

Tyrol from above

From Hall to Schwaz

By Karl Berger

The building is rather plain in appearance – but only at the first glance. The clear lines of the simple structure, a black fortification from the outside, are in stark contrast with the rugged rock bastion of the Großer Bettelwurf mountain (2,726 m) and its neighbouring peaks. Here, a sophisticated 21st-century building; there, Wetterstein limestone and craggy dolomite. While the mountains are nature's domain, ancient and apparently timeless, the valley houses a treasure chamber of Tyrolean history and culture. The year 2017 marked the opening of the *Collection and Research Centre of the Tyrolean State Museums*. In the Centre are thousands of museum pieces from within the historic boundaries of the Tyrol region, from Kufstein in the north to Ala in the south, dating from prehistory to the present day. This is where research is carried out, items are prepared for viewing and restoration work takes place. There may be various reasons why the Centre was located here, not far from the old town of Hall. But in view of the history and cultural significance of this area, which has always had a connection with the impressive mountains surrounding it, the choice of location appears both logical and consistent.

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Hall – salt production and coin minting

The town of *Hall* is a special place. Its very name, derived from the Celtic word for salt, indicates that salt production was of great importance. A document from the 13th century refers to a “salina in intal”, i.e. a salt works in the Inn Valley. Granted town status in 1303, Hall soon became an important commercial centre. This was the end point for the important river traffic route along the Inn. A barrier across the river, erected to trap the massive amounts of timber required by the salt works, prevented travel downstream to Innsbruck. In 1486, *Archduke Sigismund*, nicknamed the ‘Rich in Coin’, relocated the state mint from Merano, the regional capital at the time, to Hall. Hasegg Castle, built to protect the salt mines and traffic on the River Inn, later became the location of the mint. From then on, Hall was where Tiroler Guldiner coins, the forerunners of the later Taler coins, were minted from silver that had been mined at Schwaz.

This period of economic prosperity as the Middle Ages gave way to the modern era still shapes the appearance of Hall today. The *Old Town* contains one of the most attractive collections of buildings in the entire Alpine region. Amongst the countless gems of cultural history, the bustle of the long-gone golden age still seems to echo through the many streets and squares. The crowning glory of this harmonious sense of history is the parish church, dedicated to St Nicholas. Veneration of this saint is connected to the founding of the town, with many newly-established trading towns having dedicated their churches to his patronage in the late Middle Ages. Nicholas is the patron saint of merchants, coopers, salt workers, carters, and the river boatmen, amongst others. A side chapel of the

church houses a special and unusual highpoint in Catholic veneration of the saints. The “Haller Heiltumsschatz” was bequeathed by the knight *Florian Waldauf* (1450–1510), and is an impressive collection of relics. Not far from the parish church, another noteworthy religious feature rises above the town. The Sacred Heart Basilica was completed in 1570 as the church of the Hall Convent. The Basilica is one of the few Renaissance buildings in North Tyrol, but more than that, it also demonstrates the history of power politics. The Hall Convent was established by Archduke *Ferdinand II* (1529–1595). From the 17th century, the convent possessed taxation and administration rights over the area around Lienz and other parts of current day East Tyrol. While this provided the convent with a regular income, it was economically disadvantageous for the areas under administration. The financial burden slowly reduced following dissolution of the convent in 1783 by the reforming Emperor *Joseph II*. With the church having thereby lost its religious *raison d'être*, it was converted into a warehouse. Not until 1914, the eve of the First World War, was the building returned to its original function, developing into a centre for veneration of the Sacred Heart. Worship of the Sacred Heart in Tyrol goes back to the Coalition Wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, when, in 1796, the provincial legislature in Bozen dedicated the County of Tyrol to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus in view of the

RECHTS: Erzvorkommen und ausgedehnte Silberadern begründeten den Ruf der Stadt Schwaz als „Mutter aller Bergwerke“. Links die Burg Freundsberg, der Stammsitz der Herren von Freundsberg.

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growing threat of war. While this did not have the intended effect and the County of Tyrol was divided between different countries more than once, it was nevertheless an important starting point in the designation of Tyrol as a “Holy Land”.

