

Alpine-Adriatic: Crossing the border to those sensuous southern climes

The Hotel Karnerhof sits right on the Faaker See – a Carinthian treasure in its own right. But the Karnerhof is also ideally suited as a base for outings throughout the 3-Corners Region of Carinthia-Italy-Slovenia .

Late-sleepers sometimes have a hard time here in Carinthia. Perhaps it has something to do with the season. Whatever the case, this time around a very energetic male blackbird has taken it upon himself to share the morning hours with the guests of the Karnerhof. The views of the Faaker See certainly seem to justify the behaviour of our black-feathered flautist, for the still silvery morning sun dances across the mirror-like surface of the water, while from behind the green satin of the forest, the Mittagskogel rises triumphantly up towards the new day. At an elevation of 2,143 metres, it might not be the tallest, but it is definitely the most striking one of the Karawanken range. An enchanted tranquillity envelops the landscape – despite the constant crescendo of our avian orchestra.

Admittedly, you have to be careful not to overuse the term “idyllic”. But there truly is something indisputably idyllic about the Melcher Family’s Hotel Karnerhof, which began seven decades ago as a modest farmhouse offering guest rooms right on the lakeshore. The lake itself is the embodiment of recreation, daydreaming and reflection, which is a “good thing”, says hotel owner, Hans Melcher: “When it comes to casinos and chic boutiques, people to travel to Velden and the Wörthersee.” Yet as idyllic as the Faaker See – the warmest swimming lake in Carinthia – appears on the one hand, it is also very centrally situated on the other. Just a few kilometres away, guests can sip on their latte in the midst of the Mediterranean ambience of the Old Town in Villach.

All of the colourful goings-on, the shopping, strolling, chatting between the Baroque facades and town squares of this small community – which once actually belonged to Bavaria – give you a real sense of how close we are to Italy. The history of Villach is closely paralleled by that of its spas and hot springs, and extends all the way back to Roman times. To this very day, the sensation of those healthful beading waters upon your skin, which filter through a gravel bed directly into the pool, is a truly exhilarating experience. No less colourful and exhilarating is the summer events programme in Villach: from the “International Cabaret Festival” to the “New Orleans Festival”, from “Carinthian Summer” to the “Harley Davidson European Bike-Week”. Which brings us back again to where we started, since the most impressive motorbike rally in all of Austria takes place here on the Faaker See.

From the very outset, anyone who comes to the Faaker See knows precisely why they decided to come. A fact we see in those deep sighs we read in guest books, penned by such prominent names as Agnes Baltsa and Uschi Glas. Tranquillity, sensuousness and enjoyment, that is what it’s all about. Being open to new impressions, new thoughts, new aromas. But it is precisely this openness and embrace of life, which allows Carinthians, time and again, to step beyond conventional boundaries and return with something exciting and new.

For years now, many of our locals have made it their task to explore the 3-Corners Region which surrounds Carinthia's second-largest town, Villach – including the neighbouring countries of Slovenia and Italy – scouring the land for its natural and, above all, for its cultural treasures.

One of those people is our “Alpine-Adriatic Hiking Guide” – Walter Mamedof - always with a deep tan and in high spirits – who loves nothing more than to take our history- and nature-loving guests along on his “**Alpine-Adriatic Tour**”. This tour, which leads through three countries and over three mountain passes, reveals places of hidden beauty, many known only to Walter Mamedof himself. Nowadays, small groups head southwards with their guide, passing by the towers and ruins of Finkenstein Castle, a venue whose open-air events have become a magnet for audiences drawn from far beyond Carinthia's borders. This summer, we expect an array of stars again, including the likes of Randy Crawford, Konstantin Wecker and the ensemble of the Arena di Verona.

The journey continues, the road winding steeply uphill across the 1,071 metres-high Wurzen Pass into Slovenia. Just two decades ago, local car mechanics made quite a few extra dollars from vacationers on their way to the south. Overloaded cars, with radiators that were boiling over, were assisted much as were coach horses in the days of old. “The locals would wait with their powerful four-by-fours” recounts Mamedof, “the kids quickly hitched themselves up to these smoking cars, and then they towed them up the hill. A hundred marks per car, let me tell you, that was quite something during the high season”, grins Mamedof: “By evening, our pockets were full of money, the lad got an ice cream out of it and everyone was happy.” But ever since 1991, travellers make their way south with heavy luggage or a caravan in tow, now get to enjoy a leisurely drive through the Karawanken Tunnel. Which puts the Slovenian “hot spots” just a hop, skip and a jump away, places such as the sports mecca of Kranjska Gora and the enchanted village of Bled, where you can have yourself rowed out on a special boat to the island – a popular pilgrimage destination - located in the lake of the same name.

