



# SAFARI SEASON

To get to know a vast, linked ski area intimately, concoct a self-guided tour, staying in a different village each night, says **Yolanda Carslaw**. Just pick a low-season week, pack a toothbrush, shovel and probe and head somewhere like the Arlberg...

## WEDNESDAY

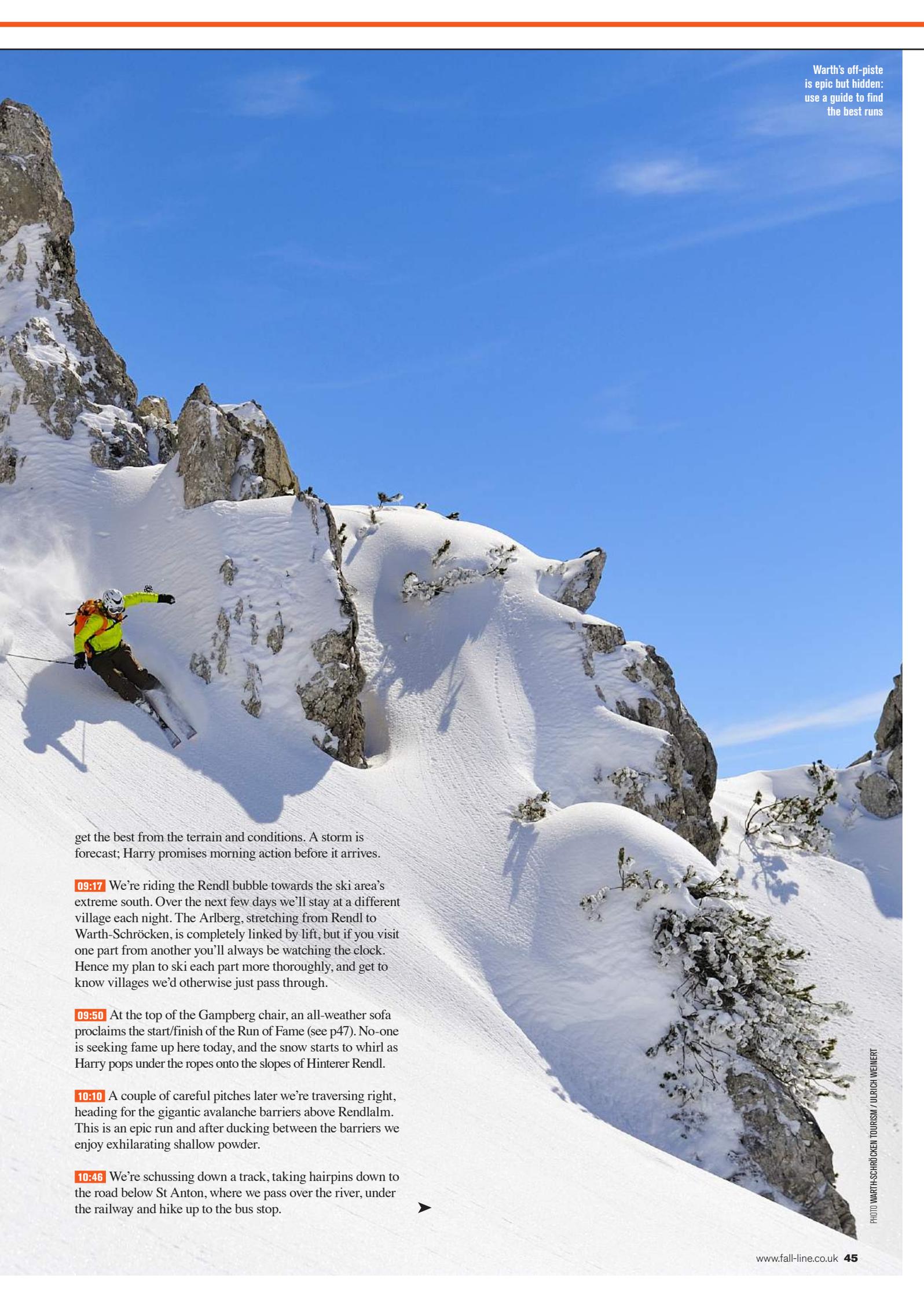
**17:10** St Anton, on a sunny January afternoon. We've just arrived, and while everyone else is après-skiing, my husband PJ and I have our gear laid on our beds. We're rooting out obsolete items, as tomorrow we're setting off on a four-day Arlberg safari, taking just overnight and safety kit.

