

Text and photos by Wolfgang Pölzer

Underwater **Austria**

—a freshwater view of diving





Completely landlocked doesn't necessarily mean that diving is out of the question. Austria is best known for alpine skiing, historical Vienna and delicious cakes, but also offers some really spectacular diving. Here, one can dive wrecks and walls, enjoying a rich aquatic life in lakes with great visibility.

Before we take you on a trip through the top ten list of freshwater diving in Austria, let's have a look at some facts. Since the break-up of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire in 1918 Austria hasn't had any access to the ocean. On the other hand, freshwater is in rich abundance in this small central European country. Together with countries like Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Finland, mountainous Austria is one of the areas in Europe richest in freshwater. And the water is clean. Ninety-nine percent of Austrians have access to potable ground- and spring water. Austria boasts a whopping 9,000 lakes, of which two thirds are natural and the last third are man-made. The man-made lakes are mostly created to support hydroelectric plants.

Widely known secret

For many divers, freshwater diving is not real diving. No coral reefs, no sharks. Cold and dark. Even amongst Austrian divers, their own backyard is a secret. Contrary to popular belief, freshwater diving can be exciting.

Enjoying clear vis in Grünersee



THIS PAGE: Grünersee from above and below; Diver and rainbow trout at Grünersee

As in the ocean, you need to choose your dive site according to what you want to see, water conditions and best time of the year. The most important aspect of freshwater diving is the season.

During the year, the temperatures in the lakes change between freezing and warm; the transparency of the water fluctuates; the vegetation differs; and fishes change their favorite hangouts. In places where you, for example, can observe perch hide in full green vegetation during the late summer months (August-September), you will only encounter a desert-like sea floor in the spring (March-April).

If you are looking for fish, my tip is to dive in the summer months (May-August) and stay in the shallows (1-5 meters / 3-16 feet) near land. Some species will be sleeping, while other will be

hunting. Another treat is the water temperature at the water's edge often allows for a 5mm wetsuit and no gloves.

Top ten dive sites

Grüner See (Green Lake)

This is by far the lake in Austria with the best visibility. It's situated in the heart of Steiermark (Styria), one of Austria's nine federal states. The distinctive character of this lake comes from the fact that its water source is almost entirely made of melted snow. Because of this, the lake actually only exists from late spring until late summer. The rest of the year it is often nearly dried out. During the dry season the lake-bed serves as a hiking trail. The water level usually peaks during June, and floods not only the dry rocky lake-bed in the middle, but also the surrounding grassland and forest. Diving the Green

Lake gives you an opportunity to dive among park benches, wooden board walks and along hiking trails. This is also a popular fishing spot, and every year, trout are released into the lake. When melting snow from the surrounding mountains, starts to fill up the lake in the spring, it passes through sand and gravel, which function like a filter. The water is therefore mostly very clear. This also means that the lake is very cold. The average temperature hovers around 6-8°C (43-47°F).

BASIC FACTS

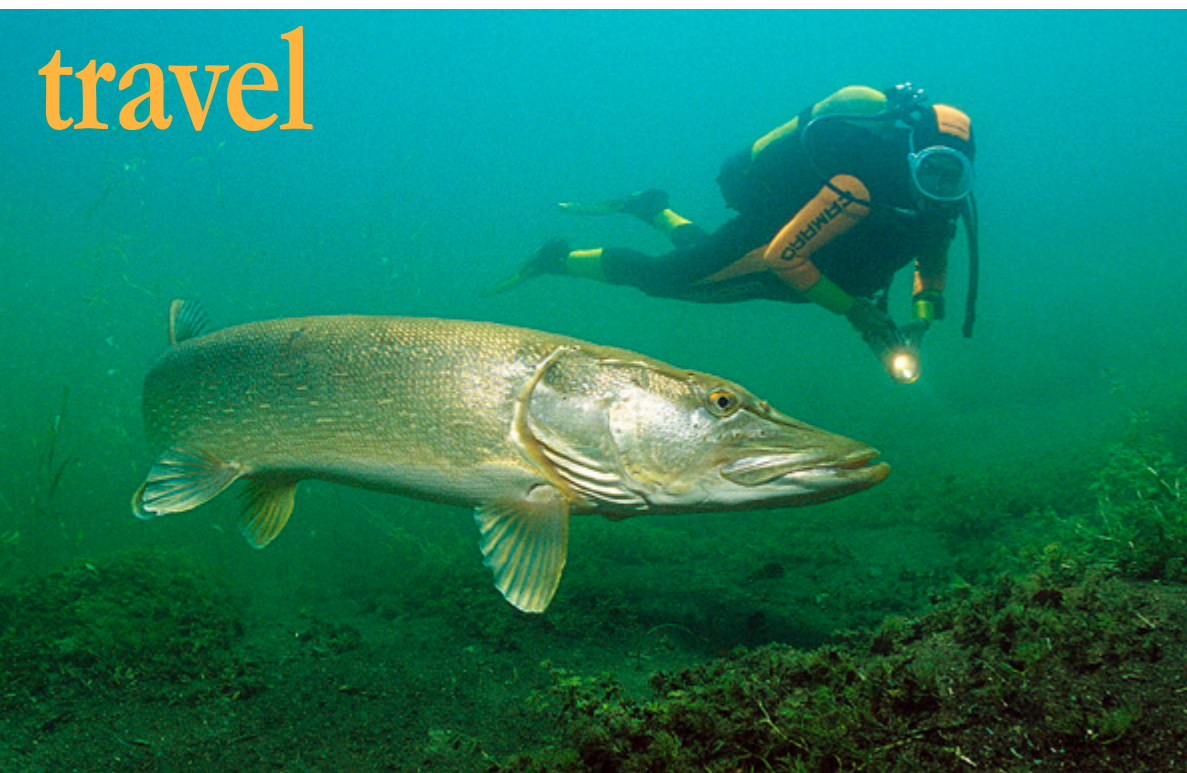
Depth: 12m / 36ft
 Best season: beginning of May until end of August
 Entrance fee: EU€ 8 per person per day, available at the main parking area
 Dive center: no center, but it's possible to fill your tanks at the Gasthof Seehof: www.seehof-gruenersee.com

[seehof-gruenersee.com](http://www.seehof-gruenersee.com)
 Tourist info: www.tragoess-gruenersee.at
 (Call/write ahead to check the water level, just in case).
 YouTube: www.youtube.com/v/WkDSIFexs-Y?

