

2020 South Jersey Ski Club Ischgl/Prague European Trip Report

Quite a trip and even a proposal, but you must read on to the end to find out who??

Our group of 48, average age 60, 3 snowboards, 3 sets of skis and multitudes of bags kept to that dastardly 23 kg weight limit and inconvenient carry-on size in tow, landed on sunny Saturday, 25 January, in Munich, Germany. Ours had been a very comfortable Lufthansa flight “across the pond” from Newark. We were met by Wolfgang, our friendly and very able Luftner-Reisen driver, and after quickly loading the bus luggage bays and overflow trailer, we set off on a beautiful drive out of Germany and into the Inn Valley of Austria on to Ischgl. Just before our departure from Munich, one of our group, Pat H., almost found himself driving a bus to Mayrhofen for another group from South Jersey, but his wife, Ursula H., stopped him just in time!

We pulled into Ischgl at 16:30 and were met in the center of town by Thomas from the Hotel Brigitte. Minivans he had arranged ferried our bags up to the hotel while we all made the short trek up a few hills to our beautiful accommodation. The Hotel Brigitte ranks as the nicest hotel we have ever stayed in on a European trip. Check-in by Nadine and Thomas was quick and easy, and everyone renting had time to regroup and walk over to Brundl Sport to pick up their previously ordered equipment. What a help our preordering spreadsheet and process proved to be!

Showers, unpacking and some drinks in the bar preceded our “Welcome Prosecco” in the game room. Bianca and Dale M. handed out trail maps, ski school information and booklets detailing the activities in Ischgl for skiers and non-skiers alike. Groups of friends quickly formed, and Janice and Russ W., Fall Line friends of many, and Chris and Pam, friends of Jan H. and Nancy A. from Vienna joined in the fun. Dinner at 7 found us all marveling at the abundant salad and antipasto bar, and the lavish menu presented to us on that night (and every night to follow). The food at Hotel Brigitte was of such a high standard and so inventive, abundant and delicious. Don M. was not alone in commenting that he had tried and enjoyed more new foods during our ski week than ever before in their lives.

Sunday morning, we found an abundant breakfast buffet prepared for us that offered the finest breads, meats, cheeses, salmon, cereals of all kinds, yogurt, made to order omelettes and waffles, fruits, spreads and much, much more. After fueling up for the day, almost everyone was ready to experience the slopes by 10 AM. The trip leaders set out with a large group, but there were splinter groups that took off once they have seen what awaited “up above”. Dale and Bianca’s group included Don M., Craig Y., Yan W., Debbie G., Mary D., Lisa M., Eileen M., Joe K., Ed and Leslie P. and occasionally Mike K., Sue J., Eddy R. and Geri B for most of the week. Other ski/boarding groups that formed included Joe L. and Marion R., Gene Z. and Pat and Ursula H. in one and John B. Sean O., Devin O. and Patrick R. in another. The latter group were often joined by Thomas A., Matt D. and Steve W., as well. Mike J., Joe D., Kelly W., Melanie F. and Tom J. were often seen on the slopes together, and Mike J’s tips took Tom J. to new levels! Dianne D., Janice W. and Ann M. skied together much of the time, and Nancy A. and Jan H. enjoyed spending time on the slopes with their friends, Chris and Pam, from Vienna.

From the lovely and very warm ski room, we walked up a short hill to an elevator which took us down to a people mover which dropped us virtually at the entrance of the Fimbabahn, an 8-person gondola. That gondola proved to be our main means up and down to the Idalp plateau from which trails and lifts branch off in all directions. We never really encountered a line there. Ischgl is spread out in such a way that there are two gondolas and one cable car up to the main mountain, and that kept the clustering of

large crowds at bay, at least during the week we were there. Some in the group braved the run back to town and the hotel, but almost to a person, and for a variety of reasons, they named it a “one and done” proposition.

