

An Englishman in Vorarlberg

By Matthew Randall

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If you type “Austria” into any online UK newspaper search engines you are likely to come up with the following results: Jörg Haider, Josef Fritzl and Natascha Kampusch. Perhaps if your news outlet has a slightly wider historical competence then you pick up “Waldheim” as a bonus. In sum, a recently deceased far right politician, a couple of horrific kidnap stories and a past Austrian president who was linked with the atrocities of the Nazis. Is this all we can know and say about this small, once powerful European country? A strangely shaped modern fragment of the vast Austrian Empire, battered down by war and nationalism.

Of course not - what of Vienna and its rumbuling trams, those timeless, mirrored cafés with piled plates of sumptuous cakes? The Staatsoper, Stefansdom and all of those beautiful architectural gems on the Ringstrasse? And Schubert, Freud, Klimt... Not to mention that little genius Mozart.

But I’m still not satisfied. This is not really the Austria I know and it’s not the Austria I see every day where I live.

But then again you wouldn’t find me amongst the tall buildings of Vienna. It is only if you travel the country from east to west and leave all those imperial relics behind that the map becomes smaller and narrower until finally you penetrate the high mountain ranges of the Alps and arrive in Vorarlberg, Austria’s last Bundesland nestled up between Germany, Switzerland and tiny Liechtenstein.

Here you are swept into the gentle arms of the Rhine valley, a well settled pathway that stretches from the last snow-covered Tyrolean peaks in the south-east right up to the lapping shores of the Bodensee where the river disappears into central Europe’s third largest lake.

This is where I arrived ten years ago, shivering in the winter chill, a long flight from Thailand and a year in Asia behind me.

I was in love with an Austrian woman who I had met by chance in India and I had followed her all the way back to her home in Vorarlberg, a place I would have never dreamed of visiting.

I was typical of my countrymen, unable to speak any languages other than my own, and completely lacking any knowledge of the place where I had landed.

I knew it was mountainous, with a strong farming tradition and they ate most things with cheese. My new girlfriend, Doris, smiled at me when I arrived without a coat.

“It gets cold here,” she said, as I left the airport in minus temperatures and slid on the ice in front of her car.

I settled in Doris’ flat close to Bregenz, the cultural capital of the state, an artistic city that boasts views across the lake to the medieval German island of Lindau and the marching Swiss peaks to the west.

Within a day of arriving I was invited to a restaurant to celebrate a family birthday. We drove for a while in deep snow, climbing roads that would be closed for a much milder winter in England, and then entered a sombre building, all dark-panelled wood and tiled wood burning ovens. The waitresses were middle-aged women, wearing strange dresses cut high under the breast and the service was more immediate and friendly than anything I had previously experienced.

I was presented with “Kaesspaetzle” tiny dumplings of boiled flour and egg drenched with a fantastically strong cheese and topped with caramelised onions.

This was the only meat-free dish on the menu and from the peculiar looks I was receiving from Doris’ family it began to dawn on me that vegetarianism was not very common here in Vorarlberg. For a while I actually believed that I was the only one.

Over the last decade, I think I have ordered “Kaesspaetzle” over a hundred times in Vorarlberg restaurants. Sometimes I don’t bother consulting the menu. Doris and I even ended up choosing it as our wedding meal on the day we got married.

Halfway through the meal, Doris explained to me a word I would hear a lot more of in Vorarlberg. “This is a “ghoerig” restaurant,” she whispered

“That’s why they don’t have anything really meat-free.” The word “ghoerig” (pronounced “kuur-rig”) encapsulates two important aspects of Vorarlberg for a foreigner like myself.

Firstly the word means literally “proper” and is a verbal stamp of approval that I’ve experienced time and time again when something is recognized as correct, the right way to do something, the expected way to behave.

Vorarlberg is a society heavily controlled by custom, tradition and the catholic religion; the seasons dictate the leisure activities you undertake (summer is for swimming in lakes, autumn is for hiking, in winter there are markets and skiing and so on), on Sunday it’s not the done thing to be seen working, the same day is a family day when spontaneous visits from friends are not expected.