Samaranger See (Lake Samaranger)

This is another gem in the collection of Austrian freshwater lakes well worth a few dives. The lake is very small, just about 100 meters, or 328 feet, across. You will usually find yourself diving in crystal clear water and almost be able to get a complete view from the





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Diver and northern pike; Beautiful scenery around Erlaufsee; Northern pike hiding in foliage; School of common rudd

middle of the lake. For the best visibility, visit during the late autumn (September – October). Besides a few rainbow trout, there isn't much fish life in the lake. The lake is full of tree trunks and branches, which are partly overgrown by algae. This allows the creative photographer to create some mysterious images. The lake bottom is covered with very fine silt, so move around with controlled fin strokes. The Tyrolean lake is situated a few hundred meters from the Palace Hotel Fernsteinsee, which is named after another nearby lake. Both lakes can only be dived with permission from the hotel, which owns the lake and the surrounding lands. You need to stay at least two nights at the four star hotel to gain a diving permit.

BASIC FACTS

Depth: 12m / 36ft
 Best season: late summer and autumn (July – September)
 Entrance fee: two night's accommodation at the Schlosshotel Fernsteinsee.
 Dive center: no center, but it's possible to fill your tanks at Schlosshotel Fernsteinsee: www.fernsteinsee.at
 Tourist info: www.mieminger-plateau.at
 Lake Samaranger on YouTube:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wEEWrY8zK0

Erlaufsee

This lake is considerably larger than the two previous lakes. Erlaufsee is right on the border between Styria and Lower Austria, not far from the tourist village of Mariazell. This lake provides you with a visibility of 10 to 15 meters / 30 – 45 feet most of the year, except in the spring (March – April) when melt-water tends to cloud the lake with particles. This lake has rich fish life, so try to get here when the visibility is good. The Erlaufsee is known for its large stock of northern pike (*Esox lucius*). The pike like to hide in the dense vegetation in shallow water. Don't be surprised if you observe at least a dozen perches during a dive. Another great feature of this lake are the numerous rudds (*Scardinius erythrophthalmus*) that inhabit the Erlaufsee. Also look for the European perch (*Perca fluviatilis*), European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) and the spiny-cheek crayfish (*Orconectes limosus*). This freshwater body even boasts a wall that drops off to 30 meters. The usual tree



trunks and branches that have fallen in from the surrounding forest make this lake one of the most versatile dive sites

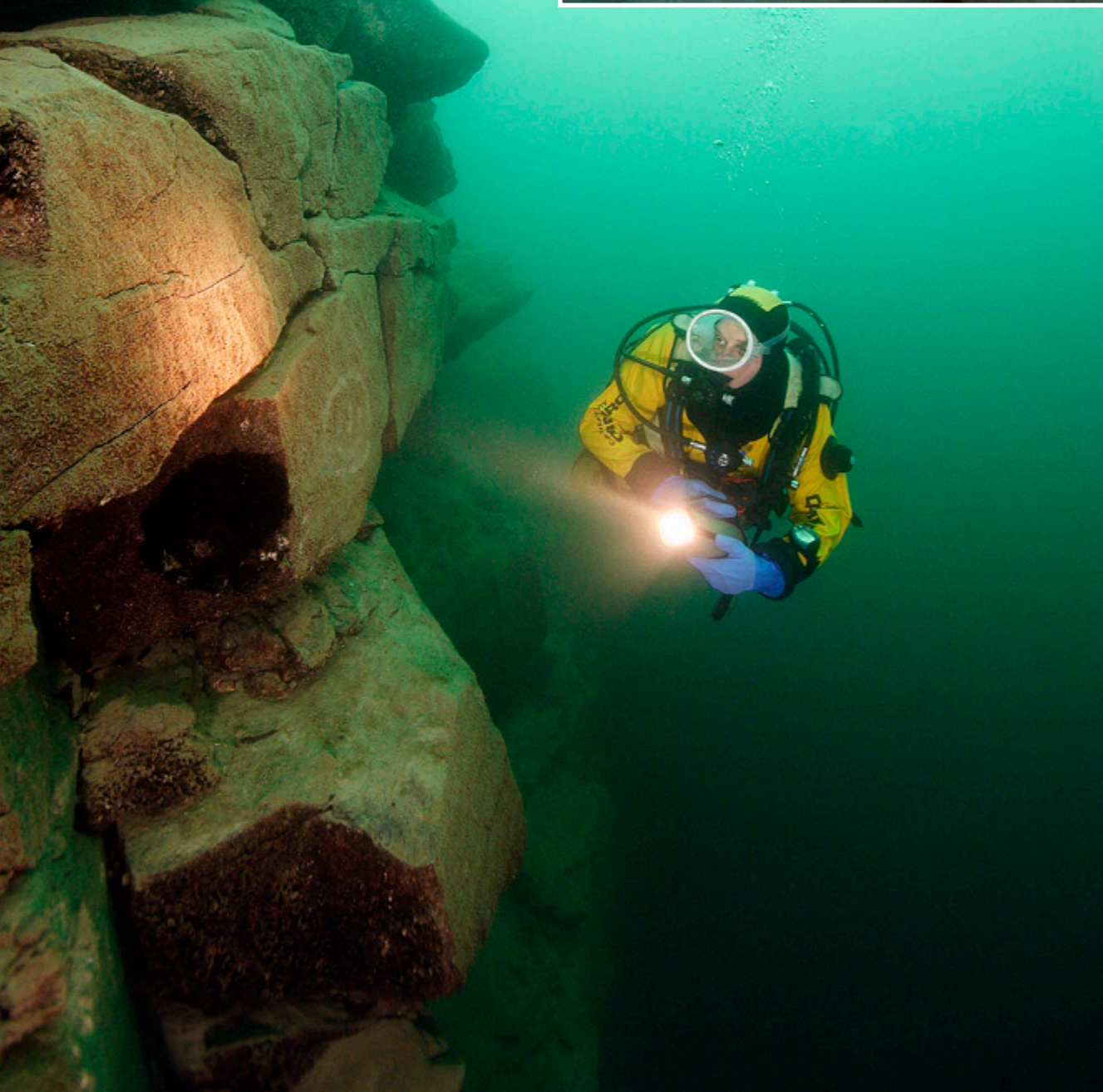
in Austria. Diving here is strictly regulated. Use only the three well-marked entry/exit points. You also need to carry an Austrian