We skied around the Idalp and Alp Trida area in mild temperatures while admiring stunning scenery for most of that first day. When we stopped for a bite at around 13.00, we were delighted to meet a group from the Princeton NJ Ski Club enjoying lunch on the terrace at La Marmotte as well. As the afternoon progressed and the light began to turn flat, our group headed down the Fimbabahn and back to our hotel. In the ski room, Eddy R., on his first ever European ski trip, was heard to exclaim, “This was the best ski day of my life, like living in a fairy tale!!”

Hotel Brigitte offers a gala 7 course dinner once a week, and ours was on Sunday evening. Before dinner we were treated to Kir Royale and Prosecco on the house. Once at our tables, we were served course after course of delicious food. Thanks to careful financial planning, SJSC was able to provide complimentary house wines to each table this evening. The staff was dressed in typical mountain costume, and the service was as stellar as the food. During dinner a special Italian friend, Stefano M., arrived as he always does when SJSC is skiing in Europe. Dale and Bianca M. have known Stefano for over 40 years, but he has endeared himself to many SJSC members in recent years as well. All were very happy to see him!

Monday dawned clear and beautiful, so most of the ski groups decided to make the trek over to Samnaun in Switzerland along the Gold, Silver or Bronze Smuggler’s Circuit. Gold group skiers were Mike J., Stefano M, Kelly W. and Melanie F., Silver skiers were Ann M., Dianne D. and Janice W. while Dale and Bianca M., Yan W., Ed and Leslie P., Craig Y., Eileen M. and Joe K., Mary D., Geri B., Eddy R. and Don M. made up the Bronze group. Sue J., Debbie G. and Gayle E. made the trip over by riding lifts. It is lovely that there is a way for even non-skiers to make the trip and enjoy the magnificent scenery.

It was simply one of those magical days that all too rare in today’s world. Samnaun is a duty-free, tax-free destination, so all took advantage of shopping for at least a few little things. The day was mild enough for an alfresco lunch, and we met Bob and Lorraine S. enjoying some apple strudel on the Hotel Vitel terrace where we gathered. The views all around were unreal, and we felt like we were on a movie set.

While most were in Switzerland, Dawn M. and Tracy G. hired a ski guide, Thor, to give them some tips and show them the mountain. Apparently, he showed them lots of the hot bars, too, because they returned to the hotel with big smiles and none the worse for wear after their day in the sun! Others seen in bars around town on a regular basis were Thomas A., Matt D., John B., Sean O., Pat R., Devin O. Jim C. and Pam A. served as unofficial hotel bar greeters all week. They had opted out of skiing and into simply relaxing. Others following their lead were Paul and Mary S., Joe M., Gayle E. and Chris Z. They all loved the spa, the views, the town and the relaxing and beautiful hotel public spaces. Joki and Simone, the hotel bartenders, were delightful, and they took excellent care of us ALL week.

Tuesday brought a complete change in the weather, and it was snowing and foggy when we arrived at Idalp for our ski day. In addition, very high winds in the higher elevations had caused the closure of many lifts. This left everyone clustered in the Idalp area. Our usual group set off down #2 Blue trail, a run that we concluded would classify as a double black in the Poconos or perhaps even in Vermont, in a crowd rivaling one to be found in those locations on President’s Weekend! The entire scene gave me a

gut feeling that something unpleasant was going to happen if we decided on another run. Fortunately, most of our group echoed my feelings as we pulled into the lift line with relief at the end of the trail. A few opted for one more run, but afterward they too called it a day as almost total white out conditions moved in. As it turned out, overall mountain conditions deteriorated to such a degree that the Fimbabahn was closed for the day at 12:45!!

Once back to town, Dale and Bianca M., Lisa M. and Yan W. walked to the Tourist Information in search of walking trail maps and the quickest way to the Pardatsch Tram part of town. We were successful on both counts and after fighting a windblown blizzard during which we met Joe L., Marion R. and Craig Y. on the street, we ducked in for lunch at the cute and quaint Gasthaus Alt Paznaun for lunch. Ultimately, we were joined by Mike J. and enjoyed a long, leisurely lunch lubricated with Pfifs, Seidls and Krugls*! At 14:30, Lisa M. and Bianca M. had to hurry back to the hotel for massage treatments by Gabi and Vivi. Aaaaah, there is nothing like a comforting massage as the snow falls and the wind blows. Our therapists treated us like queens.

