

PRESS RELEASE

Lech Zürs - a pioneer and model of sustainability

Lech Zürs am Arlberg, 1. July 2026. Developing in harmony with nature has always mattered to Lech Zürs. We launched forward-looking initiatives long before everyone else was talking about sustainability. It began with our biomass heating plants and the significant reduction of CO₂ emissions that goes along with them. The promotion of public transport and electric mobility, such as with the first fully electrified Green Garage in the EU, also contribute to this. Similarly, Skilifte Lech continually set new ecological standards, from high-altitude re-vegetation to highland cattle farming to grazing steep slopes. As a model energy region, the tourism community has also become a pioneer and driving force. This multiplication of positive environmental effects means the ecological balance sheet speaks for itself – Lech Zürs is regarded as a model for sustainable tourism. A number of awards and certifications are the proof of this, as well as of the high quality of life for both locals and visitors. The aim of all these efforts is to preserve this alpine region – for future generations, too.

Cautious and sustainable development in harmony with nature

Cautious development has mattered to Lech Zürs for generations. This means it has retained its village character as a Walser people community and therefore also its unmistakable atmosphere. “Quality over quantity” was popularised here as early as the 1960s and remains a maxim to this day. It was reflected early on in the zoning plan, strict building regulations and the spatial development model. The latter includes the guideline of not offering more than 10,000 guest beds. Maintaining agriculture on as large a scale as possible and keeping the cultivated landscape close to nature are also a part of this. So that “it’s specific character can be experienced by the locals as a home and by guests as a recreational space in as attractive a way as possible.” Those responsible have always been aware that quality tourism relies on an intact living environment and goes hand in hand with comprehensive consideration of the natural conditions, plus caring for and protecting the environment. In line with this principle, the last few decades have seen the launch of many initiatives and projects that have turned Lech Zürs into a pioneer and model for sustainable tourism.

A pioneer in biomass heating plants with almost 100% access

The Lech biomass heating plant celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2019. Guided by the principle “by nature for nature”, it provides cosy warmth with its renewable energy source, local wood chips. Commissioned in 1999, it remains the largest in Vorarlberg to this day, with the state now playing a

pioneering role in terms of biomass. The concept has proven itself and the Lech biomass heating plant has become a successful model. In 2007, a second heating plant was opened in Zug, another in Oberlech in 2009 and yet another in Zürs in 2010. Across Vorarlberg, Zürs was the first village to cover its entire heat and energy supply needs with biomass. Access is currently at 98% in Lech Zürs as a whole, making it the leader among energy suppliers. The Lech heating plant alone replaces 4.5 million litres of heating oil annually and saves 22,000 tonnes of CO₂ emissions (in Zürs around 1.3 million litres and 4,500 tonnes of CO₂). It was awarded the Vorarlberg Wood Construction Prize in 2010, proving that high-quality architecture does not stand in the way of efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

The Oberlech tunnel system - traffic-free holidays thanks to a unique Europe-wide innovation

In winter, the Oberlech plateau is completely free of traffic. This is all thanks to the Oberlech tunnel system, launched in a self-organised initiative in 1995. The construction of the clever underground supply system was completed in several stages and finished in 1997. Its design is unique and not found in any other tourist destination in Europe. While guests arrive from Lech by cable car, their baggage is transported via the tunnel system, as are the district's entire goods supply and waste disposal services. Totalling 1.7km in length and with 10 locks, 8 emergency exits and transshipment halls spanning a total of more than 3,200m², it provides sophisticated and emission-free infrastructure. Goods are of course transported to and from the hotels in electric vehicles. Guests love this little holiday paradise free from exhaust gases and traffic noise.

The ongoing expansion of public transport with the popular Lech Zürs "blue fleet"

Great attention was paid to expanding public transport in Lech Zürs from as early as the 1990s. The Ortsbus Lech bus service has been running since summer 1997 and the "blue fleet" has long become a fixture of the Lech townscape. It started with 4 buses on 2 routes and counted more than a million passengers in the 1999/2000 winter season. The fleet and routes were continuously expanded with the aim of ensuring convenient and efficient mobility for guests and locals without their own vehicles. Whether as a free ski bus in winter or as a hiking bus in summer, whose use is similarly free with the Lech Card, these buses are also extremely popular thanks to customer-friendly timetables. The Lech local bus made a significant contribution to reducing pollutants as a real alternative to using your own car and private transport has been drastically reduced. Even in peak season, Lech Zürs looks just like a traffic-calmed zone.

