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Joining the Brotherhood of St Christoph

By Rob Freeman, TravelMail

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St Christoph may be a small hamlet but it opens up a vast skiing area for winter sports enthusiasts...

As I waited for my turn to come, Adi Werner, the Master of the Fraternity, produced the ceremonial sword.

It was altogether a bigger and more fearsome weapon than I was expecting. He beckoned me forward to stand in front of him. As Adi raised the sword vertically, its point brushed a wooden beam in the ceiling.

So this was the big moment. We were in an upstairs reception room, wood-panelled and elegant, of the sumptuous Hospiz Hotel in St Christoph, in the heart of the Arlberg ski region at the far western end of the Austrian Tirol.

It was Induction Night – the investiture of new members of the world's oldest charitable fraternity, the Brotherhood of St Christoph. Existing members were gathered to watch the newcomers join their ranks.

Outside it was a chill January night, the tiny resort of St Christoph cocooned in snow.

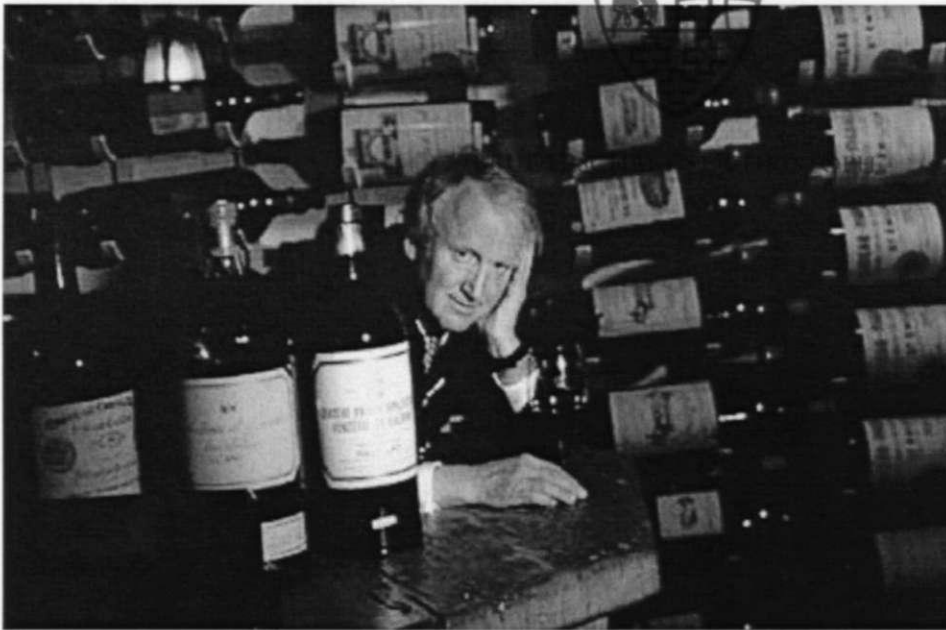
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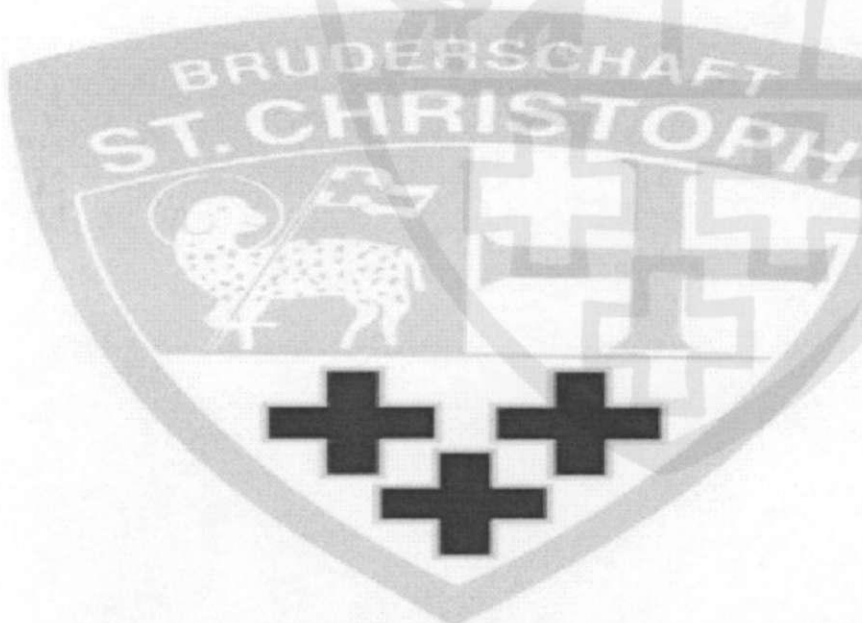


Adi Werner, the Master of Fraternity for the world's oldest charitable order

Inside all was warm and cosy. But an air of decided formality had descended on the room as the time had come for new members of the Brotherhood to be sworn in.

