Peak perfect

A weekend walking adventure in the Austrian Alps is good for both body and soul, finds **Rhodri Andrews**

Gastein Valley, Austria
PICTURE: Christoph Oberschneider

"Not a bad view, right?" says Dr Suzie Dick, our mountain guide. That's an understatement. I'm on a grassy slope that flows like a quilt in endless shades of green along one side of the 25-mile Gastein Valley, just over an hour's drive from Salzburg. Jade-green thickets of woodland cluster on the mountainsides as the sun lights up emerald meadows speckled with cows, goats and sheep.

It's certainly not the view I'm used to on an average Friday. But that's the whole idea behind the collection of Weekend Adventure Breaks from Ramble Worldwide, which marks its 80th anniversary this year. Running from Friday to Monday, they are designed to give time-poor clients a heady burst of adventure without using too much of their annual leave. The collection was added last year and has grown to include the Sierra Nevada and Picos de Europa mountains in Spain, Bavaria region of Germany, the UK and the Swiss Alps.

ALPINE AIR

I rarely took my eyes off that view of the Gastein Valley as we plodded along, passing through riots of wildflowers and under the creaking, watchful gaze of spruce and pine trees. As the path weaved its way through the hillside, it wasn't long before I glimpsed the end point of our walk – Gadaunerer Gorge. Voted one of Austria's best views by locals in 2024, that claim was hard to argue with once I'd spied the gorge's 340m-high ➢

TRIED & TESTED

POST POST HOTEL
Bad Hofgastein

As its name suggests, the lemon-hued Post Post Hotel was once home to Bad Hofgastein's post office, and it's been delivering a family-run service to travellers since 1421. It blends an Austrian charm, amassed over more than 600 years, with modern rooms and a contemporary take on classic Austrian cuisine, making for an ideal base in this chocolate-box Alpine town. Its central location means clients will find it easy to wander Bad Hofgastein's cobbled streets, and it's less than a 15-minute walk to the cable car station. Post Post Hotel's ace card, however, is its subterranean Edelweiss Spa *(pictured)*, where thermal waters are sourced from the local springs. Rooms from €198 per night.
postposthotel.com

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A waterfall in Bad Gastein; writer Rhodri Andrews; the town of Bad Hofgastein; Austrian *Mozarttorte* PICTURES: Rhodri Andrews

waterfall bouncing down the valley and the steep cliffsides sparkling with flecks of fool's gold.

Just a 45-minute stroll from our base in Bad Hofgastein, this was a good warm-up for the weekend ahead, with Saturday and Sunday providing the meatier walks of the trip. "These weekend adventures are intended to be challenging, and we've graded them on the upper tiers of our eight-point grading system to reflect that," says Wayne Perks, Ramble Worldwide's managing director. "This isn't about ticking something off a wish list, but giving people a real sense of achievement from a long weekend."

For now, though, the hard work could wait as we spent the first evening soaking in the balmy pools of the Alpentherme Gastein spa, which are naturally heated by the thermal waters that bubble up from the Hohe Tauern mountains. I followed that up with a hearty *wiener schnitzel* at the Post Post Hotel's in-house restaurant. Safe to say, I went to bed feeling serene and satisfied.

CALL OF THE WILD

Saturday started with the twin peaks of Türchlwand (2,577m) and Hirschkarspitze (2,119m) in our sights. The former began gently enough – with a swift ascent on the Gastein cable car to the upper station at Schlossalm – before things got serious. Setting off, we traced gravel paths that snaked through grassy gorges and ravines, which swooped up to serrated peaks. The higher we went, the steeper it became, and I found myself spearing the soil with my walking poles as I went. The Alpine grass gave way to rocky scree and an inquisitive marmot even popped its head out from under its rocky hideout to gaze at us zigzagging up the mountainside.

> "We couldn't pass up this view so we paused for lunch – the cheese sandwiches definitely tasted better from on high

We were within sight of the summit when things got trickier, as puddles of snow patchworked the upper reaches of Türchlwand. "This is grade seven territory," said Dick. It turned out the icy terrain meant we weren't able to go any farther, but as we started to make our descent, the lush Gastein Valley and its forested peaks unfolded majestically before us. We couldn't pass up this staggering view, so we paused for lunch – the cheese sandwiches definitely tasted better from on high.

