

COULD SKI TOURISM HAVE A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE?



Sustainability in tourism has been a much-discussed topic in the past couple of years, with the Covid-19 pandemic having speeded up thoughts and processes in this context. While a lot of discussions are centered around means of transportation, non-wasteful accommodation or supporting local businesses, not much has been said about activities during the vacation itself.

Up until now, the Austrian region of Tyrol has declared its ambition to become a role model for sustainable ski tourism.

A “Fixed Procedure”

Winter tourism plays an incredibly important role for Tyrol, with 2.8 million tourists having spent the winter in the state before the Covid-19 pandemic. According to local experts, **sustainable ski tourism is not fiction, but a very possible reality.**

According to them, it is primarily up to politicians to set sustainable framework conditions to “exploit the potential of sustainability”.

Cycling would have to be more promoted, for example, and local public transport would have to be further expanded. However, the main problem is not the technical aspect, rather the cultural and psychological one.

“The rational decision for a more environmentally friendly behavior is like brushing your teeth, it has to become a fixed procedure so that it becomes established,” Glaciologist Andrea Fischer, from the Austrian Academy of Sciences, said.

She says that it is high time for that. CO₂ in the atmosphere leads to global warming due to the greenhouse effect and is, therefore, a major cause of the climate crisis. In the Alps, the average temperature has risen by two degrees over the past hundred years, twice the global average.

In many places, skiing is already dependent on artificial snow. In Austria, in 2019 there was artificial snow on 70 % of the slopes. The country has invested more than 1.3 billion euros in the necessary technology since 2000, while some large ski areas are now engaged in “snow farming”: they collect and conserve spring snow in the shade until the start of the new season.

In this context, Fischer thinks Austria and the Alps are “well-positioned” compared to other destinations that are affected by overtourism. However, work still needs to be done in a time when the pandemic has triggered a very “deep and honest thought process in the country”.

An Example to Follow?

An example to follow in the sense of sustainable ski tourism could be the Kaunergrat Nature Park. The park was expanded by 130 sq-km to 220 in 2021 at the initiative of the region and now includes a large part of the Kaunergrat, a mountain range up to 3,500 meters high.

The Kaunertal glacier ski area is also in the immediate vicinity of the nature park. In December last year, the 600-strong community of Kaunertal received the “Best Tourism Village” award from the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

The region benefits greatly from the nature park, especially when it comes to the transformation towards sustainable regional development since the Kaunergrat Nature Park stands for essential quality standards.

“Of course - every intervention in nature is one too many,” Ernst Partl, managing director of the park, made clear. Natural resources should be used as sparingly and “intelligently” as possible. The glacier ski area has lost some lifts in recent years due to the retreat of the glacier.

In December of the previous year, a new ten-seater gondola was put into operation. “That was an enrichment for the ski area,” Partl stated.

According to him, it “improved the tourist potential of the region” from which the local population ultimately benefited directly. This is where the “social and economic dimensions of sustainability” come into play.

Each region must work out for itself in the long term how exactly one can achieve sustainable tourism and develop its own competencies. Partl thus did not want to make any general recommendations.

“We're going the Kaunertaler Way,” he referred to the motto of the new Tyrolean tourism strategy with a wink. In any case, it must be noted that Kaunertal benefits a lot from its “small structure” and a natural and cultural area that is “still intact today”, while **larger and more intensively operated ski tourism regions have to carry a larger backpack in terms of sustainability.**

All in all, with this mindset, there is no question that sustainable ski tourism will be a pillar for the tourism industry in Tyrol in the future. And perhaps the fine village of Kaunertal could be an example for the world in view of a generally more sustainable future for the industry.

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