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The Alps are warmer than for 1,000 years, and mountains are starting to fall down. Ed Douglas visits the resort of Hochfilzen, and finds winter sports adapting to survive

Save the snow

Life isn't easy for Britain's top female biathlete. Emma Fowler may have qualified for this year's Turin Winter Olympics, but the 27-year-old soldier faces familiar hurdles for those involved in fringe sports, like cuts in funding from UK Sport and media indifference. But today Fowler has a different problem. Outside her hotel in Austria's Pillerseetal, the sun is beating down and her competitors in this exacting combination of skiing and shooting are wandering around in T-shirts.

"It's a bit weird," she says. "We're used to wearing thermals and Lycra, but when the temperature hits 10C, you just want to strip off. You can feel the heat blowing across you. But you just have to get on with it. It's the same for all the other athletes."

The tunnels and switchbacks at Hochfilzen are more like a grand prix circuit than a traditional cross country circuit, its facilities upgraded when the village hosted the World Championships last year. The reason for all this investment is obvious from the staggering number of television cameras around the course and the media hutches overlooking the shooting range. Fowler may be unknown in her own country, but biathlon is increasingly popular elsewhere in Europe, especially Germany which has produced many of the sport's recent stars such as Kati Wilhelm and the now retired legend Uschi Diesl. Television audiences for biathlon in Germany top five million.

At least the circuit at Hochfilzen is open in time for the second biathlon World Cup event of the year. Across Europe this season, skiing events have more often been cancelled than not, as organisers contemplate conditions more usually seen in October than December. Casualties include the men's downhill and super combined alpine races planned for Val d'Isère this weekend.

But Hochfilzen wasn't giving up so easily. Race director Franz Berger, an oberfeldwebel in the Austrian Army who once commanded a stable of supply mules at the local barracks, proved as stubborn as his former charges.

Berger spent €70,000 hiring a fleet of 10 lorries, which made 278 trips, trucking in 15,000 cubic metres of last winter's snow from the Grossglockner, at 3,797m Austria's highest peak. Then the snow-cats and skidoos got to work, covering the asphalt trail with 45cm of snow.

The result is spectacular if rather surreal. Lycra-clad athletes, rifles on their backs, skate along an undulating thread of soft white snow through otherwise green countryside. Despite a few bare patches appearing on warmer parts of the circuit during training, Berger pronounced himself satisfied. "The sun is shining," he beamed, "and the race goes ahead. Why not?" His confidence has paid off. That day, the venue for the third round of the World Cup at Osrblie in Slovakia announced that warm temperatures and lack of snow meant they too would be cancelling. Hochfilzen was happy to step in and offer its services as a replacement venue.

Like motor sport, biathlon has its own band of travelling fans, most of them German, who have filled up hotels in Pillerseetal that wouldn't otherwise be open. Early snow at Hochfilzen has become critical. At an altitude of just 1000m, the village has always found snow a fickle friend at this time of year, according to tourist officer Martina Trixl.

"It's not uncommon that we don't have snow at this time of year, but



Hochfilzen in Austria hosts the Biathlon (shooting and skiing) World Cup Photograph: Menzicipics

Our changing world

Glaciers

Experts say 99.99% of the world's glaciers are now in terminal decline after a sharp rise in melting in recent years.

The loss of glaciers in South America and Asia will threaten the water supplies of millions of people within a few decades. Increased winter snowfall meant that a few glaciers, most notably in New Zealand and Norway, got bigger during the 1990s, but a succession of very warm summers since then has reversed the trend.

On average, the world's glaciers and ice caps lost enough water between 1961 and 1990 to raise sea levels by 0.35-0.4mm each year. For 2001-2004, the figure rose to 0.8-1mm each year. Of 150 glaciers that stood in Glacier National Park in the northern US, only 27 remain.

Seasons

This autumn is the warmest ever and temperature increases across Europe since the 1950s have lengthened the annual growing season by almost two weeks, with spring coming earlier and the onset of winter delayed.

Unusually high temperatures from January to April confuse wildlife, meaning flowers blossom, trees bud, and insects appear up to three weeks earlier than expected. This is bad news for birds and other creatures that rely on newly emerged leaves for food.

The Arctic

Polar bears have been added to the list of threatened species as satellite measurements show the area covered by Arctic winter sea ice reached an all-time low in March. Scientists say the decline shows an alarming trend, with recovery of the ice in winter no longer sufficient to compensate for melting in the summer. If the cycle continues, the summer-time Arctic ocean could lose all of its ice earlier than expected, possibly by 2030.



Arctic temperatures are rising twice as fast as the rest of the planet and the region is expected to warm by a further 4C-7C by 2100. The summer and winter ice levels are the lowest since satellite monitoring began in 1979, and almost certainly the lowest since local people began keeping records around 1900.

Oceans

The temperatures at both the surface and at depth are rising, and so is the acidity as more carbon dioxide is dissolved. Marine life from the Antarctic peninsula to North Sea cod are already affected. Plankton numbers dropped 30% in some tropical seas over the last decade as warmer waters prevent nutrient mixing, with potential knock-on effects for the rest of the food chain.

UK waters are increasingly home to exotic species, with an explosion of snake pipefish – a kind of seahorse – in northern waters, a swordfish caught off Northumberland, an octopus found in Hartlepool marina and a Porbeagle shark off Sunderland. Trigger and puffer fish, rainbow wrasse and seahorses have also been recorded. **David Adam**