After another delicious and abundant dinner, many of us convened in the hotel bar due to the very snowy conditions outside. Yan C., Mike K., Mike J, Lisa M., Joe M., Pam A and Jim C. were among them. Bianca M. decided to try a lovely pink Ischgl Gin Tonic made with local Ischgl gin, Fever Tree tonic, pink peppercorns and rose petals. She ended up chatting with Peter and Marie from Nottingham, England who had a few recommendations for future ski destinations in Europe. Stay tuned Ski Committee.

When we awoke on Wednesday morning, the mountain was invisible from our room. The upper webcams that we could get on our television showed a complete whiteout. Thus, we made the executive decision NOT to ski. Instead we would try snow walking along the trails in the valley. At breakfast we put out the notice to any who wanted to join us, and we ended up with Yan W., Eileen M., Joe K., Nancy A. and Lisa M. in our entourage. We thought about using snowshoes for this, but there were not enough for rent so regular snow boots were put to the test. We ended up trekking for 6 miles as the snow kept falling in a real winter wonderland. It was excellent exercise, and we felt like kids on a snow day!. Once more, we headed to Gasthaus Alt Paznaun for lunch, where Vanja took excellent care of us. Afterward we walked in the snow looking in store windows, flirting with some cows and a calf in a barn, making a few small purchases from the Kunst Schniterei wood carver and searching for another spot for a libation. We ended up at the Campagner Hutte for prosecco and toasts to friendship and fun.

Another group of walkers, Sue J., Debbie G. and Dawn M. trekked the valley in the opposite direction. They were lucky because they saw more cows than we did! Oh, there were some hardy souls who ventured out into the whiteout for skiing, but they proclaimed the going very tough indeed. For many of the group, the snow made for a spa day or for simply relaxing in the bar or the lobby with a book while watching the snow blanket the town.

Once a week, the hotel provides after dinner entertainment in the bar, and "Barbara and Janus" provided us with an excellent show on Wednesday evening. They performed many favorite oldies and great dance tunes. Geri B. and Eddy R really tore up the dance floor! Joki and Simone kept the drinks flowing, and it was lots of fun. A group ventured out to party in this "Ibiza of the Alps", but most were in earlier than normal. A powder day was on tap for tomorrow.

As forecast, Thursday dawned crystal clear and the new snow glittered and gleamed under the rising sun. At breakfast everyone was anxious and excited about what awaited up above, and ski groups

quickly began to form. All of us were on the Fimbabahn and up to Idalp before 9:30. There is nothing like skiing on a bluebird day over freshly fallen snow in a pristine location. We moved our group away from the crowds and skied until our legs were like noodles. We discovered the long and beautiful #22 to #23 trails and skied that area several times in a row. We stopped for a quick bite at Pardarama and found many of our SJSC skiers there before us. All proclaimed the day a 10.

(*Pfif,.2L of beer, Seidl,.3L of beer, Krugl, .5 L of beer.)

At Pardarama we heard about the horse drawn sleigh ride that Melanie F. had arranged, so Yan W., Bianca M., Debbie G., Lisa M. and Sue J. downloaded at 14.00 in order to be ready by 15.00 to join Melanie for the ride. For an hour our driver, Daniel, guided the sleigh pulled by strong and friendly Nomi and Hani along the same trail we had walked the day before. "Sleigh Bells Ring, Are You Listening? In The Lane, Snow Is Glistening!" Following our ride, the Champagner Hutte was again calling our name. After all, how could we resist more Prosecco to toast our amazing day on the snow!

Unfortunately, the sun of Thursday was not to last. Friday, our last day, was cloudy, warmer than it had been and a bit foggy. The trip leader group and others set out anyway because we did not want our last day to be one without skiing at least a little. We found the conditions variable and the snow somewhat 'Sierra cement' in spots. We decided to head to Samnaun, Switzerland in hopes of better visibility. What an adventure that proved to be! Our group of Mary D., Mike K., Don M., Debbie G., Lisa M., Yan W. Craig Y., Joe K, Eileen M. and Dale and Bianca M. made it there and back, but we were all in survival mode as we picked our way over and around deep, sticky and invisible mounds. At one-point Dale M. disappeared into a powder hole up to his neck! After the run down #11 back to Idalp, everyone was exhaustedly happy to be alive and in one piece!