Brother Adi introduced me to the gathering and explained I had 'been under observation' for some time and it was now thought appropriate to take me into the Brotherhood. With that, he brought the sword crashing down on my right shoulder, which sagged under the weight. I gritted my teeth as the sword then crashed onto my left shoulder – to be seen to be wincing would be poor form I thought.

Now I was a Brother, member No. 13,325. My new Brothers and Sisters include most members of the royal family of Holland, the King and Queen of Norway and Franz Klammer. Prince Charles, I believe, is still 'under observation'.



The Brotherhood of St. Christoph helps travellers caught out in bad weather

The Brotherhood of St Christoph was founded in 1386 by one-time pigherd Heinrich Findelkind, who had been concerned at the number of travellers who found themselves in trouble when storms struck as they negotiated the Arlberg Pass on their way down to the village of Stanzerthal, today's St Anton.

Help

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In the summer of 1387 he and his servant Ulrich opened a small hostel near the highest point of the pass, at what is now St Christoph. The front door was well above ground level, approached by a flight of 15 steps, to make sure it was accessible even in the depths of winter when at least six feet of snow could be expected in the village. Similar quantities are still the norm today, much to the delight of the skiers who come back year after year to St Christoph.



The region's skiing history dates back hundreds of years...

The Pope gave his personal approval to the venture of 1386 and Findelkind scoured Europe for patrons to help fund the hostel – and the Brotherhood was born.

The organisation has had periods of inactivity in the 600 odd years since, but now it is again thriving. And its aim now is not so much to provide food and shelter for weary travellers lost in the snows of the Arlberg – there are plenty of comfortable hotels to perform that function – but to raise money, through donations and events, for disadvantaged families of the region, particularly for the dependents of road accident victims.

And on the site of Findelkind's hostel there has more or less constantly been a warm welcome from the elements throughout the centuries – although the amenities of the present five-star Arlberg Hospiz exceeds those of the original by a fair distance.

Adi Werner, as well as being the Bruderschaft Meister, has with his wife and son Florian developed a growing hotel and restaurant family empire based on the Hospiz. He claims to have the best wine cellars in Austria – one of which is beneath the village's picturesque church. Some of the most noted wine experts in Europe gather here regularly for a tasting that is very exclusive indeed, with some of the vintages opened dating back to Napoleonic times.

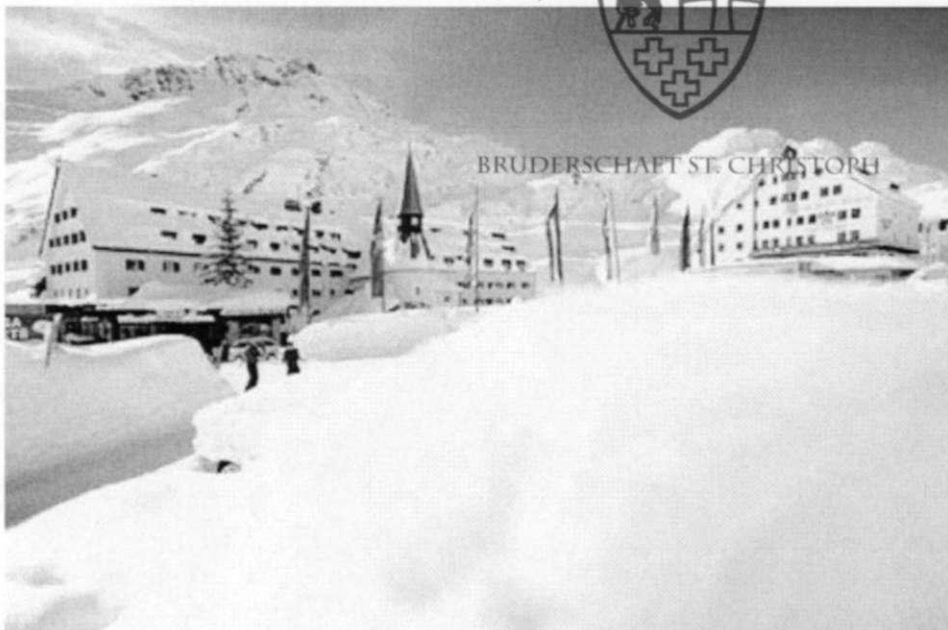
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Pretty in Pink, the sumptuous Hospiz Hotel

St Christoph, with a further handful of hotels and bars grouped around the Hospiz, is the tiniest of ski resorts, but also one of the most remarkable. It seems to be almost buried in snow throughout a long season and has a fairytale quality. And although it is remote, it is in no way isolated from some of the best skiing in the world – a high-speed four-person chairlift with weather bubble links straight into the heart of the Arlberg ski area, running from the centre of the village to Galzig, above St Anton.