Divecard, which can be bought for € 15, and is valid for many of the Austrian lakes for a full year.





Austria



BASIC FACTS

Depth: 38m / 125ft
 Best season: summer and autumn (June – September)
 Entrance fee: Austria Divecard, EU€ 15 per person per year
 Dive center: Harry's Tauchschule in St. Sebastian next to the Gasthof Seewirt: www.tauchschule.co.at
 Tourist info: www.mariazell.at
 Google Earth: 47°48'0"N 15°17'0"E
 YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJzDFrTk7_k

Attersee

This is one of the largest and deepest lakes in Austria. It is also the most dived lake. The reason for this is good visibility year around, varied underwater landscape, many possible entry/exit points and good parking facilities around the lake. And last but not least, you dive here for free! The 20 kilometer- / 12.5 mile-long lake is nestled between alpine mountains and soft rolling hills. Along the highway, which runs along the edge of the lake, you will find many sign posts of entry/exit points. At the dive sites, you will also find info-boards with detailed descriptions and drawings of suggested dives. This gives you the choice of what you want to do under water: photograph tree trunks shrouded in algae, explore ship- and car wrecks or just enjoy diving in a varied landscape with walls and deep water. Just remember to check your depth gauge often, as you descend into the clear

water. Even at 40 meters depth, you will have good natural light on a sunny day. Besides the lure of the deep end, you should also venture into the shallows and vegetation-rich zones along the lake sides.

BASIC FACTS

Depth: 171m / 561ft
 Best season: Summer and autumn (June-October)
 Entrance fee: free
 Dive center: Nautilus Dive-Company, at Weyregg, directly on the lake,

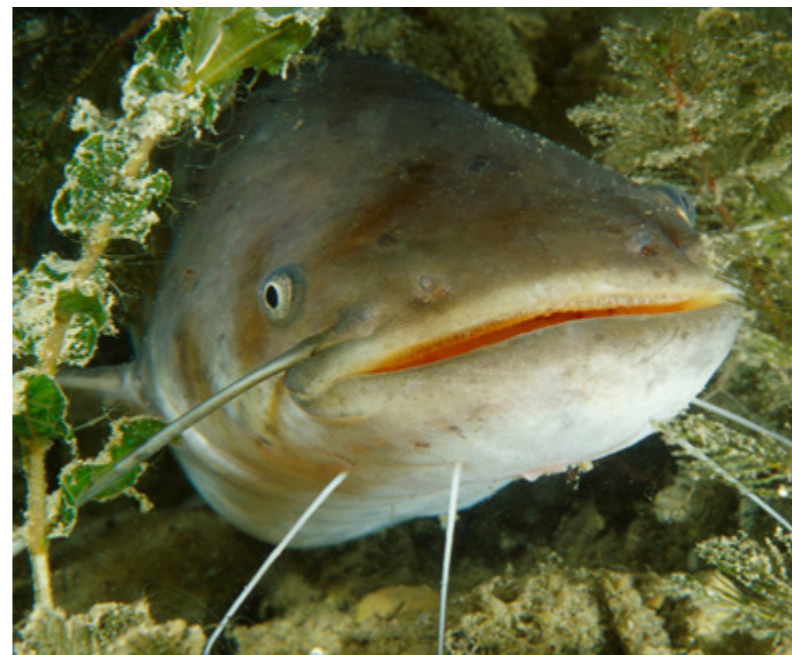
www.nautilus.at
 Tourist info: www.attersee.at (The tourist infrastructure in the area is very good. There are several places to fill your tanks in addition to a variety of accommodations and eateries).
 Google Earth: 47°54'N 13°33'E
 YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xb6gd2LGBA

Gosausee

This alpine lake is surrounded by the impressive peaks (2,500 meters / 8,200 feet) of the Dachstein mountain range



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Exploring the landscape under Attersee; Diver and Titanic canoe wreck; Divers and kayakers at Attersee; Burbot (Lota lota)



an angle of 45°. There are a few smaller walls at around 20 meters depth. The lake is dominated by huge boulders creating