We downloaded on Fimbabahn and walked to Gasthaus Alt Paznaun for toasts to our survival and our strength. Again, Vanja provided us with great service, and we sat at the table for several hours just chatting about everything under the sun. Little did we know that there was something special in store for two of our group later that evening...

Yes, the proposal...

After an afternoon of packing and preparing to depart the next morning, everyone arrived at dinner ready to share stories about the days adventures when it was announced that our group photo would be taken on the staircase leading up to the dining room. The troops were herded out there, and Dianne D. gave her phone to Thomas at Reception asking him to take a few photos. After the first shot, Joe K. jumped out of the crowd and asked Eileen M. to come down. She was talking to someone and said, "What Joe? Why?" a couple of times. After a few silent moments from all of us, she looked again and noticed Joe down on one knee. She gasped, ran down and was there when Joe said, "Eileen, will you marry me?" "Of course, of course I will!" she answered, and they hugged and kissed as everyone applauded. It was so wonderful!! We have had many things happen on our trips, but this was the first proposal!! The wonderful Mangold family provided the entire group with champagne to toast the happy couple as dinner began. Love was in the air! Congratulations to Joe and Eileen, a wonderful couple!

The proposal cast a happy glow over the entire evening, and our last Hotel Brigitte dinner was especially festive as a result. All lingered at the table until well after 22.00. To be honest, this was the only complaint that anyone ever had about the hotel. Dinners simply lasted so long. Honestly, when cuisine

of such high quality and lovely presentation is being served, there is not such thing as rushing. It is simply the European way to linger at table and savor the evening.

Our departure on Saturday morning was scheduled for 8, so breakfast was served at 7 instead of 7:30. Everyone was down, fed, packed and headed to the bus location before 8. The trip leaders did not need to wake anyone or round up any strays. Again, minibuses ferried our luggage down to the bus while the rest of us walked down on rather slick, icy streets. Naturally, it looked like a bluebird day was on tap, but alas, sadly all good things must end. At least a beautiful ride up to Munich was in store.

Wolfgang was again our driver, and he did a splendid job for us. The scenery was breathtaking with all the new snow of the week, and we were in Munich in record time. Check-in was a bit of challenge due to the slightly confusing self-check machines. Trip leader Bianca M. was actually spotted heading onto the conveyor belt with her bag before a helpful Lufthansa agent came to the rescue just in time!

Everyone had plenty of post check-in time to down some delicious Bavarian beers before our flight to Prague departed right on time. The flight only took 45 minutes, and we were on the ground in the Czech Republic by 16.00. Unfortunately, there were some whose bags did not arrive with them, despite a relatively quiet airport and ultimately efficient check-in. We are still not sure what happened there. Making the lost bag claims took some time while the rest of us waited outside. Dale M. helped greatly with that process.

At the airport, we had been met by Blanka and Alex, and later we would meet Hana at the hotel. That trio of lovely women took excellent care of us while we were in Prague. Blanka and Alex served as our tour guides on Sunday, and Hana made sure that all went smoothly at the hotel. We would not have been able to enjoy the experience quite as much without them.

Our Prague hotel, Grand Majestic Plaza, was beautiful and perfectly located for city sightseeing. Check-in was swift and efficient, and in no time, everyone was able to settle in and decide on evening activities. Groups of friends made during the ski week headed out into the beautiful and mild evening in search of Pivovar (brewery restaurants) and to take photos of Prague under the lights. What a beautiful city Prague is! Everyone immediately fell in love with its fairytale ambiance.

