

14 August 13, 2023 The Sunday Times

### Travel Summer holidays

# KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

Jonathan Dean heads to the lake country of southern Austria to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather

**T**he views from the Alexanderhütte, just outside Seeboden in southern Austria, are the Alps as a child might paint them: mountains for days, a lake, thousands of tall, spindly evergreens, a huge cow with a bell and said huge cow having a long wee.

"Look! That cow is having a wee!" giggles Ezra, who is eight.

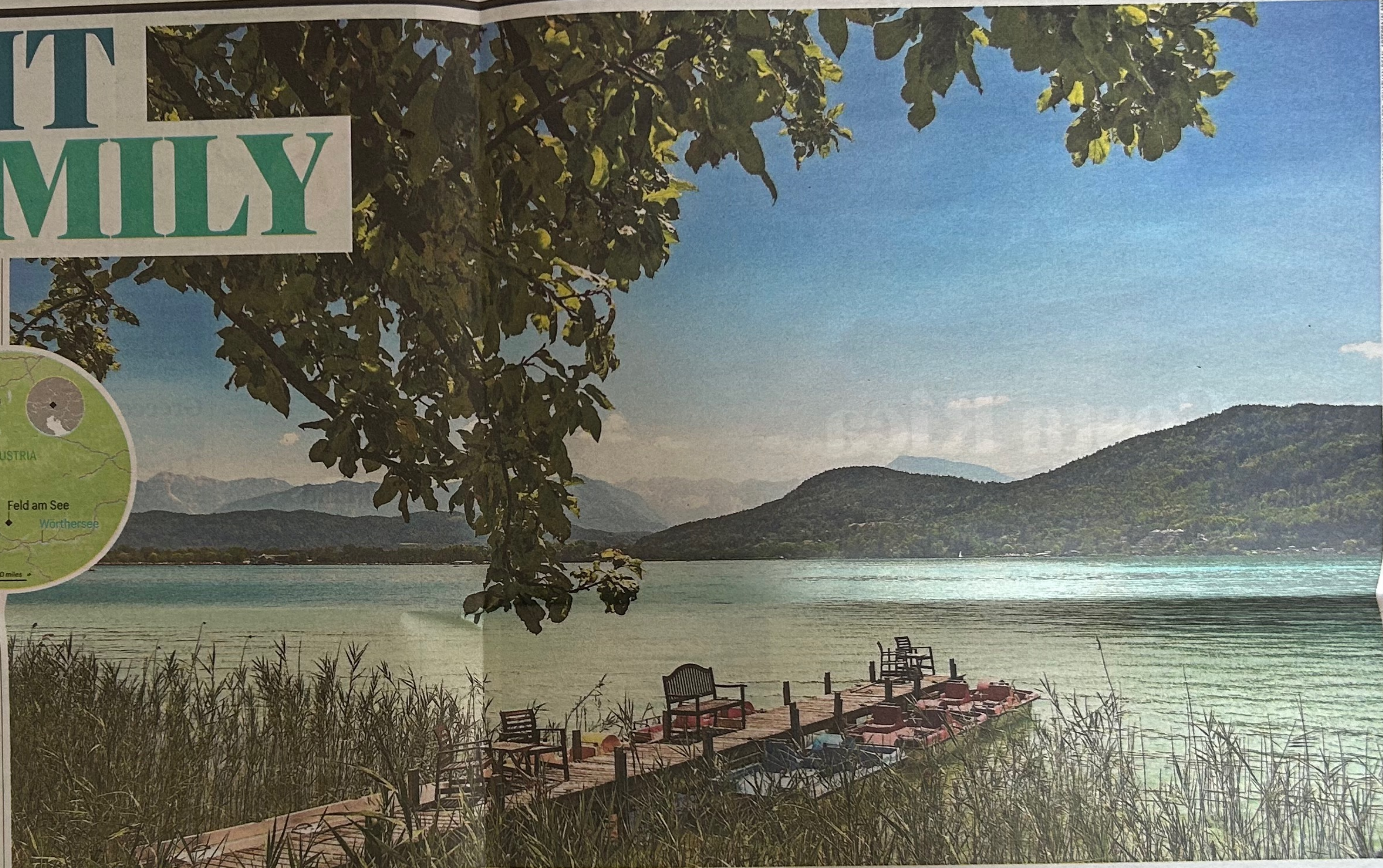
We sat at the Alexanderhütte and had a three-hour lunch – it is perfect for time-wasting that does not feel at all like wasted time. The sun was bright and the view from the tables tumbles through meadows to the valley below.