Klopeiner See

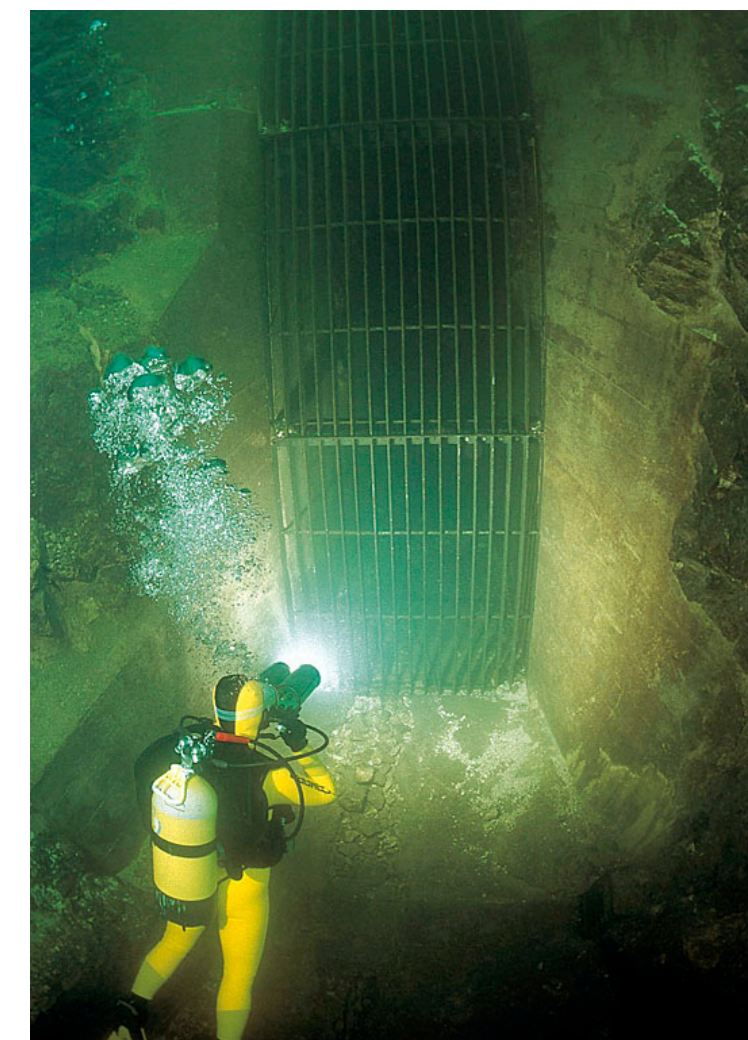
In stark contrast to the previously mentioned lake, the Klopeiner See has rich fish life and is warm enough to be a popular place in which to swim. At only 1.1 km² / 0.7 mi², the Carinthian lake is not big. The higher temperature lessens the visibility, though, which will be in the range of 8–10 meters at its best. The lake still has its attractions for divers. Due to the profile of the lake bottom and the fact that there are seldom strong winds here, the different water layers don't mix very well. Below 30 meters / 99 feet depth, there is a nearly oxygen-depleted water layer. The area around the lake is a mix of farm land and villages, which have had a strain on the lake. To keep up the water quality, the local government installed a "deep water ventilation plant" that at least partly enriches the lake's oxygen levels. One of the positive effects of the distinct layers in Klopeiner Lake is that the top layer heats up to around 25°C / 77°F during the summer months. This makes it the warmest lake in Austria and attracts more than a fair share of lakeside tourists. The

an exciting underwater landscape to explore. Stuck amongst the rocks, you can come across old tree trunks and roots, which make great photo subjects. It is forbidden to dive in the vicinity of the water intake for the hydroelectric plant. There is a 5x2 meter / 15x6 foot metal grid here, but the 3,000 foot-long pipeline creates some current. There is little of fish and vegetation in the lake due to the big difference in the water level.

BASIC FACTS

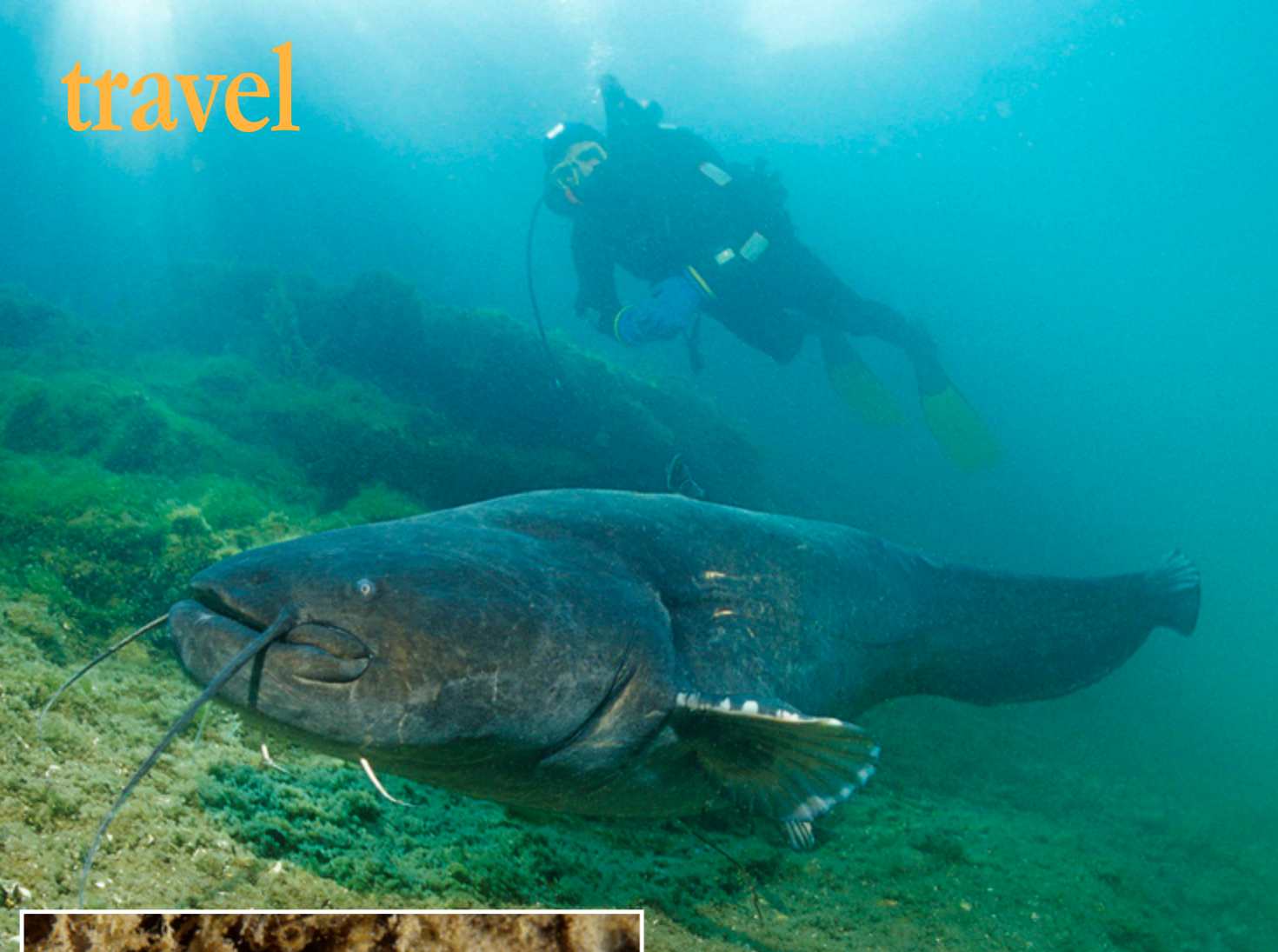
Depth: 85 m / 279 ft
 Best season: Summer and autumn (May-October)
 Entrance fee: Austria Dive card, EU€ 15 per person per year.
 Dive center: Tauchclub Dachstein-Salzkammergut, directly on the lake,
www.dive-adventures.at
 Tourist info: www.gosau.com
 Google Earth: 47°35'0"N 13°32'0"E