Sunday morning dawned sunny and nice, but rain was in the forecast for the afternoon. All enjoyed a wonderful and abundant buffet breakfast complete with Prosecco and a pianist to add to a lovely ambiance. Blanka and Alex met us at 9 for our walking tour of Old City Prague, and almost all the group participated. Blanka and Alex proved to be excellent guides, and we learned and saw so much during our 3 hours with them. They gave us tips for restaurants and provided other helpful hints that only locals know.

True to the forecast the rain began to fall at about 13.00. That did not deter our intrepid group of 47 hardy souls. Groups were seen trudging up to Prague Castle, and Gayle E. proved to be a real trooper when she joined Bianca and Dale M., and their German "family" (who had come from Cologne and Attendorn to visit them) in walking almost 28,000 steps up there and back!

Monday was a much nicer day, and after another wonderful breakfast, groups set out for more exploration. Many chose this day to go up to the Castle while others took the Hop-On, Hop-Off buses or a river cruise. Dale and Bianca M. found Josefov and the Jewish Museum to be so moving and a beautiful testament to the powers of survival in the face of the worst adversity. Bob and Lorraine S. were seen in

the street market, and they told of a wonderful encounter with a violin restorer working on 17th century instruments. Yan W. and Don M. spent the day taking the most beautiful photographs of an incredibly photogenic city. All should check out their expertise on Facebook!

That afternoon the missing luggage was delivered to the hotel, much to the delight to those who had been mustering by with the minimum. It will forever remain a mystery as to why the bags did not arrive with us on Saturday, but at least they were not permanently lost. Many phone calls were necessary to make this happen, and we thank all of those involved.

Alas, Tuesday was our departure day, and by 10 everyone was in the lobby with their bags ready to load the luggage vans. Bianca M., Melanie F., Leslie P., Kelly W. and Eileen M., among others, made last minute purchases of garnet jewelry at the small stand next to Reception. The products and prices were most appealing. Blanka and Alex accompanied us on our bus to the airport, and we thanked them profusely for their help with absolutely everything. They made all go much smoother.

Once at the airport we had plenty of time for those last crisp and delicious Czech pilsners, and Joe K., Eileen M., Dale and Bianca M. discovered that Budweiser Budvar is to US Budweiser what Boone's Farm Wine is to the finest Bordeaux!! Shopping opportunities abounded in that relatively small airport, and lots took advantage of last-minute purchases at Duty-Free or the Czech specialty shops Manufaktura, Blue or Bata. Lisa M. picked up a very fine pair of black boots indeed!

There were a few moments of panic when it was announced that our flight to Munich was delayed by 30 minutes. With a very short connection time in Munich for our flight to Newark, this could present a real problem for us. Dale and Bianca M. brought this to the attention of the gate agents who contacted the Lufthansa agents in Munich. After our short flight over finally landed, we were met in Munich by Brigitta and Carmen who swiftly, very swiftly, and efficiently escorted us rapidly through the airport to our waiting flight to Newark. We made it with mere moments to spare, and all could finally breath a sigh of relief.

Our flight back to Newark was very pleasant and uneventful, and with an abundance of films to watch on the seatback screens, all were kept well entertained. Amazingly and gratefully, despite our short turn around time in Munich, all the bags checked in Prague arrived, and most were out into Baggage Claim within ½ hour of landing. Goodbyes were said all around and the group scattered to waiting parking shuttles or pre-arranged drivers.

What a successful trip this was! The destinations and hotels lived up to their fine reputations, and an excellent time was had by all. Fortunately, there were NO injuries this trip, and almost everyone stayed healthy. There were a couple of minor illnesses, but they were not enough to keep anyone down for long. Overall, the group was extremely harmonious, and many new friendships were made, and others strengthened.

Many thanks to our wonderful trip participants whose kind words of support make trip leading so rewarding. You are the best! We also thank the Ski Committee for their hard work in making the trips a reality. We know how much work you do, and we REALLY appreciate you for it!! Finally, thanks are in order to our vendor, Alphorn Tours, for putting together the packages and giving us such a great value. This trip was a great one, and we are already looking ahead to the next, Meribel, Les Trois Vallees and Paris in 2021!! **Until Next Year, Bianca and Dale Mandel**