**18:05** We're descending, white-gowned, to the sauna. Not long ago we'd have hiked to the Mooserwirt for Weissbier, but there's something about reaching the mid-40s that heightens self-preservation – especially when a guide is booked for the next day. The secret of Austrian sauna-going is to wait until the 'empty hour' before it closes when the Germans are getting ready for dinner. Since I last stayed at the town-centre Schwarzer Adler, the pool and spa have had a refit, and food and rooms are better than ever.

**20:32** Behind the hotel the weekly ski school show is in full swing. Synchro displays, old-school kit and a light show beaming film onto the slope make for entertaining viewing.

## THURSDAY

**08:53** Our excess gear stashed behind reception, we're off to meet Harry Wolf from the Arlberg Ski School. St Anton has easily accessible off-piste, but a guide here really helps you



Warth's off-piste  
is epic but hidden:  
use a guide to find  
the best runs

get the best from the terrain and conditions. A storm is forecast; Harry promises morning action before it arrives.

**09:17** We're riding the Rendl bubble towards the ski area's extreme south. Over the next few days we'll stay at a different village each night. The Arlberg, stretching from Rendl to Warth-Schröcken, is completely linked by lift, but if you visit one part from another you'll always be watching the clock. Hence my plan to ski each part more thoroughly, and get to know villages we'd otherwise just pass through.

**09:50** At the top of the Gampberg chair, an all-weather sofa proclaims the start/finish of the Run of Fame (see p47). No-one is seeking fame up here today, and the snow starts to whirl as Harry pops under the ropes onto the slopes of Hinterer Rendl.

**10:10** A couple of careful pitches later we're traversing right, heading for the gigantic avalanche barriers above Rendlalm. This is an epic run and after ducking between the barriers we enjoy exhilarating shallow powder.

**10:46** We're schussing down a track, taking hairpins down to the road below St Anton, where we pass over the river, under the railway and hike up to the bus stop. ➤



**11:16** We've just missed a bus, but Harry sees a pal pass. A phone call later and we're in his van, heading to Galzig, wipers full blast against the falling snow.

**11:59** We're traversing into the forest near the top of St Christoph-bound blue 64 onto a sheltered off-piste run that feels like the middle of nowhere. Suddenly, we emerge near the Mooserwirt.

**12:45** Today, Harry announces, is a day for a good lunch, now the storm is building. He marches to the far end of the Galzig self-service, through a door marked Verwallstube. Less famous than the nearby Hospizalm, it has two Gault-Millau hats and fancy fare ideal for a special occasion.

**13:10** I ask Harry about the new Flexenbahn and Trittkopfbahn lifts (completed December 2016), which link St Anton/St Christoph/Stuben with Zürs/Lech/Warth. He loves not having to take the bus, but even better, he says, is the new gondola to the Albonagratt, which gives super-quick access to the Albona backcountry.

**13:40** The seasoned maitre d', Manfred Fahrner, brings schnapps and tells stories of big names who have crossed his threshold. Did he mention Putin? In a food-and-wine haze, I may have misheard, but I do remember Manfred is a golfer. We leave having admired his putting hole in the carpet.

**14:22** We step into a blizzard, and wave Harry goodbye at the Tanzböden chair. We must get to our first stop, Stuben, fast, in case the lifts close early. We set off down black 58 to the Arlenmähder, passing a skier heading left on crust thinking it's piste. We redirect him before he flounders over the edge.

**15:00** In a snowstorm Stuben (1407m) is prettier than ever. PJ sails past the turn-off and while seeking each other we explore various lanes, taking in snow-laden roofs, the church and the statue of Stuben's famous son, Hannes Schneider.

**15:15** Our hotel, the Mondschein, dates back to 1739. It's full of curiosities: painted panelling, antique skis and photos, and a light fitting carved into the shape of a lederhosen-clad boy.

**18:01** On a floodlit village drag lift we're watching the Hannes Schneider race, a GS for ski instructors. To keep warm we march up beside the course then retreat into Willi's Pilsstüble.

**19:30** At dinner we discover that a crew from K2, on an annual Arlberg ski-testing pilgrimage, have also picked the enchanting Mondschein as their base.

A mixed forecast makes packing tricky, but Yolanda and PJ (opposite) keep it light

## DON'T MISS...

**A day with an instructor or guide.** Hannes Schneider, born in Stuben, set up the world's first ski school in 1920 and the Arlberg's tradition of excellent instruction continues to thrive. There are 300 instructors in St Anton alone, including 65 mountain guides, and 1500 instructors across the Arlberg. Some ski schools arrange off-piste groups.