Refuelled, we retraced our steps down, a little frustrated after coming so close to toppling Türchlwand. But we were determined to summit one peak for the day, so our attention turned to the neighbouring mountain.

FUEL FOR ADVENTURE

Hirschkarspitze posed a completely different challenge. The slow, measured ascent of Türchlwand was replaced by a knee-knocking scramble up an exposed rocky

LOCAL experts

"Austria is full of surprises for clients – you think somewhere is inaccessible, but you walk over a ridge and there's a whole village just hiding behind it that you can explore. The country is ideal for people who want to push their boundaries over a few days, with plenty of trails for different abilities."
Dr Suzie Dick, walking guide, Ramble Worldwide

"Gastein Valley is where a lot of Austrians from Vienna and the east of the country come in the summer to relax, which is a really good sign for [international] visitors. Eastern Austria is very flat, so these are the first mountains they'd come across when travelling across the country."
Helmut Schulz, marketing executive, Gastein Tourism

INSIDER INSIGHT

"These weekend adventures are ideal for clients with an interest in the outdoors. They're challenging, so they're for people who have dabbled in a bit of walking on holiday and want to test themselves, but not commit to a whole week. You don't need to be a total fitness enthusiast – a basic level of fitness is fine. Most of our customers are 50-plus. When agents call our sales hotline, they can go through a checklist to assess their client's suitability."
Wayne Perks, managing director, Ramble Worldwide

ABOVE: The group begin their almost successful attempt to reach the summit of Türchlwand PICTURES: Rhodri Andrews

ridge, where the precipitous slopes either side ensured each footstep felt more like a careful calculation. Giant, staple-like footholds and steel cables bolted into boulders helped us navigate some of the peak's steeper sections, and while Hirschkarspitze felt a little more technical, it was more instantly gratifying as we reached the summit's towering wooden cross within half an hour.

The lush Gastein Valley took centre stage again – only this time from the other side. I stood bewitched, the aching in my legs melting away. The moment felt like a perfect reward for the effort it had required, the essence of these weekend adventures laid gloriously bare.

That evening, we savoured a hearty meal at Schmaranzbräu, a rustic farmhouse restaurant serving Austrian classics such as schnitzel and fat sausages cooked over an open flame. As we feasted, it reminded me of another perk to this trip: calories don't count when you're doing this much hiking.

WEATHER WARNINGS

The even better news is that wholesome, soul-stirring food isn't hard to come by in Austria. I found this out on the Sunday, when torrential rain and thunderstorms forced us off the mountain. "Once there's thunder and lightning, you have to get off the mountain because it's too dangerous to carry on," explained Dick.

Luckily for me, though, the warmth of Cafe Gamskar was close by and within minutes I'd stripped off my sopping outer layers and was devouring warm apple strudel served with lashings of whipped cream. Even in the pouring rain, Austria delivered.

> "The moment felt like a perfect reward for the effort, the essence of these weekend adventures laid gloriously bare

Our final evening was spent tracing the Gasteiner Ache river, which weaves into the neighbouring town of Bad Gastein; here, cliff-clinging 19th-century villas and a dramatic 341m-high waterfall look like something from a fairytale. We made a beeline for 600-year-old chalet restaurant Bellevue Alm, nestled high up in the Hohe Tauern mountains. As I tucked into a platter of beef, pork and *spaetzle* (a type of pasta), my muscles felt weary but my stomach and heart were full. I probably shouldn't have opted for the *kaiserschmarrn* (a fluffy pancake served with raisins and a fruit compote) for dessert – but after the epic weekend I'd had, I'd certainly earnt it. TW

BOOK IT

Ramble Worldwide's three-night Hiking in Austria: Bad Hofgastein Weekend Adventure starts from £699 per person, based on two sharing for departures on July 24, August 14 and September 18. It includes breakfast, accommodation, local transport and guided activities with a tour leader. Flights not included.
rambleworldwide.co.uk