

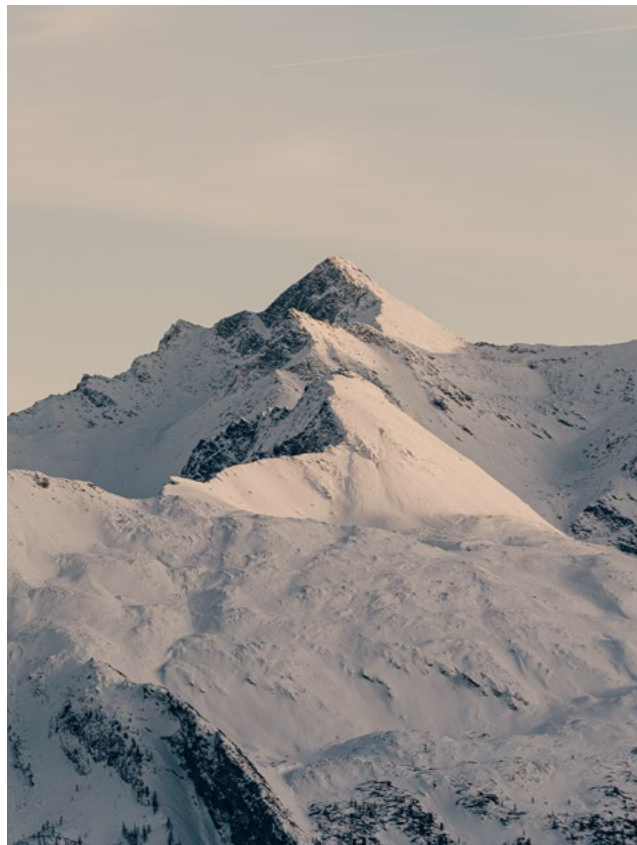


The Austrian town of Bad Gastein offers a surprising creative playground that you might not find in larger European capitals. Here, the cōmodo hotel's potent combination of provenance and place offers a unique experience for those seeking mountainous respite.



Fit for a New Era

Words Elli Stühler
Images PION Studio



1 The cōmodo hotel's once-yellow facade now fully transformed with two new timber extensions and a 1.2 meter tall sign on its roof.
2 Owner and architect Barbara Elwardt with lead designer and creative partner Piotr Wisniewski seen on one of the snowy paths in the Alpine village of Bad Gastein.

Walking through the quiet roads of Bad Gastein, where snow reflects the warm glow of the street lamps, you get a sense of the town's former glory. The architecture is built for nobility, members of which flocked to the Austrian town in the nineteenth century to bask in its thermal spring waters and mountain landscapes. Grand hotels stand atop steep cliffs—their cake-colored palettes are enough to make Wes Anderson fans go weak in the knees.

The thermal springs that propelled the town to fame had already been discovered by the fifteenth century. By the nineteenth century, German monarchs, Iraqi kings, and Bulgarian czars alike were frequenting the fashionable resort town, attracted by the healing properties thought to be contained in the springs. Empress Sisi came here to go on long hikes and write poetry, while her husband, Emperor Franz Joseph, personally attended the opening of the local train station, one of the oldest in the Alps.

Even today, there are many pleasures to be had in Bad Gastein. It's a place to ski in the winter, hike in the summer, and recharge year-round at the town's many spas. Nevertheless, Bad Gastein's glory days were long thought to be over—until recently.

“Bad Gastein had a problem when flights became cheap and everyone starting flying to Spain and Italy instead,” says Barbara Elwardt, a Berlin-based architect and the owner of the cōmodo, Bad Gastein's newest hotel. With the rise of affordable airfare, Alpine towns like Bad Gastein saw their visitor numbers dwindle. Many of the grand hotels stood empty for years. The brutalist congress center, an architectural outlier in a town filled with belle époque hotels and Alpine chalets, is cordoned off, having held its last convention in 2007. But Barbara has been coming to Bad Gastein with her husband and four children for fifteen years, and, having spent time in New York in the '80s and Berlin in the '90s, she knows well enough the boundless potential of a disused building.



