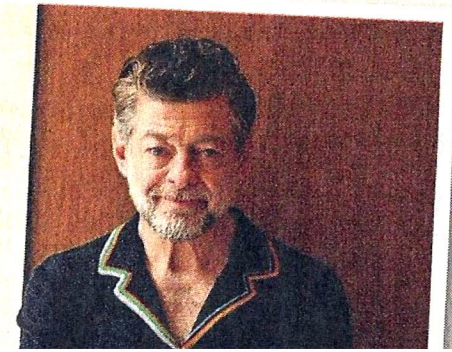


# Life & Arts

## FTWeekend



### KEY NOTES

#### THE COMODO, BAD GASTEIN, AUSTRIA

**What's the buzz?** In the Austrian Alps most hotels still cleave to the traditional paradigm — wood panelling, antlers on the walls, sheepskin throws and red-checked curtains — so The Comodo is a bold departure. A former sanatorium built in the early 1960s, and latterly used as a convalescent home for employees of the City of Vienna, has been transformed by Berlin-based architects Barbara Elwardt and Piotr Wisniewski into a funky mid-century retreat, with vintage furniture and thoughtfully commissioned artwork. Though it only opened on January 27, word is already spreading about what could be the coolest mountain hotel in Europe.

**Location, location, location** Set around a waterfall in a rugged gorge near the end of the Gastein valley, 50 miles south of Salzburg, Bad Gastein is a very unusual ski resort. In fact, not really a ski resort at all but a historic spa town with pistes and lifts added as an afterthought. About 5m litres of water emerge from the town's 18 springs each day, rich in minerals and naturally heated to 46C. A spa boom in the 19th century saw grand hotels built into the steep slopes beside the gorge. Notable visitors ranged from Emperor Wilhelm I of Germany and King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia to Franz Schubert and William

Somerset Maugham. A train line opened in 1905 brought more mainstream tourists (direct trains still arrive from Salzburg, Vienna and Munich).

By the 1990s, though, the smart set had gone elsewhere. Rather than capitalising on its illustrious history, Bad Gastein felt stuck in the past, with a reputation as somewhere for the elderly and infirm. When insurance companies stopped funding spa cures, visitor numbers fell further. Today, many of the Belle Époque hotel buildings are shuttered, or converted into cheap apartments. Walk the winding streets, craning your neck up at the tiers of ornate pastel-coloured buildings, and it's impossible not to think of Wes Anderson.

Faced with a declining spa business, the town authorities invested in expanding the ski area, but it is an influx of creatives — drawn by the air of faded glamour and, presumably, the low rents in a town with a massive oversupply of accommodation — that is reviving its fortunes. Several of the old hotels and guesthouses have been given hipsterish makeovers, and cool cafés and co-working spaces are popping up. The Süddeutsche Zeitung called it “a mountain holiday resort for city dwellers who don't actually like mountains or holidays”.

**Checking in** Even from the brass lettering on the signage by the lifts, it's clear this is an architect's project, with extreme attention to detail throughout. Original terrazzo floors in the hallways give on to warm oak boards in the open-plan lounge area, where the low, fluffy sofas, globe wall lights and marble-topped side tables suggest a mash-up of

1960s futurism and a Viennese coffee house. The reception desk sits beside the opulent bar and the welcome is warm and informal: “Ah, I must practise my English!” beamed the receptionist.

Elwardt and Wisniewski had intended to lease the finished building to a hotel operator but became so bound up in the details that they decided to run it themselves — and are now talking about expanding the concept to a small chain.

Bedrooms have rich colour schemes of bottle-green and burgundy, and clever fitted furniture (beds incorporate side tables with alcoves for carafes of spring water); some rooms have beautiful tan-leather day beds. Above all is the view: 55 of the 70 rooms look out through floor-to-ceiling windows down the whole length of the Gastein valley (the others look up to the mountains behind).

Sometimes the hipness becomes a bit much for this late-adopting Gen-Xer.

*The low, fluffy sofas, globe wall lights and marble-topped side tables suggest a mash-up of 1960s futurism and a Viennese coffee house*



Rooms have no phone or printed information of any kind (nor minibar and don't even think about a trouser press). Back down at reception, a member of staff wearily explained that you are supposed to scan a QR code printed on a wooden block in the room, which then allows you to WhatsApp the front desk. Ironic signs in the garden, pointing up to “Sky” and down to “Mother Nature”, are all very jolly but, as a first-time visitor, I would have preferred one that indicated the path to the town centre.

**What to do?** If the hotel was a surprise, the ski area was more so. I had assumed the slopes would be gentle and limited, in keeping with a genteel spa resort. In fact they were expansive — there are 200km of pistes, rising up to 2,686m — and unexpectedly hardcore, with few runs graded blue (easy) and lots of reds that would be black elsewhere. Though there was no powder on the afternoon I visited, there was clearly potential for some incredible off-piste too.

Skiing is just one option, though — you should also make time to walk beside the thundering waterfall and visit the *Felsenherme*, the extensive complex of indoor and outdoor thermal baths at the foot of the slopes. The Comodo has its own pool and sauna, too, and there are free yoga and breathwork classes for guests.

**What about the food?** It started so well — a beautiful dining room, enthusiastic waiters, a short, intriguing menu (funny that the wine and cocktail list is simply marked “Fluids”), beautiful cutlery on a dark green marble table, and a crisp

glass of Grüner Veltliner. The starter — yeast dumpling with sautéed mushrooms and blue cabbage — was delicious. And then . . . nothing.

Some assume visiting reviewers get special attention; the truth is that hotels are machines so complex that maintaining a facade is impossible. About 35 minutes after ordering my main course (veal in a horseradish crust), a waiter returned to say they had run out and would I mind beef with pasta instead? It finally arrived 95 minutes after I'd sat down — pleasant but hardly “the intersection of culture and cuisine” billed.

Thankfully the kitchen redeemed itself the next morning. Breakfast was the urban café dream — ginger shots, fresh blackberry, carrot and beetroot juices, strong coffee and fresh pastries — but accompanied by a panoramic view of the sun rising over the snowy peaks.

**Other guests?** Dressed-down professionals from Germany and Austria, a surprisingly harmonious mix of cocktail-sipping couples and families heading for the pool.

**The damage** Double rooms officially start at €268 but are currently available on the hotel's own site for €190 (including during the Easter school holidays). That is an absolute steal.

**Elevator pitch** Barbarella goes skiing.

**Tom Robbins**

Tom Robbins was a guest of The Comodo ([thecomodo.com](http://thecomodo.com)). For more on Bad Gastein see [gastein.com](http://gastein.com)