



WINTER *wonderland*

Tom Otley heads to a secluded Bavarian castle-turned-luxury resort that hosted the G7 summit last year

Schloss Elmau came to the world's attention when it played host to the G7 summit in June last year. The Bavarian Alps provided an incongruous backdrop both to the international meeting and the unfolding crisis, as waves of immigrants made their way across Europe. Pictures of Barack Obama and Angela Merkel debating around a bench in the grounds certainly put the location on the map. Of course, just because a hotel hosts a global summit, it doesn't mean it is right for your holiday, but if the management can keep several world leaders and their entourages happy, there's a good chance they can satisfy your loved ones, too.

We were there in February. The 90-minute drive from Munich airport was through pouring rain, which turned to sleet as we reached the swish resort town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen, location of the 1936 Winter Olympics. The ski runs down into town seemed empty, but as we climbed higher into the woods and then down into a valley, the sleet became snow, dusting the pine trees in white. By the time we pulled up at the resort, the lights were glinting at the windows and winter darkness had fallen. An hour later, we were swimming in one of the heated outdoor pools as the snow settled on balconies and roofs. Quite a first impression.

The hotel is divided into two parts: the original Schloss (castle), or "Hideaway", with 115 rooms and suites, and the newer Retreat, which has 47 suites. Furnishings throughout are of high quality, with parquet floors, handmade carpets from Iran and antiques from all over the world. High-speed wifi is free throughout the resort and grounds. Deluxe rooms, Junior suites and Standard suites are all located in the new South and West wing of the Schloss. Most have floor-to-ceiling windows and views to the Wetterstein mountain range. We stayed in the Retreat, which also had stunning views, and a balcony too cold to step out on, but which must be a lovely place in summer.

There are nine restaurants serving up a range of cuisines, including Thai, Italian, Bavarian and even a fondue venue (Kaminstubel). There isn't much in the way of cheap eats here – a burger for the kids is inevitably wagyu beef and comes in at €25, but room rates include a €50 per person per day dining allowance. If you have a meal at the Michelin-starred Luce d'Oro you will spend considerably more (six courses is €135 per person), but the food

Left: View towards Schloss Elmau



is polished and the presentation faultless, so much so that at least half the diners were Instagramming photos of it.

The snow continued throughout the first night and, after a good sleep aided by the superior soundproofing, we spent the morning careering down a slope just below the hotel on traditional wooden sledges. After lunch we explored the hotel, wandering through a billiard lounge with table football, past grand pianos on landings, several libraries lined with hundreds of interesting-looking books, a tea lounge, an elegant bar with another grand piano, two yoga studios and the kit room, where guests can rent everything from the latest ski to Nordic walking equipment. Everywhere we went, staff were happy to help and answer questions.

VISIONARY PROJECT

The combination of service and superb facilities set in a beautiful location only partly explains why the resort is so special. A glimpse into its 100-year history reveals how the resort has – unusually – remained true to the vision of its founder.

Dr Johannes Muller was a Protestant theologian and philosopher who wanted Schloss Elmau to be “a space for the development of personal and communal life free of any ideology”. In spite of various interruptions and challenges – such as the 2005 fire that destroyed two-thirds of the castle – that ethos has endured. It’s why the G7 summit was a good fit – and why the resort hosts more than 200 cultural events each year.

We had just missed cellist Mischa Maisky when we visited, but caught some superb performances including a Vivaldi flute concerto by La Folia Barockorchester and Stefan Temmingh, and a jazz recital by accordionist Vincent Peirani and Michael Wollny on piano. The duo had been in residence recording a CD. This is more than a bit of marketing;

Clockwise from above: Badhaus rooftop pool; Michelin-starred Luco d’Oro; Retreat suite; Merkel and Obama at the G7 summit; Elmauer Alm ski cabin; the hammam

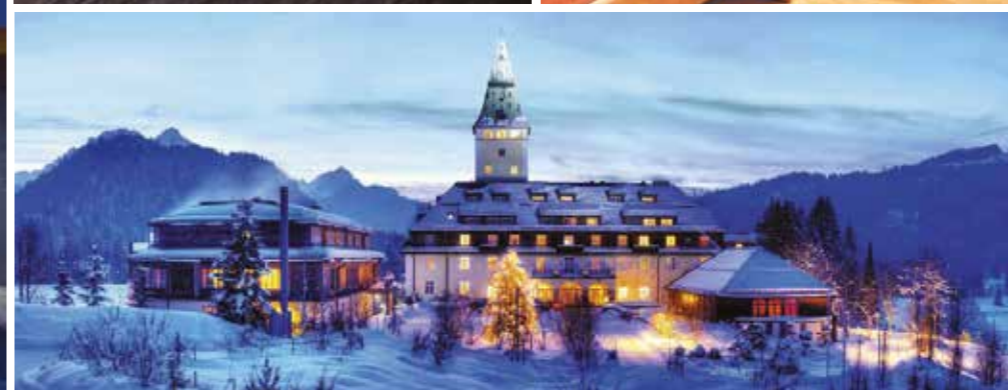


ULRIKE MYRZIG

it is core to the hotel’s appeal. How often have you been promised live music at a resort hotel and sat through the same tired performer night after night?

Then there’s the health and fitness options. No self-respecting European resort hotel can afford to neglect its spa facilities, but Schloss Elmau’s are outstanding. In a strange way, the 2005 fire helped, necessitating the reconstruction of the Schloss by 2007 and the addition of the Retreat, opened in 2015, next door. Covering about 7,000 sqm over four floors, facilities include the adults-only Badehaus spa with 25-metre outdoor infinity pool, probably the largest hammam west of Istanbul at 500 sqm, and a family spa. In summer, there is also a Nature spa in the grounds. In addition, the Retreat has the Shantigiri spa with adult, women and family sections, two saunas and steam rooms, infinity lap and saltwater pools, a cold plunge pool and eight treatment rooms. There is a choice of several yoga, pilates and qigong classes on offer daily.

While there is much to do in the resort, it’s worth exploring further afield. The surrounding area’s activities differ according to the season but, whether



hiking or cross-country skiing, it’s worth making the effort to visit Elmauer Alm – a wooden ski cabin located at 1,203 metres above sea level. Built in 1924 and open year-round, it has a modern central wood burner, red-and-white checked tablecloths and matching curtains.

Faces fresh from our hike, we found not everything had to be Michelin-starred to be delicious, tucking into warming Bavarian classics such as soup and currywurst. Standing on the terrace afterwards, the Wetterstein mountains appeared through the clouds for the first time on our trip, providing a majestic backdrop to our juvenile sledging antics as we returned to the hotel. I don’t know what it is about sledging (or surfing for that matter) that causes even grown adults to yell like children, but it feels good. That night, we tried to imagine what the resort would be like to visit in summer. Different, but equally brilliant, was the conclusion. Those world leaders would know.

■ Rooms in the main building start from €408 per night based on two people sharing, and in the Retreat from €628 per night. schloss-elmau.de