**Crowd-free 'at-the-edge' runs, such as Rend; the Albonagratt above Stuben; Lange Zug at Lech; and the ski route to Schröcken.**

**The Run of Fame: 85km of pistes and 18,000m of vertical from one end of the Arlberg to the other and back. Only attempt it if you're fast and fuff-free. Locals we met had taken five to six hours with no stops, flat out.**

**Après-ski, not only in St Anton. Try Toni's Einkehr in Hotel Flexen, Zürs, Warth's base-stations for afternoon live music on certain days and Stuben's cosy bars.**

**20:44** The owner Markus Kegele, formerly a sommelier, shows us his candlelit cellar, jam-packed with mostly Austrian bottles. "Skiing and wine are our passions," he says, adding that the Mondschein, on a trade route, was so named because the safe time to travel was in the cool of moonlight when avalanches were less likely. It has a wood-clad extension and a 12-room chalet, but the compact village, with 800 beds, will never expand due to the avalanche zones.

**21:55** Time for a nightcap in the bar, formerly the piggery (cows lived next door, in what's now the lounge). We attempt the Nails Game, after which some teenage locals set 'em up and bang 'em in using about three strokes...

## FRIDAY

**09:10** Sunshine! At least 25cm of fresh! We've caught the first lift and are cruising down to the Flexenbahn gondola, which climbs to the ridge between Alpe Rauz and Zürs.

**09:41** Fresh tracks on the Ochsenboden ski route (39). We can see that both sides of high-lying Zürs (1716m) offer untracked swathes between pistes. Avalanche risk is 3; we'll stick to mellow terrain, which looks like the Madloch side.

**10:38** Two laps of the Zürsersee chair later and we can't believe how few people are skiing this powder. There's more under the Madloch chair – with careful route-finding – and off the back of the Madloch. My legs are burning on this satisfying ski route (170/171/172) down to the peaceful village of Zug.

“Sunshine! At least 25cm of fresh! We're cruising down to the Flexenbahn gondola”



“ We find satisfying pitches of choppy powder and fun steep pistes ”



PHOTOS: LECH-ZIRBS TOURISM / SEPP MALLAUN; YOLANDA CARSLAW



**13:20** After lunch at ‘rustic-chic’ Rud Alpe, we head up the parallel cable cars to Lech’s Rüfikopf. We make careful tracks between avalanche barriers to access barely touched powder on a route you can’t easily lap. A sunny button lift takes us to the Lange Zug ski route (215/216), the start of which is marked by signage warning of the 80% gradient...

**14:20** We pass barely a dozen people on Lange Zug, which does start steeply. Off-piste is a mess of blasted avalanche debris, but it’s a lovely scenic run. Making for the Rüfikopf station, we’re alone... probably because our route involves a mega-skate-and-push, a drag lift and garden-hopping.

**15:03** We share the ride back up with the K2 gang; they’re as stoked with the conditions as us. We’re on a 4pm deadline to reach Toni’s Einkehr, an après-ski hut in Hotel Flexen.

**15:35** Some speedy pistes and a couple of lifts later, we’re here. Another run? No, we decide, and land the last two prime barstools as reserved tables fill with regulars.

**16:00** I’m a fan of Austrian oompah, and Gegi Gabriel and Seine Band are top-notch. With two accordions and a guitar, they kick off with trad tunes; there’s tentative dancing, schnapps for the Germans, beers for PJ and red wine spritzers for me. The music turns to ubiquitous numbers like ‘Sweet Caroline’, plus an Udo Jurgens medley. We catch a bus to Lech in time for dinner at our next hotel, the central and friendly Sandhof.

**Mondschein’s Markus Kegele (middle) has two passions in life: wine and skiing. We like him**

**SATURDAY**

**09:01** Today’s goal is Warth, which along with neighbouring Schröcken, clocks an average winter snowfall of 11m. We’re heading there via the Auenfeldjet link bubble, built five years ago.

**10:45** Warth’s mostly north-facing terrain offers easy-access off-piste and we find satisfying pitches of choppy powder and fun steep pistes. Eventually we’re riding Warth’s newest lift, the short but useful Dorfbahn, which links the village’s lower end with the Steffisalp main lift 500m away.

**13:11** After a feed at the Salober restaurant, the light is flat. Time to tackle the parallel slalom course we saw earlier. We lap it, swapping sides each time to ensure fairness.

**15:05** To hit the area’s limits, I’m keen to ski to Schröcken (1269m). Marked as a ski route (309), it’s a picturesque forest-lined cat-track. The inviting Schnee Bar at the bottom is a great spot for a Jägertee before the half-hourly bus back to Warth. There’s enough viz to spot groups and guides emerging from the Klem off-piste route, accessed from Lech.