The cōmodo is the latest in a series of new arrivals sparking renewed interest in Bad Gastein. “After Barbara acquired the building, three or four other buildings were bought up,” says Piotr Wisniewski, the cōmodo’s lead designer. As was the case in the warehouses of New York’s Soho and the once-dark neighborhoods of East Berlin,

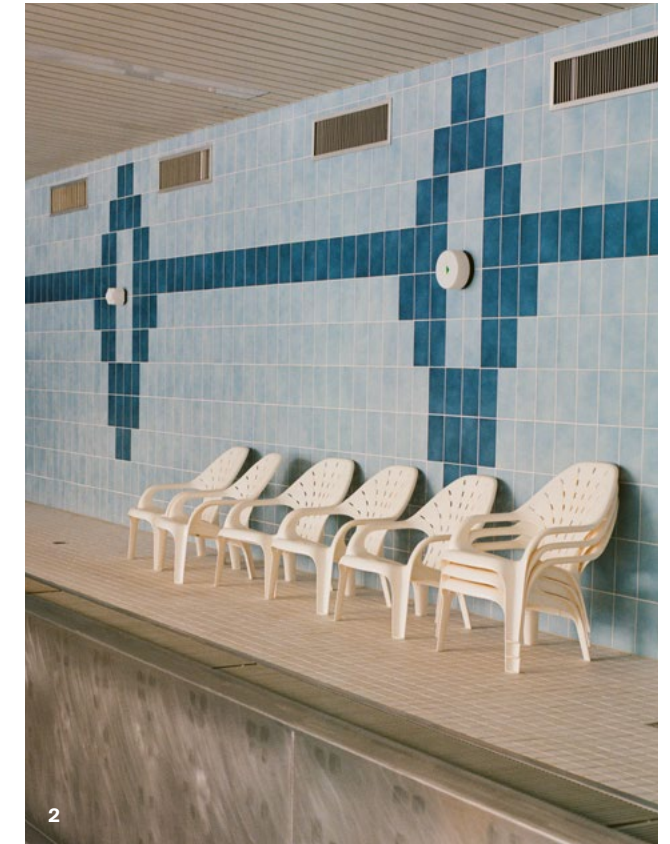
a new generation of entrepreneurs, artists, designers, and chefs are rediscovering the pleasure of this little Alpine town and finding opportunity in its empty buildings.

There’s Mex, a recently opened taco joint run by an Australian duo, and Sommer Frische Kunst, an annual contemporary art fair that fills the town’s vacant spaces with pop-up exhibitions; both have contributed to Bad Gastein’s designation as a newfound hub for contemporary art and culture.

The brand-new 70-room hotel and spa, instantly recognizable by the meter-high sign glowing brightly enough to be seen from the surrounding ski slopes, was masterminded down to the last detail by Barbara and Piotr. Together they make up weStudio, whose projects include an apartment renovation in Poland, and Mamula Island, a five-star hotel on a private island off the coast of Montenegro. Their Bad Gastein project is the very first under the cōmodo brand umbrella, which is poised to become a string of hotels designed with an unfussy approach to luxury, and, befitting the location, filled to the brim with art.

1 The pool area before reconstruction. The bright yellow of the sun loungers was retained in the new deck furniture. The artificial palm, however, was not. Photo: Piotr Wisniewski

2 The pool area’s original tiling was replaced by a new design, a graphic composition (seen on the next page) designed to mimic the earth formations behind the construction site. Photo: Theresa Lattermann



Barbara jokes about buying an ugly duckling, something where “people can’t imagine what you can make out of it.”

“Every year we want to give space to an artist in residence and create a sculpture garden,” says Piotr. The hotel’s first sculpture, the gilded *Snow Guarantee* by Iwo Borkowicz, is already installed on the property. “It’s a sculpture, but also a private meteorological station,” Piotr explains. “It’s more accurate than the local one.”