Directly available are 83 lifts covering 162 miles of pistes and unlimited off-piste, the Arlberg ski pass embracing Lech and Zurs, as well as St Anton and Stuben. St Christoph also has a pair of draglifts to serve its own local slopes, and a baby drag for beginners.

Its status in the ski world is epitomised by the fact that one of the main state-run schools for the training of ski instructors, the Bundessportheim, is based here – and it was at the Hospiz, in 1901, that the prestigious Arlberg Ski Club was formed. Lessons were being given to beginners on the slopes on St Christoph in 1902, and by 1907, Hannes Schneider, who was born in the nearby village of Stuben, across the border in the province of Vorarlberg, was welcoming groups of foreigners to the Arlberg.

St Christoph is a lunchtime magnet for skiers from all over the Arlberg – a clutch of restaurants have sundecks at the foot of the pistes just by the village, the Hospiz Alm being one of the main attractions. Taking the slide instead of the stairs down to the loos is a tradition here.

It is an attractive proposition to let the afternoon slip away as you sit on the sundeck, maybe having been tempted to a bottle of wine from Adi Werner's cellar – and if you are staying at the Arlberg Hospiz it is not too arduous a trip home. There's always tomorrow to hit the wide open expanses of the Arlberg again.

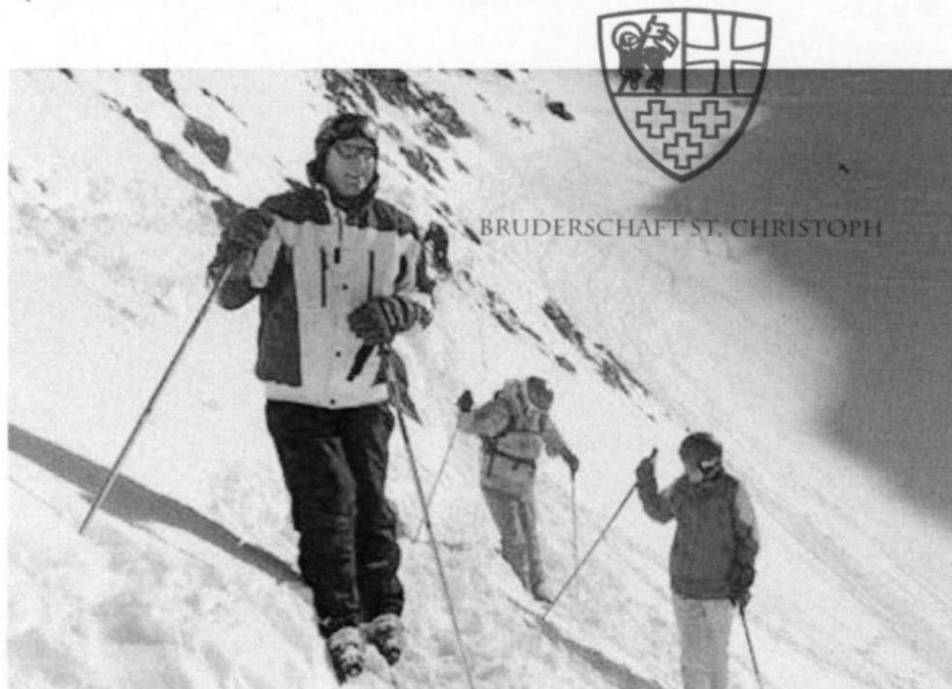
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St Christoph is home to some of the best skiing in the world, as Rob Freeman, left, knows...

And I have a special reason to keep St Christoph in mind since becoming part of the Brotherhood – if a fellow member spots another not wearing the pin badge, a fine is payable next time you're in the village.

Travel facts

More details about St Christoph on www.tiscover.com/st.christoph, or the tourist office at St Anton, 0043 5446 22690, info@stantonamarlberg.com, www.stantonamarlberg.com.

Or contact the Austrian National Tourist Office in London on 0845 101 1818, holiday@austria.info, www.Austria.info/uk.

The Arlberg Hospiz Hotel is on 0043 5446 2611. Fax: 0043 5446 3773. email: info@arlberghospiz.at website: www.hospiz.com. Ski Scott Dunn, 020 8682 5050, www.scottdunn.com are among the operators with St Christoph in their programme.

Nearest airport is Innsbruck, served by GB Airways, 0870 850 9850, www.britishairways.com, until March 29, 2008, then by EasyJet, 0871 244 2366, www.easyjet.com. Regular trains run from Innsbruck to St Anton, then bus or taxi to St Christoph. Or cab or car hire from Innsbruck Airport (best rental deals through arguscarhire.com, 0870 625 1234). Another possibility is Ryanair, www.ryanair.com, 0871 246 0000, to Friedrichshafen from Stansted.

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