi Strahammer, awaits.

The moor acts as Gabi’s private orchard and herb garden. The plants there are so different to what other chefs are using, she can experiment with foraged ingredients like fir tips, sloe berries, meadowsweet and moor cranberry.

In Bregenzerwald, it seems, food is not just about satiation but about all the senses: the feel of the artworks hanging on the walls made from peat, the sound of Gabi’s pink “moor lemonade” being poured wafting over our conversation, and the delightful zing and fresh aroma of her latest moor experiment: clover ice cream.

It makes all that exercise rather incidental, actually.

THE WRITER TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF THE AUSTRIAN NATIONAL TOURIST OFFICE