From Thaur via Absam to Fritzens

On the gently sloping, sunny hillside to the north of Hall lie the communities of *Thaur* and *Absam*, also full of historical interest. The Kiechlberg area and the small hills in Thaur-Kapons conceal evidence of neolithic settlement activity that is amongst the oldest in North Tyrol. Recently, archaeologists uncovered finds dating from late antiquity, while in the early Middle Ages a fortress was located here. For a long time, its successor, Burg Thaur, housed the law courts. Such historically significant places are always centres of religious worship too. The little *Romedius Chapel* is named for a remarkable holy man. Born at Burg Thaur, as the story goes, he was sent by Saint Vigilius, the Bishop of Trent, to the Non Valley. Here he lived in a hermitage, nowadays the monastery of San Romedio. The Romedius Chapel stands on the site of the former castle chapel and is an inconspicuous building today. Regardless, it is a popular end point on a hiking route that takes in many scenic and historic delights. The *Church of St Ulrich* is a noteworthy complex of buildings. With its core dating back to the 8th century, this is one of the oldest religious buildings in Austria. Its patronage indicates that it was once under the secular authority of the Augsburg See. The Church of St Ulrich and the Romedius Chapel are indications of how Tyrol was created in a symbiosis between Northern Italy and Southern Germany, often harmoniously but sometimes involving much conflict. These tensions still shape the cultural landscape today.

East of Thaur lies the idyllic village of *Absam*. Based on documentary evidence, the community is one of the earliest places of occupation in the historic diocese of Brixen. But it is as a *place of pilgrimage* that it first became well known outside the region and remains popular to this day. This came about in 1797 – with the first Coalition War as a historical backdrop once again – when an image of the Virgin Mary appeared on a farmhouse window. Some of these old and imposing

farm buildings are still standing, although many have been levelled since the middle of the 20th century, changing the character of the village. The romantic *Hall Valley*, flanked by rocky slopes, commences at the foot of the Zunterkopf (1,966 m) and falls within the boundaries of Absam. This is the location of the former Convent of St Mary Magdalen as well as the *Hall salt mines*, which over the centuries allowed the region to become a financially powerful centre of trade and industry. The valley is always well worth a visit for mountain walkers in summer, while it attracts many visitors in winter when the road can be used as a very shady toboggan run. The Bettelwurf massif shapes the environment here. The Bettelwurf itself is, as described in 1849, one of the “finest mountains of the Hall Valley”. The mountain does in fact offer a very popular panoramic viewpoint, but reaching the summit is not easy and requires some effort, perseverance and skill.

Running parallel to the Hall Valley is the Vomper Loch Valley. From the Überschalljoch (1,912 m) – the watershed between the catchment areas of the Inn and Isar rivers – the valley merges into the Hinterautal Valley. The Vomper Loch Valley is considered to be one of the most unspoilt and secluded parts of the Karwendel mountain range and the “most beautiful high mountain valley of the North Tyrol Limestone Alps”, to quote *Heinrich von Ficker* (1885–1919). The meteorologist and mountaineer thought the valley “infinitely lonely and abandoned”, concluding: “No mountain huts, no refuges where we could rest; only closed-up hunting lodges indicated that people do sometimes live here, even in this isolated spot.” A century later, this description remains completely accurate. The steep-sided valley approximately 15 km in length requires a certain amount of stamina and sure-footedness. But those who care to make the effort discover a captivating landscape. This is particularly the case in autumn, when the mixed woodland offers a colourful visual treat. The valley’s isolation was also exploited at the end of the Second World War by many conscientious objectors, who were able to hide from the Nazi regime. Only a few years ago, an exhibition detailing this hidden chapter in the history of Tyrol was staged by the museum in Absam, which is well worth a visit.

Between Terfens and Vomp the stream

which runs down the Vomper Loch Valley, the Vomperbach, joins the River Inn. The village of *Terfens* is distinguished by its parish church. The interior displays Gothic frescoes of a Life of the Virgin Mary as well as paintings by the artist *Christoph Anton Mayr* (1720–1771), who was from Schwaz. Further upstream lies *Fritzens*. In the 5th century BC this was the location of an extensive Raetian settlement which continued south of the River Inn on the *Himmelreich* site between Wattens and Volders. The people who once lived in these settlements belonged to a culture which extended as far as the Trentino region of Italy. Archaeologists uncovered a find complex at Sanzeno im Nonsberg that is comparable to the excavations in Fritzens. For this reason, the culture was named the *Fritzens-Sanzeno culture*. Even as early as 2,500 years ago, intensive cultural links existed between what is now North Tyrol and Trentino, with the main Alpine ridge forming a connecting bracket rather than a border.