The lists of dos and don’ts are endless and pretty much rigidly adhered to.

Any break with these “normal” patterns of behaviour is frowned upon and condemned as not being “ghoerig.”

People not eating meat or restaurants with exotic new meat-free dishes are simply further examples. And therein lies the essence of the people in this society.

They do things in a “ghoerig” way, a proper way with no shoddy, half finished labour. The houses in Vorarlberg, new and old, have been built with care and with little expense spared, the most recent incorporating the latest, most efficient eco-technology.

The seasonal celebrations and rituals are no half-measures; take “Fasching” the carnival time in winter for example. Grown men and women career through the streets for days, dressed in elaborate costumes they have spent weeks creating, serving up a Brueghel-esque festival of anarchy which, amongst other highlights, involves the mayor of Bregenz, dressed in a wet suit leaping from his office balcony into a paddling pool positioned below.

He was just being “ghoerig”, a Vorarlberger would say. The second aspect of the word “ghoerig” is that it is a dialect word. It is not a word you will find in your German dictionary. When I first arrived in Vorarlberg I set myself to the decidedly un-English task of really learning this strange, new language that I heard about me.

I would struggle through endless courses, battling with the intricacies of German grammar, only to emerge onto the streets and fail to grasp a single word of what bus drivers, shopkeepers and the general public were trying to tell me.

What I found out later was that they were speaking their own particular Alemannic dialect, far closer to Swiss-German than anything else, an impossible combination of letter-swallowing, vowel-swapping, private-speak that produces hundreds of variations depending on which village you were brought up in.

When Vorarlbergers write anything down, make an academic speech or read the news they revert to high German; when they do anything else they chatter on in a language that even other Austrians find difficult to understand (people from Vorarlberg who are interviewed for television are subtitled for the rest of the population).

After the meal with Doris’ family, as we drove back down the mountain, I couldn’t help but notice a certain obsession occurring in all the homes around me.

Everyone seemed to be outside their houses delivering, transporting, cutting, sawing and sta-

cking wood. The neatly piled log walls had already caught my attention in the short time I had been here and I had presumed it formed some sort of hobby for ex-farmers who no longer tilled the land.

That part proved to be partly true but I later discovered that it is less a hobby, more a national sport to heat their houses.

Academics, doctors, headmasters and (my own profession) social workers all have something in common – they are all expected to be able to cut wood.

Not just cut it, as I found to my own cost on numerous afternoons with my girlfriend’s parents, but to hack at it with an axe, pare off branches with a sharp knife, load freshly cut pines onto tractors and to learn the exquisite art of stacking logs so they won’t fall over for at least two years.

I even found myself piling up my wood on the “correct moon” as, according to local superstition, it won’t dry out properly if it’s the wrong day.

Now ten years on, I can finally understand the different dialects and appreciate what is “ghoerig” and what is decidedly not (I will always be a little suspect in this aspect to Vorarlbergers – Doris’ family have never truly understood my vegetarianism).

I can even cut my wood with the best of them (although I’ve never really believed that moon-thing). But for me Vorarlberg has become far more than the sum of these cultural parts.

When I wander through Bregenz and the medieval buildings with their crumbling bricks and cobbled lanes, the random maze of the streets with iron signs creaking above the shops and the strange half-moon windows set in narrow attics with glimpses of yellow light behind the wooden shutters, I realise that it has not just been one love affair that has kept me here.

And when I see Lake Constance in its winter dress, the sea-birds flying low over the frozen flotsam and the far distant island of Lindau gleaming white and blue and red through the fog, I am not sure when I will ever be able to leave again.

Vorarlberg may not be Vienna or Salzburg, but for this Englishman, who stumbled upon it by chance all those years ago, it has become his personal piece of Austria. The culture and cafes of the cities I can enjoy when I visit, but I will always be happy to take the train back across the Alps to this small province of wood, tradition and stunning natural beauty.