

Looking for the white

With Valentine's Day looming, **Neil English** picks two hotels ideal for a romantic ski break

RECOMMENDING a romantic ski getaway for Valentine's Day is no easy thing because there are a myriad of choices. And there are so many aspects to consider – beguiling scenery, superb skiing, stunning accommodation, sumptuous spa treatments and good food. Taking all these into account, I've come up with two clear favourites:

Kristallhütte at Kaltenbach, Austria (tel 00 43 (0) 676 88 632 400 or www.kristallhuette.at)

THIS top-of-the-mountain hotel, set at 7,500ft with panoramic views of the Ziller Valley in the Austrian Tyrol, is an unforgettable place to stay. Austrian President Heinz Fischer and his German counterpart, Horst Köhler, are regular guests.

The exceptionally good-value half-board rate of just £76 per person per night includes an excellent four-course dinner.

I fondly remember having tiger prawns on beautifully moist risotto, followed by a palate-cleansing Austrian speciality of dumpling consommé and finally a melt-in-your-mouth fillet steak on a bed of succulent local mushrooms.

The Kristallhütte prides itself on providing a cosy, remote mountain experience. At the centre of the spacious lounge/dining area is a vast circular hearth where a roaring log fire is surrounded by comfortable banquette seating for those rather intimate après-ski hours.

One afternoon I arrived for a snack on the sundeck to be greeted by a gleaming glass of vintage champagne and a silver salver brimming with oysters. Then, as if stage-managed, an elegantly attired string quartet arrived to serenade us. It doesn't get much better than that.

Combine two, three or four nights here with a couple in the neighbouring resort of Hochfigen at the four-star Hotel Lamark (www.lamark.at).

Its spa and friendly nature alone are worth the visit, but the Restaurant Alexander, run by Alexander Fankhauser, Michelin-starred Austrian chef of the Year 2005, adds heavenly culinary delight to a romantic break.

Catch the 7.15am GB Airways flight from Gatwick to Innsbruck (www.ba.com or 0870 8509850), then a 40-minute taxi ride to Kaltenbach and you can be checked in to



PARALLEL LIVES: The slopes make a great trip for couples. Left: Neil and partner Tess

the Kristallhütte and skiing on the slopes by noon. Simply brilliant.

Hotel Rosa Alpina (Relais & Chateau) at San Cassiano, Italy
THE Dolomites ooze more romance than any other mountain range I know. When the sun kisses these granite and limestone rock structures, the vivid colours range from seductive pink hues to deeply passionate, fiery reds – and that's before you have even arrived at the

love in all places...



ALAMY / CORBIS

MOUNTAIN HIDEAWAY: The Rosa Alpina, right, has a spa package for couples, perfect after a day's skiing

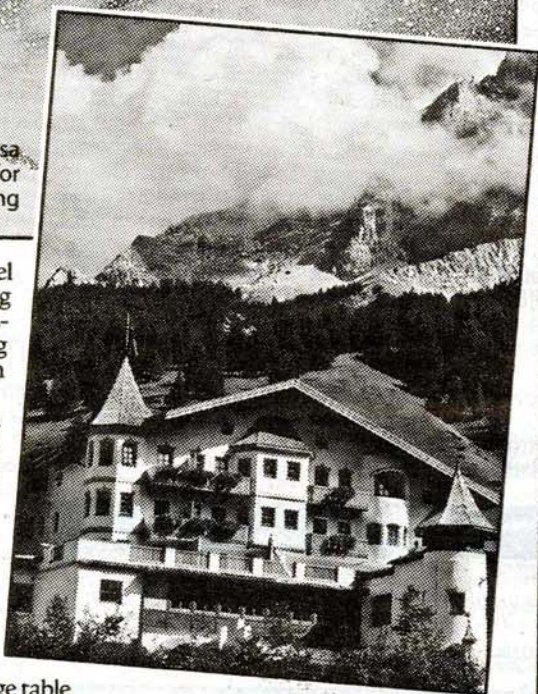
beautiful and aptly named Hotel Rosa Alpina, a mini-palace nestling in the tranquil village of San Cassiano far away from the madding crowds of better-known Selva in Val Gardena.

It wasn't Valentine's Day when my partner and I were ushered into our spacious suite paved with warm local stone, but it might as well have been.

A generous, decorative archway separated our large marbled bathroom and walk-in wardrobe from the main bedroom in one of the impressive turrets of the hotel. The bed was sumptuous and vast. Waiting for us on the large table in the bay window of the turret was a complimentary cake and a large vase of white orchids.

We even had our own thick granite pillar in the middle of the room which somehow seemed to heap opulence on opulence.

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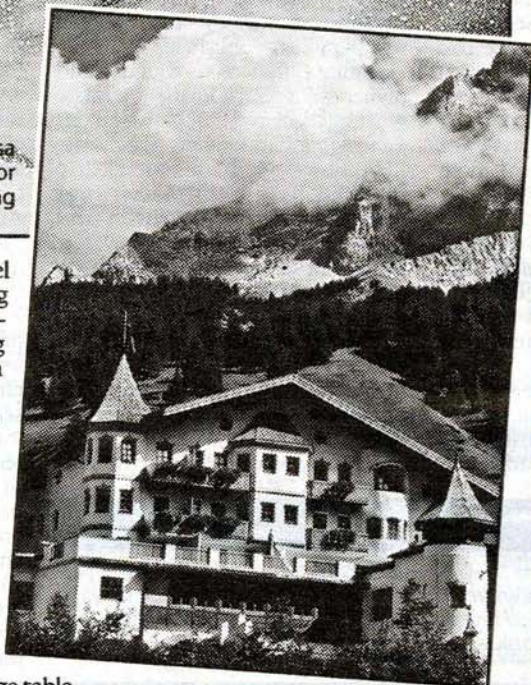
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Despite the incredible drama of the peaks all around, skiing in the Dolomites is relatively tame, with well groomed pistes providing cruising that is so relaxing you can almost keep one eye on the views.

Our kind-hearted local ski instructor, Ludwig Castlunger from neighbouring La Villa, gave us a fantastic tour of the Sella Ronda, a day's ski expedition taking in many of the little villages surrounding the vast Sella Gruppo rock structure, which stands mighty and proud with flat top sections rather like Table Mountain in South Africa.

After a full day on the slopes you are in for another Rosa Alpina speciality, the Daniela Steiner Spa. Daniela, who is married to hotel owner Paulo Pizzinini, has earned such an international reputa-



tion for its design and management that she has been asked to open similar facilities in five-star establishments at locations including St Moritz, Zermatt, Cairo, Monte Carlo and Venice.

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But perhaps the pièce de résistance of the Rosa Alpina comes in the form of the St Hubertus restaurant, which has rightfully just won its second Michelin star. Be sure to book at least one meal here before you travel. I could wax lyrical about Chef Norbert Niederkofler's incredible food, but suffice it to say his culinary masterpieces are as inspiring as the surrounding scenery.

● **Scott Dunn** (020 8682 5080 or www.scottdunn.com) offers seven nights' bed and breakfast in Rosa Alpina, including private transfers and BA flights to Venice or Innsbruck, from £1,670 per person based on two sharing a double room.