at the border of Upper Austria and Styria. The tiny lake is best dived between early summer and late autumn (May – October). The present water level is a result of a dam, which was built 100 years ago. As it is a water reservoir, the water level can fluctuate as much as 30 meters. When you arrive at the lake from November until June, it can give you the impression of an half empty bathtub. In the spring, the melting snow fills up the lake again. You can dive here all year round, but when the water level is low, it is difficult to haul heavy diving gear down the rocky slopes. Also, the best visibility is only had when the water levels are at their peak. Expect up to 50 meters visibility at depth. This is the real highlight of the lake, but before you reach this visibility, you need to penetrate a couple of thermoclines and endure a water temperature of 4°C / 39°F. The lake-bed slopes at



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Scenes under the surface of Gosausee; Silurus glanis in Klopeinersee; Delicate flora and fauna in Klopeinersee





CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Juvenile Wels catfish (*Silurus glanis*); *Lepomis gibbosus*; Diver and huge Wels catfish resting on ledge of Klopeinersee; Diver prepares to dive Weissensee; Scenes below the ice in Weissensee

white lake. The lake bed is covered with calcareous mud. Fish seem to like this because as many as 24 species inhabit the Weissensee. Northern pikes (*Esox lucius*) are easily observed. The common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) appears in large schools. If you are looking for greenery, you need to stay in

the shallows at the water's edge. As many of the fish like to hide here, this makes for good dives in summer nights.

BASIC FACTS:
Depth: 99m / 325ft
Best season: Autumn (August - October)
Entrance fee: free
Dive center: Tauchschule

nice temperate water makes this lake more inviting to plant and fish life than other lakes in Austria. Klopeiner Lake is inhabited by 17 species of fish. The avid fish lover can encounter slightly exotic fishes such as Eurasian ruffe (*Gymnocephalus cernuus*), or pumpkinseed sunfish (*Lepomis gibbosus*) and the impressive Wels catfish (*Silurus glanis*). Getting close to one of these bottom dwellers, which can reach a length of more than two meters and weigh as much as 250-300 kilograms / 550-660 pounds, would spike any diver's adrenalin levels. Besides the ecological curios, you can also see a more than 300-year-old tree at 10 meters / 33 feet depth. For those chasing depth, there are a few places with drop offs as well.