Naturpark Karwendel and Fiecht Abbey

To the east of Terfens lies *Vomp*, officially designated a market town in 2009. The area administered by the town is extensive, stretching as far as the border with Bavaria. Vomp and the village of *Eben* on Lake Achen both share the remote Rißtal Valley, the northern end of which actually lies within the boundaries of the Bavarian parish of Lenggries. In fact, the hamlet of *Hinterriß* can only be reached by car from Germany. The southern part of the main ridge of the Karwendel mountain range forms the spectacular boundary of the Rißtal and its side valleys. Looking down on the *Falkenhütte* refuge (1,848 m) is the Laliedererspitz (2,588 m), which also lends its name to the rock faces further to the east. These rock faces are a paradise for climbers, forming a contrast to the lush green pastures in the valley that is absolutely typical of the Naturpark Karwendel. Just as in Thaur and Absam, Vomp too has its own illustrious history. Trade and commerce in Vomp was influenced by the mining industry in Schwaz, while the fun-loving Archduke Sigismund had a hunting lodge built here that was given the very fitting name of Sigismund’s Pleasure.



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Fiecht Abbey, a community whose origins are on the *Georgenberg* in the parish of Stans, also lies within the municipality of Vomp. Vomp was formerly the place where the interests of the Counts of Tyrol came up against those of the Augsburg See; however, the Benedictine monastery introduced a further factor into the power-politics. In the year 950, *Rathold von Aibling* established a monastery on the *Georgenberg*. This is the second oldest monastery in North Tyrol after Wilten, and it was soon presented with numerous gifts. The monastery, well known today as a place of pilgrimage, can be reached via Stans or Fiecht as well as by the highly romantic *Wolfsklamm* gorge. Here, thundering waterfalls, dense forest and craggy cliffs are the features of a landscape which feels primitive and is nonetheless accessible for tourists. The “*Höhe Brücke*” (High Bridge) leads to the church on the *Georgenberg*. The bridge was built at the end of the 15th century in response to increasing numbers of pil-

grims. It is a unique structure, consisting of Gothic stone pillars and a Baroque timber construction. The pilgrims’ goal was initially St George, the first patron saint of Tyrol. But in the 15th century, the Gothic era devotional picture was supplemented by a reliquary of Holy Blood. Today, however, it is a Pietà of Our Lady of Sorrows upon the high altar which is the focus of veneration. The *Georgenberg* is one of the most important and oldest sites of Christian worship in North Tyrol. Further evidence of this is the architecturally remarkable “*Kirche unter der Linde*”, a church built in around 1230 slightly higher up the hill from the monastery. An interesting feature inside the church building is a small plaque built into the wall beside the pulpit. This was presented by *Hippolyt Guarinoni*, a doctor from Hall, in memory of his triplet children who died. The *Georgenberg* is as popular with religious visitors as it is with nature lovers and hikers. This comes as no surprise because this is a place that

brings together spirituality with many interesting cultural and historical details and impressive natural scenery. The history of the monastery and the convent is presented at the Abbey Museum in Fiecht. The Abbey is situated on a level, sunny plateau providing a good view over the Inn Valley. However, its days in Fiecht are numbered. The community moved to the site in the early 18th century, but in 2016 the Benedictine Friars decided to return to the *Georgenberg*.

Schwaz, the “mother of all mines”

The town of *Schwaz* lies southeast of Vomp, and spreads along the opposite bank of the Inn at the foot of the *Kellerjoch* mountain (2,344 m). From the late Middle Ages and into the 19th century, *Schwaz* was the most densely populated area of Tyrol. This was all down to the mining industry. Smelting began here in the Neolithic period. Extensive burial grounds, such as the burial site in Vomp



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which has gradually been excavated by archaeologists from the Tyrolean State Museum Ferdinandeum, are evidence that this region was economically significant over 3,000 years ago. In the early Middle Ages, the ore deposits started to be intensively exploited under the pa-

tronage of the Lords of *Freundberg*, who built their ancestral seat in the hills above Schwaz. But it was the discovery of extensive veins of silver above the town at Falkenstein that led to Schwaz becoming the “mother of all mines”. Hundreds of miners and their families

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came from Bohemia and Saxony to mine the rich veins. The *Fugger* family, merchants from Augsburg, made good money out of silver from Schwaz in the 16th century. Having lent Emperor *Maximilian* a small fortune for him to secure the Imperial Crown for his grandson, the family received mining rights in return. The traces of this era are visible everywhere even today – for example, in those miners’ houses which fortunately have not been torn down. Schwaz was a fast-growing settlement, but not one which expanded in a planned fashion. This was why the citizens turned down an offer from Emperor Maximilian to grant the privileges of town status, as it would have been too complex and expensive to enclose the entire settlement with a town wall. Hence, the community – whose population was approximately 20,000 in 1500 – only became a town in 1899.