It is remote and only reachable by a half-hour hike, but the uphill struggle is worth it. The beer is good and the food organic, local and inventive – I had a ham salad with edible flowers, while my wife, Rosamund, had a veggie option. It is in my top five lunches of all time, just below when I spent four hours at Cal Pep in Barcelona in March 2011.

But there was something burgeoning for the soul about eating food from the mountains, way above the noise. And also it meant something to me; Austria is not just a random summer-holiday destination – a break from more time in the Algarve – this year, you see, I was granted an Austrian passport.

This was thanks to my grandfather, Heinz Sherwood. He was born a Schapira, which explains how all that happened. A Jew, he fled Vienna to London in 1939, changed his surname and met my English grandmother. I wrote a book about him and his even more extraordinary father, David, titled *I Must Belong Somewhere*, which was read by as many as seven people. Anyway, my mum, Anne, was born in 1953 in Croydon, and while I am British, Austria now offers citizenship to "descendants of victims of the National Socialist regime" – aka the Nazis – and so I am half-Austrian too. So too are my children Ezra and Eden, who's six.

Say what you want about Brexit, but it sure is some turn of events for the country that forced out my grandfather to offer his ancestors freedom of movement. Want to study without fuss in Rome? Go ahead, kids. Want to join the EU customs queue to sample the delights of Amsterdam an hour before your mates travelling on British navy-coloured passports. This way, please. (Point of order, though, to soften this #FBPE boasting – if you have a second passport, you must take your British one with you, because we were asked upon re-entry



Jonathan and his family, above, explore the lakes of Wörthersee, main, and Millstätter See, below



whether we actually live here, which was awkward.)

So all this is why we went to Austria. Of course, Ezra and Eden do not understand anything about global entry yet, and when we landed in Salzburg the queue for Brits was shorter than the one for those from the EU, so that buzz was short lived. But it means a lot to my mum, and this was a holiday with depth.

An added layer is that I lived in Vienna for four years when I was in my teens because my dad, Chris, worked there for IBM. During the summers we would go to the town of Seeboden, on a lake called Millstätter See, and that was where we were returning nearly 30 years on – hair greyer and with a significantly weaker grip on German.

Millstätter See is 90 minutes' drive from Salzburg, through the sort of rugged scenery you imagine Tom Cruise running over. We stayed in Hotel Bellevue on the edge of Seeboden, up a steep hill that gives it said belle vue. It is a family-friendly place, with a warm indoor swimming pool and bikes for hire, but it is somewhat dated. Our twin double was big, but did not have a bath, fridge

or kettle. Also, you must insist on a balcony at booking – most rooms have them, but ours did not, which meant that the brilliant view was rather hard to take in (B&B doubles from £110; [bellevue.or.at](http://bellevue.or.at)).

The children loved it, though – we stayed half-board and the big buffet breakfast of meats, egg, fruit, waffles, bread and honeycomb was an entire activity, while varied dinners offered soups, salads, meat, fish and vegetable options, with a weekly magician and a lounge singer who did very interesting takes on Coldplay.

What Hotel Bellevue offered was the ideal base from which to explore. The south Austrian lakes in the province of Carinthia – Millstätter See and Wörthersee are the big ones – are warm enough to swim in, with beaches and bars. Our nearest lake was a ten-minute walk from the hotel and, thanks to bikes and a local taxi scheme called Nockmobil, a hire car is not essential.

Pick up a Kärnten card from hotel receptions for free access to beaches

or discounts on various activities and the area will reveal that it has the best bits of a Spanish beach holiday, albeit with absolutely no restaurants geared towards egg-and-bacon, Union Jack Brits. Bliss.

Indeed, the restaurants in which we had lunch were superb. One day we did Alexanderhütte, the lofty heaven in the Nockberge mountains.

