

## A Smuggler's Tale

Nestled in a sheltered valley surrounded by 3,000m peaks in the far east of Switzerland lies the tiny village of Samnaun. It's a remote location, barely accessible and not far from the Austrian and Italian borders. No highways lead here, it's not on a route to anywhere but, like many things Swiss, it's dedicated to making money. In a rather unusual way. Samnaun is the haunt of smugglers – European, twenty-first century smugglers.

For centuries, the hardy folk from the Tyrolean mountain villages of the Paznaun valley across the border in Austria have made the arduous trek over the mountain passes in search of commodities not so readily available back home. Even now, when Austria is a member of the 27 state European Union – while Switzerland is not – tax and duty rates are different enough to make cross border trading an inviting proposition. You might think that this would be illegal but the ever inventive Swiss, in search of the tourist euros it would bring, simply declared Samnaun a duty free zone and the EU turned its back.

Hard nosed venture capitalists quickly followed, building a highway in the sky, a series of five cable cars which ferry visitors from the Austrian ski resort of Ischgl over the Alps to Samnaun. The first is an open chair lift which carries you up the first stage to Idalpe. Then comes an up and downer in an enclosed cabin up to Viderjoch where even in summer remnants of the winter glaciers provide meltwater to feed the valley's rivers. Here is marked the border – no customs, no immigration – right in the middle of the mountains. The next cable run takes you down into a massive enclosed valley called the Silvretta Arena which is now a winter playground for skiers and snowboarders. In summer, it attracts hikers and bikers – and smugglers. From here, there is one more chair lift to the edge and a final, double decker cable car down to the station in the valley from where a free bus takes you into the village of Samnaun.

There's a party atmosphere in Samnaun. It's sheltered from the cold northerly winds and orchards of peaches grow here. Every building is decked out with boxes of flowers in the Tyrolean manner. And almost every building houses a duty free shop. There's everything. The ladies in our party exclaimed that Samnaun was better than every airport duty free mall put together. They came back loaded with pots and potions cheaper than they had seen anywhere else. The boys found hunting knives and the dads cameras, high tech gadgets and booze.

The more serious trippers from over the border came to load up with duty free sugar from a self-service kiosk on the street side across from Hangl's restaurant where those of us less retail inclined gorged on apfel strudel and vanilla sauce.

You have to leave Samnaun by 3pm or you will be stuck in the mountains when the cable cars halt for the night. It made me wonder what goes on there when the tourists have gone. Counting the takings, no doubt.

You might reasonably wonder what took a Kenyan family to this distant and unknown part of Europe. Especially as we were actually staying in a place called Kappl, even smaller and less known but at least on a main-ish sort of road. It was a family reunion, one part coming from Hamburg in northern Germany and us from Nairobi. They plotted an eight hour drive south and we an eight hour flight north. About half way, in travel time at least, lay the Austrian Alps, the region called Tyrol. More distant relatives on the German side had visited before and recommended the Paznaun Valley for its peace and quiet and Kappl for its absence of tourists. They were right on both counts.

In winter, this place buzzes, but August is low season and no-one goes there, which makes it rather attractive. It's almost eery finding an empty European tourist resort in the height of summer but that's how it is. Tyrolean villages still function as farming communities, letting the cows graze on the mountains while the pastures grow and bringing them back when the snow falls. Each house stores its own hay and firewood against the winter when deep snow drifts prevent access to the fields. And nearly every house takes in paying guests.

What brings people here in summer is an endless string of hiking trails that go up and down both valley and mountain. Each village is linked by a reliable hourly bus service and each has its cable base

station from where visitors can be transported into the hills. A multi-day pass entitles you to travel on buses and cable cars for many miles around.

We started our visit with a short hop up the local mountain to a Tyrolean festival they called 'Das Grosse Sunny Mountain Sommerfest', with oompah band, grilled wurstl (traditional sausages) and plenty of beer. Next day we took a more adventurous hike to the Fluchthorn peak which at 3,400m still shelters a massive glacier even at this season. We trekked 20km there and back, stopping for beer and cheese plates at traditional 'alm' farmhouses brought to summer life by the families who farm nearby. The meadows echoed to the sound of tinkling cow bells and shone yellow, white and blue with carpets of wild flowers. But our friends were not impressed when we told them that this altitude was merely the starting point for trekking up Mt Kenya.

Another day, we took the bus to the end of the valley following the Hochalpenstrasse – a road only open in summertime – to where the Silvretta lake glistens grey green, backed by the high peak of Piz Buin over in Switzerland. Our destination was the neighbouring valley of Montafon, secluded and sheltered and full of cherry and apricot orchards. What we didn't know was that the road winds down no less than thirty four 180° hairpin bends, each turn leaving the end of the bus hanging over the void as in that classic final scene of *The Italian Job*. We stopped for lunch in the village of Schruns, famous apparently for a visit long ago by Ernest Hemingway and one more recently by Angela Merkel who likes to hike there.