Schwaz is made up of two ancient areas of settlement, extending left and right of the Lahnbach stream. Water from the stream was extremely important for smelting, early industrial works, breweries and fish farming. Yet it was not named without good reason: the areas near the stream were threatened in winter by avalanches – known as “Lahn” in the local dialect – and by mudslides in the summer. Extensive barrier walls were erected as far back as the mid-15th century – early proof for the control of mountain torrents in Tyrol. Many architectural gems can be seen in the two historic parts of town that are separated by the Lahnbach, such as the *Franciscan Monastery* with its impressive cloisters. Also remarkable are the numerous houses of the townsfolk, as well as the residences of the nobility and administrative buildings, the oldest parts of which mostly date from between 1450 and 1550. The “*Blue House*” for instance, built for one of the mining companies, is worthy of note. It was during this boom time for the mining industry that the *parish Church of Our Lady* was also constructed. The model for this building with two naves was the church in Landshut, while the front makes reference to the façade of Munich Town Hall. The octagonal tower is topped off with the oldest cupola of its type in Tyrol. In the mid-18th century, the town’s unified appearance led the learned author *Anton Roschmann* to express his view that Schwaz “may well be the largest and most beautiful village in all German-speaking

lands". Not least because of its history, present-day Schwaz has become a focus for cultural activities. Numerous events are organised each year as part of the themed "Silver Summer" series, while various attractions – the Rabalderhaus, the Museum of Ethnology, the former silver mine and the town museum at Castle Freundsberg – all appeal to those interested in the history of Schwaz. The Zeiss Planetarium, many galleries and a vibrant alternative scene further contribute to making this former centre of mining and industry a cultural hub for the Tyrolean Unterland district.

Looming above the area south-east of the town centre is a striking rock formation, the *Eiblschrofen*, which hit the headlines in 1999. A series of rock falls threatened the suburb of Ried, leading to an evacuation of residents lasting for several days. On the other side of the river, *Tratzberg Castle* rises majestically from tree-covered slopes. Emperor Maximilian

swapped this castle for Berneck Castle in the Kaunertal Valley. The other party to the exchange, the *Tänzl* family, built an impressive Renaissance castle to replace the fire-damaged ruins. Tratzberg Castle remains in private hands, but its formal apartments are open to visitors.

Further downstream lies *Jenbach*. When the mines were still operational, smelting was carried out here. Since then, in fact for over 600 years, the character of this place has been defined by industry. The old mining company eventually became the Jenbacher Werke, nowadays globally-recognised specialists in gas engine technology. On what is today an industrial site, a special kind of hotel was built in 1862. The successor to this building still stands today near the railway station. In its first sitting after Emperor Franz Josef issued the Imperial Decree on Protestantism in 1861, the Tyrol State Parliament resolved that the right of public

exercise of religious beliefs be reserved for the Catholic Church. The so-called "unity of faith" that was claimed at the time invokes the idea of a united Tyrol. Protestantism therefore encountered a fierce struggle. Very few people dared to go against unanimous opinion. The opening, therefore, of *Hotel Toleranz* was a particularly courageous and daring sign. The hotel stood at the entrance to the Zillertal Valley, the place from which 25 years earlier approximately 400 Protestants had been expelled. Furthermore, it was not until 1879 that the first Protestant place of worship was consecrated in Innsbruck, and later still, between 1883 and 1885, that the first purpose-built Protestant church in Tyrol was constructed in the spa town of Meran. Hotel Toleranz is now a protected building, although it has been empty for some time and awaiting a new purpose.