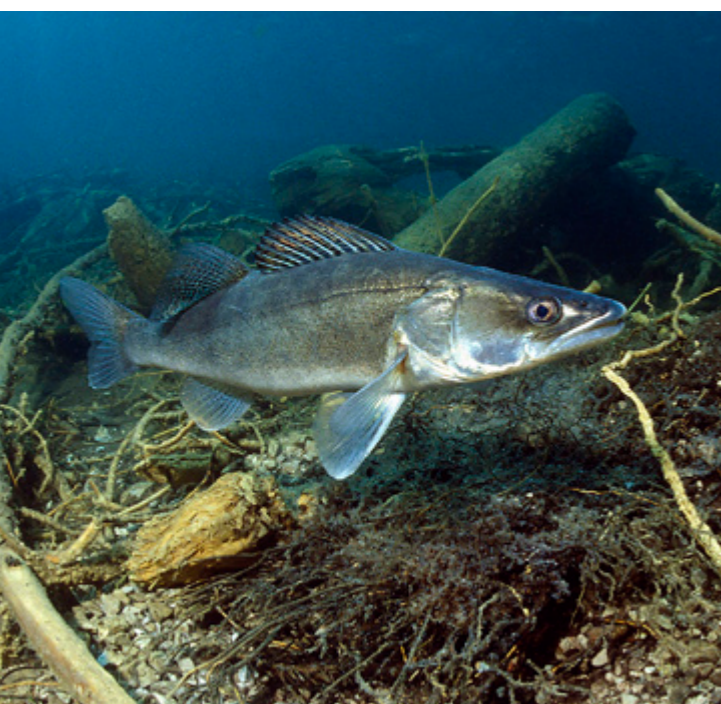
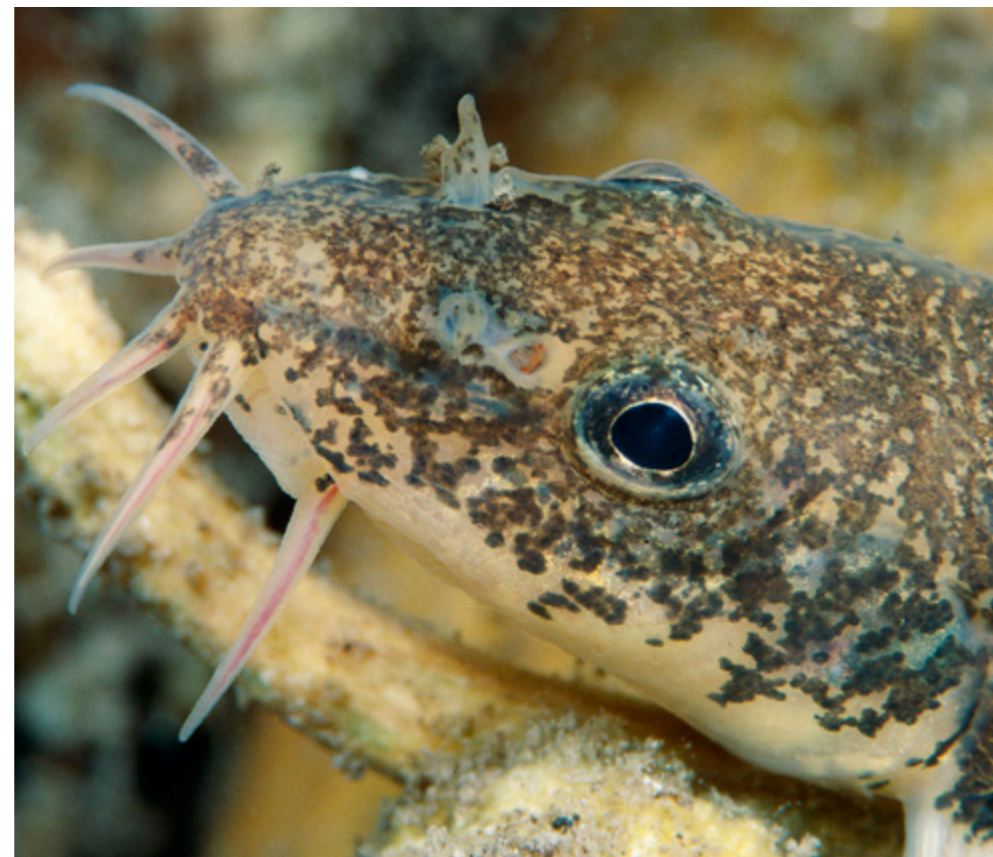
BASIC FACTS
Depth: 48m / 157ft
Best season: Autumn (August - October)
Entrance fee: EU€ 1.50 per person per day
Dive center: Tauchschule Easy Dive, at the Strandbad Süd, www.easydive.at
Tourist info: Klopeinersee.com
Google Earth: 46°36'16"N 14°34'59"E

Weissensee
This lake in the southern part of Carinthia is good for diving all year. This 11 kilometer- / 6.8 mile-long but less than 1 kilometer- / 0.68 mile-wide

body of water is walled by high mountains rising up to an altitude of 930 meters / 3,050 feet. It freezes over completely from January to March, and good ice makes it popular for ice-diving. Under the ice, the visibility is usually good at 20 meters / 66 feet or more. This lake offers some breathtaking walls—some of them with

large overhangs, and even some caves. Add to that the usual collection of tree trunks, some wrecks and good fish life, and you have dive sites for any taste. It is easy to dive the Weissensee, as you can rapidly reach all the different dive sites with a boat. The lake is rich on calcium, which gives the lake its name—Weissensee, or the





CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Ice hole for diving in Blindsee; Stone loach (*Nemacheilus barbatulus*); A zander (*Stizostedion lucioperca*) is a species of fish related to perch; Diver approaches zander; Zander in Blindsee hovers over its nest

Dive World, at the Strandbad Stockenboi on the eastside of the lake, www.dive-world.at
 Tourist info: www.weissensee.com
 Google earth: 46° 42'22.17" N 13° 20'34.55 E

Blindsee

This is a small alpine lake with some rare species of fish. You can find the lake at 1,100 meters altitude in Tirol. On sunny days, the turquoise water surrounded by evergreen needle tree forests crowned by snow capped mountains, makes a great photo. Just like the previously-mentioned Samaranger See, this lake is on private land and connected to the four star Mohr Life Resort. The kilometer-long lake attracts divers because of its special fish population. Of the handful of species, which have made the lake their home, the large amount of slender silvery zander (*Stizostedion lucioperca*) quickly catches one's eye. These tasty predators are best seen in

the spring during their mating rituals. During this period, the males build nests at two meters depth where the females place the eggs to be fertilized. The males then guard the eggs ferociously against other predators. This fish has even been known to attack divers, biting them while defending their eggs. The smaller and evidently less aggressive stone loach (*Noemacheilus barbatulus*) are also an abundant in Blindsee. These finger-long bottom dwellers are rarely seen by divers in other lakes in Austria. Should you grow tired of fish-watching, you will find an intriguing pile of trunks interesting. They resemble a pile of Mikado sticks. They are the result of an avalanche that swept parts of the forest at the water's edge into the lake about 30 years ago. You can swim around his labyrinth of waist-thick tree trunks.