Next up was a smart deli called Radlerei, on the cobbled streets of the natural spring town Feld am See – the sort of place that a remake of *The Sound of Music* might be filmed. The menu there was bold and different – yes, you could get a wiener schnitzel, but they also create their own meatballs and curries to take away or eat in. We ate there twice.

Also hugely recommended is the Panorama-Restaurant Nock IN – a striking, wooden and modern retreat with a menu of salads and the local speciality Kärntner kasnudeln, or Carinthian noodles (basically, a big cheesy tortellini), and a 360-degree Alpine view. To reach Nock IN you

“Kaiserburg Bob is a blast – just the correct side of terrifying”

travel up the Biosphärenparkbahn Brunnach cable car to a Unesco-approved park nestled on the summit, with a well-designed, imaginative, natural playground including rafts and water spouts, yoga spots and many well-padded walks.

I remembered quite a lot about Carinthia from when I was last there, aged 14. I do remember the mini-golf in Seeboden, pedalos and the many places for ice cream, but I did not remember the area being quite so well geared towards kids. Some of the appeal is new – Kaiserburg Bob, opened in 2020, is a blast of a rollercoaster bobsleigh track that is significantly faster than you think and just the correct side of terrifying (£14; [badkleinkirchheimer.com](http://badkleinkirchheimer.com)). At the other end of the spectrum, and equally as popular with Ezra and Eden, was the Alpen Wildpark in Feld am See. Built in 1985 and, it seems, barely updated since, it is a mixture of deer and pigs and a collection of waxworks and taxidermy representing everything from the Wild West to a couple of depressed-looking dead zebras.

We even did a spot of mining for red garnet stones at the Erlebniswelt

### 3 MORE EUROPEAN LAKESIDE ESCAPES

#### LAKE CONSTANCE

Not sure whether you want a lake bordering Switzerland, Germany or Austria? Lake Constance laps against all three and offers mesmerising glimpses of the Alps in the distance. This spacious apartment in Immenstaad is three minutes' walk from the lake and short cycle rides to Friedrichshafen and Meersburg and the boat to Mainau, an island of flowers.

**Details** Seven nights' self-catering for five from £1,176 (expedia.com). Fly to Friedrichshafen via Frankfurt

#### ITALIAN LAKES

Nothing exudes character and class quite like an Italian lake, particularly in autumn, when the summer crowds have dispersed but temperatures remain pleasantly warm. In addition to its crystal-clear water and mountain vistas, Lake Garda throws in Roman ruins, the peninsula town of Sirmione and delectable bigoli with sardines and risotto with Amaroni wine.

**Details** Seven nights' self-catering for four in the Doria Apartments in Garda from £664, including flights and transfers (tui.co.uk)

#### POLAND'S LAKE DISTRICT

Welcome to Masuria in northeastern Poland, a large expanse of unspoilt forests and over 2,000 lakes. Galery69 is a truly stylish retreat on Lake Wulpinskie that enables hammock-induced calm reflection, explorations by kayak and paddleboard and an arty atmosphere in which to enjoy a selection of Polish-inspired and modern European dishes. Aimed fair and square at adults, though children over 16 are welcome.

**Details** B&B doubles from £117 (hotelgalery69.pl). Fly to Olsztyn-Mazury or Warsaw and take train to Olsztyn

**Adrian Bridge**

Granatium, which was weird and hard, but again the kids loved it. There is a range here that makes it more memorable than two weeks on a sunlounger, but a bonus is that southern Austria offers that type of holiday as well. The forecast threatened rain that never really came, and no wonder my grandfather used to visit these lakes – and why I have happy memories of them as a young boy.

We hired a motorboat, sunbathed while keeping half an eye on the paddling children, watched Ezra jump into the lake umpteenth times and Eden mess around with the sand. We kept on saying how wholesome the holiday felt, as I read *American Psycho* because I had not got round to it before. So that was less wholesome, but we were relaxed, with this second country of ours starting to feel like home.

Jonathan Dean was a guest of the Austrian National Tourist Office ([austria.info](http://austria.info)), the Millstätter See, Bad Kleinkirchheim and Nockberge Tourist Board ([millstaettersee.com](http://millstaettersee.com)) and Visit Carinthia ([visitcarinthia.at](http://visitcarinthia.at)). Seven nights' B&B in Millstatt from £841, including flights (tui.co.uk)