

ALPINE REGION IS WARMING-UP AND AUSTRIA TURNS TO MOUNTAIN BIKING

Mountain bikers rush to the cable cars to go up the mountain at one of Austria's top Alpine resorts. They load their bikes onto racks usually reserved for skis.

Leogang-Saalbach is one of many Alpine resorts focusing on warm-weather activities in response to rising temperatures and dwindling snow in Austria. Bikers from all over Europe are coming to the Salzburg region in western Austria to race down the steep slopes.

Oliver Fritz, a senior economist at the Austrian Institute of Economic Research (WIFO), pointed out that the economic importance of summer seasons has slightly exceeded that of winter seasons in the country since the pandemic. This shift in focus towards summer activities including mountain biking brings promising economic opportunities for the Alpine resorts.

Summer and winter have traditionally contributed equally to the tourist industry's annual revenue. However, due to the pandemic, the balance has shifted, with the summer season of 2023 accounting for more than half of the industry's 29.5 billion euros (\$31.9 billion) generated, according to Fritz.

Additionally, a survey revealed that bikers have become the second largest group of summer tourists in Austria after hikers, increasing from 22 percent before the pandemic to 27 percent in 2023.

Last year's winter season in the Alps was hot, making it the second-warmest winter in Austria since the records began in 1851. The mild temperatures led to less snow, threatening Austria's famous ski resorts. According to experts, tourist destinations are considering alternative activities, such as mountain biking, to adapt to changing trends due to climate change.

Austria's government is taking proactive steps to meet the rising demand for legal mountain bike trails. They plan to sign more contracts with landowners, including forest owners, who currently restrict the access. This approach ensures that the growing popularity of mountain biking is being accommodated and regulated.

Austria's rules formulated nearly 50 years ago, include a default ban on biking across land unless the owner gives explicit approval.

The government will focus on resorts like Leogang-Saalbach, which have successfully become year-round destinations.

The famous bike park, which regularly hosts mountain biking World Cup races, was the first of its kind in Austria when it was established in 2001. Austria is home to more than two dozen bike parks and trail centers.

However, the successful establishment of the park required an agreement with several local landowners. Their foresight and cooperation paid off, demonstrating that, with the right approach, all parties can coexist harmoniously in the Alpine region.

Over the past ten years, the bike park has experienced an almost 70 percent increase in first-time visitors, reaching 260,000 last year.

Economist Fritz hopes that the government strategy will establish a much-needed framework to ensure the harmonious coexistence of all parties.

"Mountain biking brings a lot of potential for conflict, as landowners, forestry workers, hunters, and hikers are not always happy with bikers," he said.

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