

WHOLESOME AND FLIRTATIOUS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DIRNDL

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BELOW • The author in costume in Zermatt, Switzerland.

THE FIRST TIME I wore a dirndl, I fell in love. It was the 2007 Telluride Bluegrass Festival. He was a gypsy river boy from Montana in ratty cords, a Hawaiian shirt and a beat-up straw hat. I was a big-city refugee in quintessential female alpine attire: the corseted bodice, a lacy blouse showing a pinch of cleavage and full skirt reaching to just above the knee. We spent two days together and then he went home to Missoula. The next time I saw him, a month later, he was moving in with me. This sort of fast-paced romance was not my norm and though I'd like to think it had to do with some irresistible charm I possess, it didn't. It was the dirndl. They seem to have a way with men.

Born in the 19th century among the jagged peaks of Bavaria and Tirol—and the birthplace of alpine skiing—the dirndl was a staple of a working woman's wardrobe. It consisted of a long shirt, under which a woman would cinch a corseted bodice or wrap a piece of cloth around the waist for warmth and “support” (the bodice eventually made its way out from under the shirt). She'd tie an apron around the shirt to ward off stains and dirt, and when she came in from the fields she'd switch out the apron for another one used for housework or festive occasions.

Despite these utilitarian beginnings, the dirndl has become a symbol for all things alpine. Over time, Austrian aristocrats adopted the traditional dress, and it made its way into the mainstream. With the advent of bottled beer in the 19th century and inspired by the waitresses of the period, the German brand St. Pauli Girl began to feature a busty dirndl-clad blonde proffering pints on its label, thus cementing the dress's association with beer. And babes. And skiing.

These days, you'll find dirndl-bedecked lasses scattered about the German-speaking parts of the Alps, from Zermatt to St. Anton; you'll see dirndls on women at Oktoberfest in Munich and on waitresses, desk clerks and ladies going to weddings, baptisms and birthday parties across Austria. In Austria's heartland, they're still both everyday wear and high-class finery, worn on the most upscale occasions—black-tie events, holidays and the Hahnenkamm's Kitz and Glitz. In London, they're worn by runway models; in the United States, they're common attire—though definitely bastardized in the form of a \$10 getup from Target—on drunken college coeds at frat and Halloween parties. They're worn by beer maids in bars and pubs worldwide. There's even dirndl porn.

So what is it about a simple, traditional dress that has inspired such fascination across the globe, from the mountains to bars and sorority parties? A male friend summed it up this way: “The dirndl is wholesome and flirtatious, innocent but playful.



Cute and pretty but utilitarian, and when combined with the association of endlessly free-flowing beer, it's very appealing.”

Yes, the dirndl is all of those things, but I tend to agree more with fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, who once said, “There would be no ugliness in the world if every woman wore a dirndl.” She's right. Spotting a woman in a dirndl—and more so, wearing one—is like seeing a duo riding a tandem bike on a Saturday afternoon: a splash of sunshine on what would otherwise be an ordinary day. And for me, a dirndl is a sign that I've arrived in the Alps, touched down in the homeland of skiing.

Unfortunately, the love that stemmed from that first dirndl didn't last, but my affection for Austrian flair did. For me, that one piece of clothing evokes the essence of the alpine world: apple strudel and *gemuetlichkeit* and smoking guides; learning to ski in Lech when I was 9 with a Schneider-schooled instructor; my first ski-bumming season in Telluride and après at Leimgruber's, where dirndl-clad waitresses served pints of beer; centuries-old mountain hamlets; 5,000-vertical-foot descents; and ski tours that last for days. And a culture—from food and language to a lacy blouse—shaped by a 750-mile-long stretch of mountains strung across Europe, and rooted in skiing. ❧