Things continue to take a few twists and turns for our small group, especially in the Slovenian portion of the trip. 24 switchbacks take them past the Russian Chapel and on up to an elevation of 1611 metres above sea level. The trip alone is a true feast for the eyes, with new views revealing themselves around every corner, as they now pass through the very first national park in all of Europe (founded in 1908), the Triglav. From the Vrsic Pass, yet another 20 sharp bends lead back down to the Soča Valley. This is home to the “Marmorata”, the unique Soča trout, served at the tables of acclaimed restaurants. But this time, the route leads to the source of the Soča (Izvir Soče) or the Isonzo, as the river is known in Italy. Despite the steep climb and having to struggle to maintain your balance on the rocks and gravel, it is definitely worth the effort. The pebbles in the crystal-clear waters which lie before the mysterious black hole of the springs, appear an iridescent emerald green, while the young river whips up a white foam as it plunges across limestone boulders down towards the depths below.

Every metre here is historic ground, every metre has been fought over in centuries past. Man has left clear signs of his activities amid this magnificent mountain landscape, such as Kluže fortress shortly prior to the Predil Pass. Constructed by the Barons of Bovec in the 16th century, conquered by the French in the 18th century and further fortified under Emperor Franz Joseph, it serves today as a museum attesting to the development and to the insanity of static warfare.

Things definitely take a more peaceful turn as the group makes its way to the shores of Lago Predil, the Raibler See. After enjoying a canoe trip on the lake's deep-blue waters, a hearty pasta at the Chalet al Lago is sure to taste twice as good. That goes especially for their amazing dough pockets filled with a Ricotta-pear stuffing. But then things gradually draw to a close, as the group heads back via Taraviso and Villach. If you happened to have a little more time available to you, we would definitely recommend venturing out even further into this region, perhaps to experience those quiet side valleys in Italy, the epicurean delights of the Friuli region and its own shopping and gourmet paradise, Udine. And let us not forget San Daniele, a mecca for Prosciutto - that nutty, delicate ham - and the ancient port town of Trieste, with its fairytale Miramar Castle.

Just as was the case with our Italian neighbours, there is no shortage of gourmet tips in Carinthia either. In the immediate vicinity of Villach and the Faaker See alone, you will discover numerous specialists in the realm of refined taste: There is a whole array of quality-minded producers, whom you can also visit right there at their manufacturing sites. Peter Bachmann, for example, cures his organic Irish salmon only with the aid of rock salt, Grander Water and organic herbs – unsurpassed surpassed when it comes to tenderness and aroma. And where better to sample it, than right there at his own inn in Hermagor. The Nuarts, at the Hafnerhof close to the Klopeiner See, coax unimagined nuances from their sheep's cheese by allowing the creatures to graze on sweet clover and meadow hay, while Carinthian caviar from the Sicher restaurant in Tainach – created only from the very finest char roe – has become quite a celebrity in its own right. For the freshest fish of all time – self-caught pike, vendace, trout and pikeperch - fishing permits are available for Carinthia's lakes. Of course, that does mean that you will, indeed, have to rise in the morning with those blackbirds.

Info: Wellness- & Genießerhotel Karnerhof**S**
Karnerhofweg 10, 9580 Egg am Faaker See – Austria, Tel. +43 / (0)4254/2188,
Fax +43 / (0)4254/3650, hotel@karnerhof.com , www.karnerhof.com

Characters (no spaces) excl. address block: 7,610

Villach-Faakersee Tourism, A-9523 Villach-Landskron, Töbringer Str. 1,
Tel. +43 / (0)4242/42 0000, Fax +43 / (0)4242/42 00042,
e-mail: office@vi-fa-os.at, www.da-lacht-das-herz.at

Culinary Addresses:

Bachmann Organic Salmon, A-9620 Hermagor, Obervellach 33, Tel. +43 / (0)4282/2069, Fax: +43 / (0)4282/ 2069-20, e-mail: info@bachmann.co.at, www.bachmann.co.at

Hafnerhof, A-9131 Mittertrixen, Waisenberg 6, Tel. +43 / (0)4231/2043, Fax +43 / (0)4231/20434, e-mail: office@vulgo-hafner.at, www.vulgo-hafner.at,

Restaurant Sicher, A-9121 Tainach, Mühlenweg 2, Tel. +43 / (0)4239/2638, Fax +43 / (0)4239/26382, e-mail: office@sicherrestaurant.at, www.sicherrestaurant.at,

ARGE “Gurktal Air-Cured Bacon”, A-9341 Strassburg, Hauptstr. 13, Tel. +43 / (0)664/2111717, e-mail: office@fleischerei-seiser.at, www.luftgeselchter.at