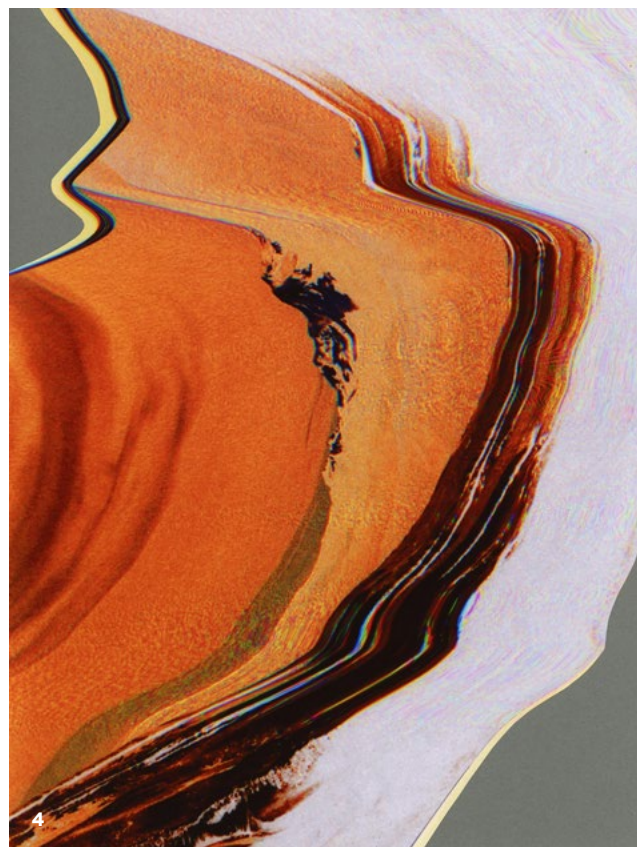
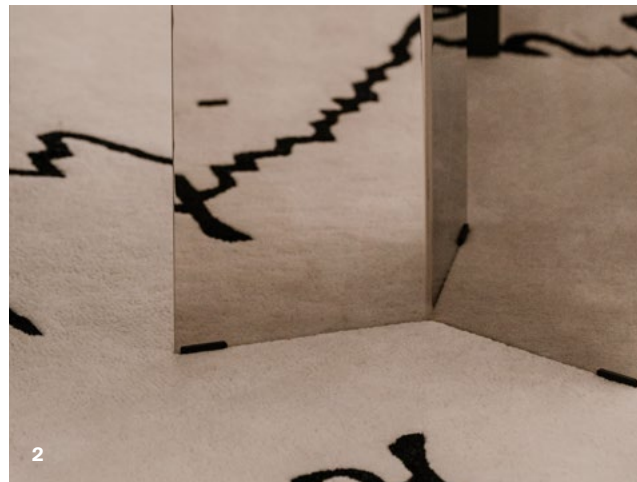
More art fills the hotel’s rooms. Berlin design duo Amberdesign was commissioned to create a 140-piece body of work that spans photography, collage, and graphic design. It follows a simple and fitting brief: mountains. They also created the custom wallpaper in the bedrooms, featuring a pattern formed of the topographical lines of the terrain with a bright dot

pointing out the position of the cōmodo. The mountain motif further extends to the plush carpets in the lobby, also by Amberdesign, which echo the craggy lines of the surrounding landscape.

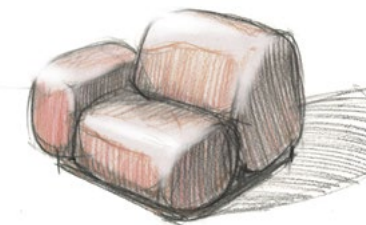
The hotel is housed in what locals will know better as the Habsburger Hof. The current structure was rebuilt as a hotel in the 1960s and later bought by the city of Vienna to use as a sanatorium for its employees. Barbara jokes about buying an ugly duckling, something where “people can’t imagine what you can make out of it.” By the time Barbara and Piotr laid eyes on it, the unremarkable building had been standing empty for two years, its facade painted a drab shade of yellow.







- 1 The irregular shape of the bar was designed to conceal structural pillars. The fluted edges are a contemporary touch to complement the hotel's midcentury feel.
- 2 The craggy lines of the surrounding mountains are represented in these rugs by Berlin design duo Amberdesign.
- 3 Barbara and Piotr looking through the many material samples that informed the design of the cōmodo.
- 4 One of the vibrant artworks by Amberdesign.