The variety and number of places of historical interest in and around Schwaz

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can conceal the fact that the surrounding mountains are the perfect place to experience the great outdoors. This is particularly the case for the *Kellerjoch* (2,334 m), the most prominent mountain in the area around Schwaz, Buch and Galzein. Its exposed position makes the summit an attractive vantage point: the view stretches from the Kitzbühel Alps and the Hohen Tauern to the east, passes over the Zillertal Alps to the south, the Karwendel and the Rofengebirge to the north and finally loses itself in the Lower Inn Valley. The ascent via Schwaz is the most popular, and although the alternative path over Pillberg and the Loassattel passes areas of beautiful wildflowers, it does however require sure-footedness and stamina. It is also possible to reach the *Gilfert* (2,506 m) this way. This peak, lying slightly further to the south in the foothills of the Tux Alps, is a popular destination for ski tours in the spring. In this case, ascent is normally via *Weerberg*. This village is dominated by its imposing church, which was built in the mid-19th century, prompted by promulgation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in 1854. Two years later, work started on the monumental new parish church. Modelled on the cathedrals of the Rhineland, it is a neo-Romanesque cathedral with two towers framing the façade. This demonstration of Catholic power, clearly visible from elsewhere in the valley, is thought by many to look a little out of place in this

rural, tranquil setting.

From Weer the road continues to *Kolsass*. This community, documented as one of the oldest in the area and probably also the area's parent parish, was formerly governed from *Neu-Rettenberg* Castle. This defensive fort on the *Kolsassberg* was built by the knight *Florian Waldauf*, but is nowadays a ruin.

West of *Kolsass* lies the market town of *Wattens*. As early as the 16th century this was an important location for industry, harnessing the power of the *Wattenbach* stream. The paper mill has been in existence since 1559 and nowadays manufactures products such as cigarette paper. But it is for polished crystal glass that *Wattens* is best-known. It is hardly surprising that *Daniel Swarowski*, born in *Gablonz* in Bohemia, founded his company here, between *Hall* and *Schwaz* – Tyrol's first and oldest industrial area – in 1895.

The elongated *Wattental Valley* stretches out to the south of *Wattens*, forming the western edge of the parish of *Vögelsberg*. Flanked to the east by spurs of the *Largoz* (2,214 m) and *Malgrübler* (2,749 m) peaks and to the west by the *Rote Wand* (2,252 m) and *Hirzer* (2,725 m), the narrow, steep-sided valley opens into a densely-wooded area. The furthest end, the *Wattener Lizum*, is the site of a military training area of approximately 157 km² belonging to the Austrian Armed Forces. Apart from its military uses, the *Lizum*, an area of alpine pas-

ture, is popular with hikers and off-piste skiers. Numerous routes start at *Walchen*, while the spacious *Lizumer Hütte* refuge (2,019 m) is an important base. From here, it is possible to reach the *Reckner* (2,886 m), the *Geier* (2,857 m), which is particularly popular with skiers, the *Sonnspitze* (2,831 m) or the *Tarntaler Köpfe* (2,757 m). Running parallel to the *Wattental Valley* is the virtually untouched natural landscape of the *Volder-tal Valley* and the *Glungezer* (2,677 m). The valley was once the hunting grounds of Tyrol's ruling dynasty. Later on, a spa developed at the entrance to the valley. It is thought that the *Volderwildbad Spa*, together with the *Chapel of St Cosmas* and *St Damian*, can be traced back to the efforts of *Hippolyt Guarinoni*. *Guarinoni* is a provocative figure in the history of Tyrol. He was the founder of the *Karlskirche* church in *Volders*, on a site which nowadays lies right next to the motorway. The impressive, colourful building in a Venetian baroque style is connected with a Servite monastery. It is one of the most significant buildings of the Counter-Reformation in Tyrol, with a floor-plan modelled on that of *St Peter's* in Rome. Surrounded by baroque splendour, it is easy to forget that *Guarinoni*, who was buried here, was not just a polymath and trained doctor from Trento, known for his numerous medical publications. The personal physician for the *Hall Convent* was above all a religious fanatic. It was as such that he was the originator of the anti-Semitic cult of *Andreas von Rinn*. Veneration of this purported child victim of Jewish ritual murder was only prohibited by the Bishop of *Innsbruck*, *Reinhold Stecher*, in 1994 – giving rise, however, to many radical predictions of doom. At the time, the bishop made the pointed remark that one of the features of fanaticism is “campaigning for the minor, not the significant” – a thought which is valid when it comes to matters of culture and tradition, whether between *Hall* and *Schwaz* or further afield.

Translated by Hannah Burdekin

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