BASIC FACTS
 Depth: 23m / 75ft

Best season: Autumn (August - October)
 Entrance fee: free for hotel guest, others EU€ 12.50 per person per day
 Dive center: Tauchen in Tirol (this is an operation from Innsbruck, which has an outlet at the Mohr Life Resort, www.tauchen-in-tirol.at
 Tourist info: www.mohr-resort.at

Grüblsee

Feeding fish while diving is normally banned in Austria, but at the Grüblsee, nobody will frown upon you if you bring a plastic container with some treats for the fish. And since our scaled friends are quite used to this practice, they will quickly descend upon you to get a bite of the goodies. On the other hand, this lake is not natural. It's actually a large "foil pond" found at 1,160 meters / 3800 feet altitude. Not made for divers or swimmers but as a reservoir to feed all the snow-cans used by the ski-resorts in the area during the winter season. Flexible as the



Austrians are, they convert one of the ski huts into a dive center during the summer months. The local ingenious dive base owner has also stocked up the lake with 14 species of fish over the last eight year—not only fish but also European crayfish (*Astacus astacus*) and swan mussels (*Anodonta cygnea*). If that isn't enough, the lake offers divers underwater platforms, statues, treasure chests, a Christmas tree forest and other bizarre sculptures. Still, for most divers, the unafraid fishes are the highlight. Rainbow- and brook trout feed right of your hand. A little more shy but more impressive are the three species of

sturgeons found in Gröblsee. These fish can, after all, grow to be several meters long. The tiny 200x100 meter- / 660x330 foot-large lake easily gets warm during the summer months, which makes diving here rather pleasant. You can dive safe and hassle-free in the shallow pond and still enjoy 20 meters / 66 feet of visibility.

BASIC FACTS
Depth: 9m / 27ft
Best season: summer and autumn



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Diver and schooling brook trout and Rainbow trout; Divers prepare for a freshwater dive in Gröblsee; Diver under the waves and kayaker on the surface at Traunfälle; Diver with sterlet (*Acipenser ruthenus*) of the sturgeon family

Traunfälle
At the end of our list, but not by far the least excellent diving, is the Traunfälle, or Traun waterfall. This is one of the best rivers to dive in Austria. The Traun River, which has its source in the Salzkammergut, runs through several lakes and then empties into the mighty Danube. The best part of the river to dive is situated in Upper Austria. A dam was built on the river in 1922. At a safe distance from the hydroelectric plant, the new dam was erected

(May-October)
Entrance fee: EU€ 3 per person per day
Dive center: Tauchschule Präbichl, a small center directly on the lake, www.grueblsee.at
Tourist info: www.vordernberg.at



at a wider part of the river. Here, you can find a canyon-like riverbed with polished rock formations and a maximum depth of 19 meters. When the water

flow isn't too strong, you can dive through 30 caverns and tunnels. The best way to dive here is to let the local dive center drop you at the best and safest places with a



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The falls at Traunfalle; Divers brave the rapids; Diver and common barbel; Diver explores the underwater landscape of Traunfalle; A grayling, *Thymallus thymallus*, of the salmon family

several species of trout are plentiful, but also, the more rare and endangered Danube salmon (*Hucho hucho*) can be seen. In addition to the river above the falls, you can also dive below the waterfall. Springs add clear water into the river creating pockets of good visibility of ten meters or more. Due to the a wider and flatter riverbed, the water flow is stronger, so you won't be able to dive on long stretches of the river, unlike above the falls—at least not with scuba gear. If you enjoy snorkeling, you can traverse some of the stronger flowing parts of the river with fins, mask and snorkel. To do this kind of "drift snorkling", contact the local dive center and do this

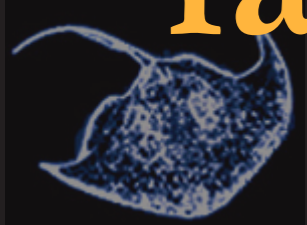
boat, for a one-hour drift-dive. The river is rich with fish, and you can encounter more aquatic life here than on many ocean dives. Fish like northern pike (*Esox lucius*), common barbel (*Barbus barbus*), burbot (*Lota lota*), grayling (*Thymallus thymallus*) and

with a guide.
BASIC FACTS
 Depth: 19m / 62ft
 Best season: summer and autumn (May-October)
 Entrance fee: EU€ 10 per person per day
 Dive center: Atlantis Qualidive, in the village of Viecht above the waterfall, www.flusstauschen.at
 Tourist info: www.schwandenstadt.at
 Google Earth: N 48° 00.909' E 013° 47.962'
 YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=DsLMCVGkrU

Wolfgang Pölzer is a native of Austria. He has written a book on diving in Austria together with his wife Barbara Lackner entitled, Die schönsten Tauchgewässer Österreichs, ISBN 3-900323-73-9. For more



fact file



Austria



SOURCE: CIA.GOV WORLD FACTBOOK

History Austria was once the center of power for the large Austro-Hungarian Empire. After its defeat in WWI, it was reduced to a small republic. Austria's status remained unclear for a decade following annexation by Nazi Germany in 1938 and then occupation in 1945 by the victorious Allies. In 1955, a State Treaty was signed which ended the occupation and recognized Austria's independence, forbidding unification with Germany. That same year, a constitutional law declared the country's "perpetual neutrality" terms for Soviet military withdrawal. The meaning of the nation's neutrality was altered after the collapse of the Soviet Union's in 1991 and Austria's entry into the European Union in 1995. In 1999, Austria was a prosperous, democratic country entering the EU Economic and Monetary Union. Austria assumed a nonpermanent seat on the United Nations Security Council for the 2009-10 term, in January 2009. Government: Federal republic. Capital: Vienna

Geography Austria is located in Central Europe, north of Italy and Slovenia. The terrain in the west and the south is mostly mountainous (Alps); along the eastern and northern margins it is mostly flat or slopes gently. Coastline: 0km (Austria is landlocked). Lowest point: Neusiedler See 115m. Highest point: Grossglockner 3,798m. Note: This landlocked country has a strategic location at the crossroads of central Europe with numerous easily traversable Alpine passes and valleys. Austria's major river is the Danube. Because of steep slopes, poor

soils and low temperatures elsewhere, its population is concentrated on eastern lowlands.