Sustainability is something that Piotr comes back to: “This aspect isn’t just in solar panels, although we do have the whole roof covered, but also by building sustainably, in keeping the existing structure as much as possible.” Throughout the renovation process, only one internal structural wall had to be demolished—an anomaly for such an extensive refurbishment, and one that meant they were able to drastically minimize waste on the construction site. Barbara and Piotr kept original elements like the stone floor in the lobby and the stainless steel pool. While the hotel is neither a pastiche reinterpretation nor a total reconstruction of the Habsburger Hof, these maintained elements ensure its history is along for the ride.

Being a building from the '60s, the cōmodo's footprint is one of the few in town that stretches out lengthwise, unlike the nineteenth-century hotels the town is known for, which tend to extend vertically. “I wanted something horizontal,” says Barbara. “I wanted interaction between everybody and I don’t think it works if you have to change levels.” The spacious lobby sprawls out into a bar area, with a restaurant, private dining room, and coworking space all on the ground level.

“If you sit at one corner of the sofa, it’s big enough that someone else can sit there too,” says Barbara. “Maybe you start to talk; that would be just perfect. This interaction is the main thing.”

But when designing the interior, Piotr took only partial inspiration from its 1960s provenance. “When people

think of the '60s, everyone thinks teak wood and Scandinavian design,” he says. “But this completely doesn’t match the Austrian vibe.” Instead, the wall and ceiling panels are made from oak, the floors are typical Austrian *landhaus dielen*, which retain the timber’s natural knots, and many of the accents are made from the same pine you see when you look out the hotel’s panoramic windows.

The '60s language is interpreted in subtler ways, like in the use of curves, which can be found everywhere—even the letters in the name “cōmodo.” A circular artwork by the Danish artist Jeppe Hein that Barbara bought after sitting next to him at a New Year’s party features concentric rings that light up like rhythmic inhalations. Nearby, the bar is clad in fluted timber. And upstairs in the valley-facing rooms, curving desks stand across from a curving headboard, which contains one of the hotel’s most curious design features.

“In this region, especially over the border in Italy, you often have a statue of the Virgin Mary built into a niche in the corner of buildings,” says Piotr, who echoed this detail in the nightstand by designing a curving alcove in its base. Instead of the Virgin Mary, it’s a space for guests to stash their water bottles. “The water from the tap is mineral water, so we’ve started calling it holy water.” This detail, born from Piotr’s own experience of knocking over water bottles in his sleep, is one of countless ways the hotel invites the region into its design.

The sofas in the lobby are another. Guests walking into the cōmodo are greeted by a wine-red Camaleonda sofa from B&B Italia, which was chosen after the team spotted the same model in old photographs of the town’s congress center. Sandwiching a leather number



from Knoll International, from Piotr's extensive personal collection, is the Pebble sofa. The modular design is inspired by the light-gray stones that flank the famous waterfall cutting through Bad Gastein and is one of the many pieces of furniture that Piotr designed exclusively for the cōmodo.

If the story of the cōmodo begins when Barbara bought the building in 2019, its prologue starts nearly forty years earlier, back when Barbara was just eighteen years old. She was invited to accompany a friend for a spell in New York, where she spent two unbothered months exploring the city. It was the early '80s; Warhol and Basquiat had only just met and the warehouses of Soho still welcomed starving artists. "It was a crazy time," she says. "I came back and thought I would love to live in places like this." Fast-forward to the fall of the Berlin

Wall: "I was very young but thought, 'Now will be a huge transition,'" she continues. "This is not something that everyone saw at the time."

Barbara, along with Piotr, is applying that same foresight to Bad Gastein. The two have big plans for the cōmodo, and have already purchased a building that will house an eventual second location. The first artist to participate in the residency program has been selected and more than 1,200 plants and trees have been planted in the hotel's gardens. In the near future, yoga classes, spa treatments, movie nights, and the new restaurant and bar all position this ambitious hotel to become a new hub of activity in the sleepy Alpine town that, after a long slumber, has finally woken up. ●