Exemplary electric mobility - including with Europe's first "Green Garage"

An electric bus has been tested for public transport since the 2019/20 winter season. It's no coincidence that a winter hardiness test of a brand new technical development is being carried out here, in a place

where electric mobility has also taken on a pioneering role. E-bikes and e-scooters were first rented out in the summer of 2011, which made electric mobility a public service. The following year, Lech Zürs opened an e-charging station for the vehicles of “Vlotte” – a Vorarlberg company that promotes and supports the purchase of electric cars. A real milestone was the opening of the BMW i Green Garage in the winter season 2018/19. In cooperation with BMW and Vorarlberger Kraftwerke AG (VKW), the first fully electric green garage for electric vehicles in the EU was created in the municipality of Lech. The renovation of the Rüfigarage in the centre of the village resulted in a state-of-the-art facility with 23 parking spaces and corresponding charging infrastructure, plus “intelligent load management”. An LED display provides information about current space capacities. Payment is easy via the conventional international e-card systems. This facility is not just a fantastic provision for supporters of electric mobility, it's also intended to pave the way for other tourist destinations.

The innovation and vision of Skilifte Lech - from high-altitude re-vegetation to the Schottenhof farm

The innovations and initiatives of the local cable car companies are pioneering in many ways, and have been for decades. Skilifte Lech in particular have been an example to the entire industry under the many years of leadership of Michael Manhart. Even his grandfather – ski lift pioneer Sepp Bildstein, who built Austria's first surface lift in Zürs in 1938 – paid attention to sustainable development in harmony with nature. Manhart also proved to be a visionary, not only in terms of technical innovation in the field of snowmaking and avalanche protection in particular, but also in terms of environmental protection. The international high-altitude environmental conferences he organised and that took place in Lech Zürs from 1978 to 2000, generated valuable scientific principles for the responsible handling of alpine nature. The same applies to the high-altitude renaturation and a targeted eco-audit for ski resorts, both of which have become exemplary worldwide. This is partly due to the fact that the ski runs yield a variety of species in summer. As early as 1997, the quality management of Skilifte Lech was certified in line with ISO 9001, then with ISO 14001 for environmentally conscious and sustainable management, and as per EMAS, the EU eco-audit, in 1999. Local agriculture plays an important role in safeguarding the native high-alpine flora. Since 2008, Skilifte Lech has been breeding Scottish highland cattle to graze steep slopes, preventing snow creep and thus avalanches. The Schottenhof farm (1,760m) in Oberlech, built in 2013, has become a model for high-alpine agriculture. On the one hand, the meat of the highland cattle is marketed to the local catering establishments, on the other, the grazing is part of the landscape maintenance.

The many efforts of Lech municipality and corresponding number of awards

Alongside the ones already mentioned, Lech municipality has implemented many other projects for sustainable management and efficient environmental protection. For more than 30 years, a plant garden has been in operation with special attention paid to the flora typical of the region. More than 2,000 trees are planted annually by the municipality, whereby the seedlings used are not only used for reforestation projects, but also for private gardens and forecourts. A fully biological sewage treatment plant has been in operation since 1976 and all buildings, including the ski huts that are often located far away from the village centre, are all connected to the public sewer network. Last but not least, Lech and its neighbouring municipality of Warth have served as a model energy region since 2010, which resulted in a whole package of measures. This included an LED campaign for tourism businesses in 2012 and the switch to dimmable LED street lighting, which reduced the related annual energy costs to almost a quarter. A model region manager was available locally for consultations on energy, implementation and funding. All the relevant topics were covered – from the heat pump exchange campaign through the installation of thermostatic valves or economical shower heads to intelligent electricity meters and controllers, plus the expansion of solar energy and photovoltaics. The list of eco-friendly initiatives and aspects in Lech Zürs is long, as is the list of the awards it has won for them. These include the “most beautiful municipality of Vorarlberg” 2002 and “most beautiful village in Europe” in 2004 at the Entente Florale. A special, rare award was the rock crystal from the Alpine Protection Association for its “clean landscape” in 2002. The highest recognition is, however, the guests’ love of Lech Zürs as probably the most sustainable tourism community.

More information about Lech Zürs am Arlberg at www.lechzuers.com/en

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