Climate Austria's climate is temperate. It is continental and cloudy, enduring cold winters with snow in mountains, and frequent rain and some snow in the lowlands. Summers are moderate with occasional showers. Natural hazards include landslides, avalanches and earthquakes.

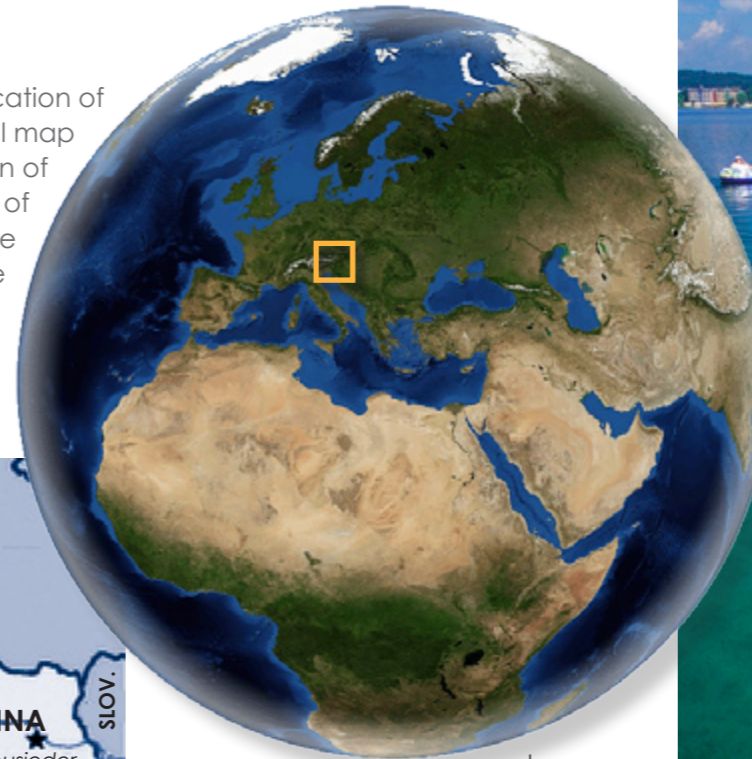
Environmental issues Austria's challenges include some forest degradation due to air and soil pollution; soil pollution due to the use of agricultural chemicals; air pollution due to emissions of coal- and oil-fired industrial plants and power stations as well as trucks moving between northern and southern Europe. The nation is party to agreements including Air Pollution, Air Pollution-Nitrogen Oxides, Air Pollution-Persistent Organic Pollutants, Air Pollution-Sulfur 85, Air Pollution-Sulphur 94, Air Pollution-Volatile Organic Compounds, Antarctic Treaty, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Environmental Modification, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands, Whaling.

Economy Austria has a well-developed market economy and high standard of living. It is closely tied to other EU



economies, particularly Germany's. The nation's economy has developed a big service sector—with strong commercial relations in banking and insurance sectors—a solid industrial sector, and a small, but well-developed agricultural sector. However, the country was affected by the recent global economic downturn and financial crisis, after enjoying several years of healthy foreign demand for Austrian exports and record employment growth. A recession in the country persisted until late 2009, although unemployment has not risen as much as in other European countries since the government subsidized working hour reduction schemes allowing companies to retain their employees. Current challenges include developing knowledge-based

RIGHT: Location of Austria on global map
BELOW: Location of Austria on map of Central Europe
FAR RIGHT: Paddle boaters on Klopeinersee



sectors of the economy, creating greater labor flexibility and participation to offset unemployment growth, dealing with an aging population and an exceedingly low fertility rate. Natural resources: oil, coal, lignite, timber, iron ore, copper, zinc, antimony, magnesite, tungsten, graphite, salt, hydropower. Agriculture: grains, potatoes, sugar beets, wine, fruit; dairy products, cattle, pigs, poultry; lumber. Industries: construction, machinery, vehicles and parts, food, metals, chemicals, lumber and wood processing, paper and paperboard, communications equipment, tourism.

Currency euros (EUR)

Population 7,821,281 (July 2010 est.). Ethnic groups: Austrians 91.1%, former Yugoslavs 4% (includes Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, and Bosniaks), Turks 1.6%, German 0.9%, other groups 2.4% (2001 census). Religions: Roman Catholic 73.6%, Protestant 4.7%, Muslim 4.2%, other groups 3.5% (2001 census). Internet users: 5.937 million (2008)

Language German is the official



language nationwide at 88.6%, Turkish 2.3%, Serbian 2.2%, Croatian (the official language in Burgenland) 1.6%, other languages including Slovene (the official language in Carinthia) and Hungarian 5.3% (2001 census)

Hyperbaric Chambers

Dept. for Thoracic Surgery & Hyperbaric Surgery, County Hospital, University Medical School, Auenbruggerplatz 29, Graz, Austria 8036
Tel. +43 (0) 316 385-2827

Medical University of Vienna, Anesthesia and Intensive Care Medicine, Währinger Grütel 18-20, Vienna Austria 1090
Tel. (+43) 1 40400 1001

Websites

Austria Tourism
www.austria.info