**16:45** In Warth at Hotel Walserberg, tradition meets health kick. As well as two saunas and a steam room, there’s a ‘water-treading basin’ and a relaxation room with mountain hay. Dinner is outstanding; as well as the main set menu there’s a ‘Vital’ menu and the other guests do look oddly slim... but if you’re as greedy as me at the salad and bread bars the healthier bits are cancelled out.





## “ We explore a rocky chute into Hölle (aka Hell)... ”

### SUNDAY

**09:00** We've a morning with Hannes Lumper of Skischule Warth. After testing us on powdery chop, he leads us below the Warterhorn avalanche barriers to pitch after pitch of knee-deep powder, back to the Steffisalp chair.

**10:32** Now we're exploring parts you wouldn't suspect are there, starting with a rocky chute into Hölle (aka Hell). This north-facing haven of powder is a great place to have an insider to find stashes – and to identify its circus of peaks.

**11:40** Our final run is towards Galerie, named after the anti-avalanche open-sided road tunnel beneath. We push and walk back to Steffisalp, where we leave Hannes, as the race back to St Anton and our train home is suddenly on.

**12:23** Ride the Steffisalp Express chairlift.

**12:48** Arrive at the Lech-bound Auenfeldjet bubble.

**13:09** Reach the Rufikopf lift and bump into the K2 gang.

**13:45** Get to Trittkopf I, with its red and white-topped pylons like the Austrian flag.

**13:55** We realise we're making good time, so see the Hall of Fame museum before continuing towards St Anton.

**14:30** 'Happy Valley' (blue 55), is closed as there are massive cracks on the south-facing slopes above. We take the diversion, then I make a wrong turning to Mattun, adding a loop.

**14:55** Famished! The Heustadl, two-minutes above St Anton, beckons for a rack of ribs. We join a table of Danes intent on fun, and the party is swinging by the time we leave.

**16:38** Time for a speedy beer at the Mooserwirt, and negotiating the tangle of skis outside, before our final few turns. PJ collects our spare bag while I get the train tickets.

**17:03** Safely on the Innsbruck train, still in ski boots... *Fall-Line*

You too could be linking ski areas on a DIY safari – and finding pow havens like this

### HOW TO BUILD A DIY SAFARI

**PLAN LIGHTLY** Pick a low-season period and book flights, but you may need to wait until last minute to book rooms. If you don't want to move daily, go for a week and spend two nights at each place.

**BEST FOR MOSTLY PISTE:** Dolomites, Italy. Devise a route around Sella Ronda or Superski Dolomiti (four-day pass €177-221) staying in villages or piste-side huts. Or get Dolomites specialists theskisafari.com to organise it.

**PICK YOUR ZONE** The Arlberg is made for this kind of trip, with a short airport transfer, lodgings for all budgets and a varied ski area. Also in Austria, the Zillertal would be a winner – in villages like Hochfügen and Finkenberg, or at the mountainside Kristallhütte and Wedelhütte (four-day pass €185). Ski Amadé in Salzburgerland has 28 villages linked by bus and lift (four-day pass €191-206). Or try Montafon in the Vorarlberg (four-day pass €152-190).

**BEST FOR SCENERY:** Jungfrau, Switzerland. Explore Mürren, Wengen and Grindelwald (four-day pass CHF263), incorporating a mountain stay at Suppenalp, Bellevue des Alpes or Lodge Bergrestaurant at Kleine Scheidegg.

**BEST FOR BACKCOUNTRY:** Monterosa, Italy. Start at Champoluc or one of its easily accessible huts, and stay in Gressoney and Alagna before working your way back. Build in time with a guide. Four-day lift pass: from about €172.

**BEST FOR MILEAGE:** France: any number of resorts would work, from the Portes du Soleil to Les Arcs/La Plagne. Stay in low-key villages like Peisey.

**KIT** Carry the minimum. I wore a lightly insulated jacket and pants, two merino baselayers, transceiver, goggles, hat, glove liners and mittens. In my pack was shovel and probe; one set of lightweight non-ski clothing, water bottle, sunglasses, neck-warmer, nighty, toothbrush/paste, camera and phone.

### ESSENTIALS

Arlberg villages include St Anton, Stuben, Zürs and Schröcken. It has 305km of pistes; 200km of off-piste. Four-day lift pass €206 main season; €144-176 off season. We stayed at Hotel

Schwarzer Adler in St Anton (schwarzeradler.com), Hotel Mondschein in Stuben (mondschein.com), Hotel Sandhof in Lech (sandhof.at) and Hotel Walsberg in Warth (walsberg.at).

There's acres of  
accessible off-piste  
both sides of the  
Zürsersee chair

