



Rolling stones: Eisstock is a form of curling played on the lake

Lake superior: Skaters on the Eleven Cities Tour, below and left

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Blades of glory on an ice little learner

» continued from page 11

that everyone on the ice is so focused on technique. We overtake young mothers pushing baby buggies, ice hockey players passing a puck, and dog walkers, all moving in a giant anticlockwise loop around the western part of the lake. But why must we skate anticlockwise, I ask Wolfgang.

Speed skaters aren't able to turn right, he says, laughing. Apparently turning left is easier mentally.

Next, we're overtaken by a Ford Escort. This isn't a car that took a wrong turn, it's the eismeister's mode of transport for grooming the ice. A local celebrity, he looks for spots that are starting to freeze, and when the ice is 15cm thick, relies on these 1990s cars with a snowplough on the front to clear the snow. You don't want to risk an expensive vehicle in this profession.

The reason the lake freezes so quickly is that, as well as being 930m above sea level, it's fed mostly by underwater springs and shielded from the wind by mountains on every side.

With global warming, the start of the skating season is getting later, but it usually lasts from mid-late December to early-mid March. I was there in the first week of January, when the eismeister prepared a 3.5km circuit. And, in what seems like no time, I've done four loops of the lake on rented long-bladed touring skates.

Wolfgang has another lesson before lunch, so I stop at one of the three café-bars spread out along the western loop for a coffee and viennoiserie. But I'm itching to carry on.

By this time, the lake is buzzing with activity, and to reach the ice I navigate past a game of eisstock – a form of curling – and an ice hockey match.

The skating is so addictive that I'm averaging 15kph, but many go faster. The organisers of the Eleven Cities Tour – an ice skating race on Dutch canals – now hold their 200km event here after being inspired by seeing a British man on the ice. No, not me, but Timothy Dalton as James Bond in *The Living Daylights*, which featured a car chase on the lake.

Having done 14km in the morning and again in the afternoon, I'm not sure I can manage the 'blister party', which turns this quiet village into a wild, all-night party venue.

I finish with a schnapps at a lakeside bar as a celebration, which is in order as

the skating was in doubt because of what skaters fear most: snowfall. There was a lot of that at the start of my trip.

So, the next day I go cross-country skiing instead, exploring 40km of trails through the magical winter landscape under my own steam. This is harder work than skating, and afterwards I need the lakeside spa at my hotel, the Regitnig. Here, a spameister throws oils on to hot stones and swirls a towel over their head until everyone is so hot, they plunge into an open section of the lake.

After that, I had earned my dinner of fillet of freshwater zander, medallions of pork and saddle of veal, all served by waiting staff in traditional dress.

The next day, when the snow was heaviest, I took the free 45-minute bus ride to Nassfeld, with 110km of pistes that cross the Italian border. If you want a skiing holiday with skating thrown in, it's a good base, and British tour operators such as Crystal Ski come here. I aimed to take all 30 lifts, but skiing the deep powder was challenging.

Beginners don't need such a big resort and can try Weissensee's ski area with five lifts – which is where I went the next day while the snow eased. It's charming, with the beginner slopes intersecting walking and snowshoeing trails at the top of the mountain, and challenging runs offering spectacular views of the lake. A must was sledging on the walking route from the summit, where friendly huskies wanted to race me down.

But no sight was more beautiful than the one that greeted me over breakfast the following morning, when the freshly prepared ice glistened in the sunlight, sparkling like the bubbles in my prosecco – and offering by far the smoothest glide of the holiday.

Getting there

Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies twice weekly to Klagenfurt from London Stansted for £29 return. Colin travelled as a guest of Weissensee and Nassfeld (nlw.at), Carinthia (visitcarinthia.at) and Austria (austria.info). He stayed at Hotels and Chalets Regitnig (regitnig.com; +43 4713 2225) which offers double rooms from €168 (£144) a night B&B. Skate hire from €12 (alpensport.at). A day ticket on the lake is free to overnight guests in Weissensee, otherwise €8. Lessons (weissensee-aktiv.com) cost €31.40 per person for a group of five for 90 minutes.