Food in the Tyrol is good and inexpensive but it's mostly pork in a rather limited variety of cuts and recipes. Schnitzel (veal) is common too. Mountain communities bulk up with carbohydrates so it was no surprise to find Swiss style spaetzle and roesti as well as a local speciality called groestl which consists of sautéed potato slices cooked with onions and topped with a fried egg. My favourite was pork medallions in a rich creamy pepper sauce ('schweinmedallions mit pfefferraumsaus'). There is a wonderful selection of tasty breads, and breakfasts typically revolve around cheeses and various wursts and salami style sausages. Austrian wines, like German, tend towards sweet even in the reds, but the beer is wonderful.

The northern slopes of the Alps where the Tyrol lies consist of a series of almost parallel valleys scoured by glacial run off. Each valley has its river, its string of farming villages and its own character. We ventured too up the Oetztal where the river runs rough and loud through a steep sided canyon where skiing would be impossible. Instead, this valley has been turned over to watersports – kayaking and wild water rafting – where the River Inn swells on its way towards Innsbruck and eventual merger with the Danube. Rock climbing, paragliding and thermal spas are other attractions here.

The mountain villages are strongly Catholic and there is a spired church in every village. Even the smallest of hamlets may consist of just one house and a church. Many churches have onion shaped domes reflecting a shared history with the earlier days of orthodox Christianity before the first and second Reichs of the Hapsburg dynasties and the Austro-Hungarian Empire cemented the split between east and west and shaped much of modern day central Europe. Figurines of their saviour are placed along hiking trails and street sides, at cross roads and mountain tops, with the intent of warding off disaster and catastrophe. Avalanches and road accidents still happen, however. But the latest threat comes from global warming, which is reducing winter snowfall in winter and extending the summers.

Some creative marketing will soon be necessary to reinvent these villages and their valleys as summer resorts less dependent on the skiing fraternity. Already, this is a summer highland hikers' paradise. Walking is well recognised as a healthy pastime but here its taken to literally new heights as people hike from alm to alm along mountain top trails. Nordic hiking with long sticks is popular and there are hundreds of mountain bikers who enjoy the long downhill runs. 'Wellness' is another fashion item with offers including astrological readings, reflexology, chromotherapy, crystals, aromatherapy and meditation. For us, the clear air and the hiking trails provided enough wellness to last for another year at least.

I was fascinated by the attention given to the environment in Austria. After all, the Tyrol is one long testament to man-made landscape engineering where the shape of the valleys, the villages, the transport networks and the mountain slopes themselves are all designed, constructed and carefully maintained. The rising temperatures are being countered by snow machines placed alongside the

pistes. You just don't see electricity pylons and telecommunication masts – they are not red and white to stand out but dull green to fade in. Household waste has to be sorted in no less than six separate bins and bagged accordingly. Each house heats its water primarily with south facing solar panels. Insulation is thick and in winter, roof restrainers ensure that a thick layer of snow also stays on the roof. These homes are cosy beyond belief.

We went to Austria, to Kappl, for a family reunion not knowing the area at all, but if you ask me this is a piece of paradise. If you prefer ready vacancies, discounted rates, free parking and no crowds – in the middle of everyone else's high season – then this is Europe's hidden secret summer holiday hideaway. Oh yes, and we did all our duty free shopping there too!

### **Getting there**

Central Europe is not well served from Kenya any more and Swiss Airlines to Zurich is pretty well the only viable option. Alternatives would include Emirates or Turkish with a change of planes which can take you to most European cities.

Once there, internal flights are expensive, even on the so-called budget airlines. I prefer to hire a car which at around €40 (Kshs 4,400) a day is quite economic for a couple or a family. Roads and roads signs are excellent and you can easily find your way all over Europe.

Now that Switzerland is a member of the Schengen bloc, one visa gives you access to 25 countries from Finland in the far north, to Romania in the east, Portugal in the west and everywhere in between. You barely even notice the borders and can drive freely from one country to another without restriction.

Be aware, as ever, for shifting requirements on different airlines regarding weight allowances and security issues. These are not always well communicated and you may find yourself having to unpack and repack at the check-in counter.

### **Where to stay**

In the Tyrol, nearly every resort and village has its own website and webcam so you can easily do your research and see what it looks like. Look at [www.kappl.com](http://www.kappl.com). You can get a list of hotels and make all of your bookings online. We stayed on recommendation in our own self catering apartment at Haus Mahren in Kappl, for which we were charged a total of €39 a night. See [www.mahren.at](http://www.mahren.at).