

Legends and Fairy tales about the Mountains

Mountains, myths and monsters: exploring the folklore of Austria's dramatic regions.

The Austrian Alps are full of legends and mystic tales of witches, devils, vows and the like.

Legends: the folk culture in Austria

The legends are mainly based on oral tradition and are thusly very similar to fairytales. They are short, mythical tales that often sound like true stories because real people, places and events are adapted with fictional elements. The legend's authors are mostly unknown and the subject matters as well as the motives are often taken from other cultures and mixed with local traits of the landscape or the times.

Legends spread like Chinese whispers and can therefore differ from place to place and from narrator to narrator.

Legends around the Kristberg

The long history of the population on and around the Kristberg makes for a lot of good legends for the locals.

During a holiday on the Kristberg you will have the opportunity to experience the thrilling legends and stories from the Montafon. Performed on the open air stage in Silbertal or told by the "flute player from the Kristberg" during a tour through the St. Agatha chapel.

The little church on the Kristberg was built by miners at the beginning of the 15th century and is considered to be the Montafon's oldest church.

Legend has it that exactly where today's chapel is located once was a shaft or a tunnel that one day collapsed and buried some of the miners. In desperation and not knowing what else to do the buried miners started to pray to their patron St. Agatha. They promised to build a chapel in her honour if they escaped the tunnel alive.

The rescue of the miners was successful and they kept their promise and built the St. Agatha Chapel exactly where they got out of the tunnel.

Which brings us to the dwarfs. They are said to play mischievous pranks on unsuspecting hikers and even lead them down the wrong path, or so it is said. Supposedly, the Unterberg is also home to the so-called "wild women", who are known to seduce farmers, and to giants who hurl rocks down onto the Salzburg plain. As you might guess, the Untersberg is one of the most fabled mountains in the German-speaking world – with many of these traditions going all the way back to Celtic times. Thanks to the "German Legends" collected by the Brothers Grimm, many of these tales ultimately found their way into children's bedrooms around the world. One of the most famous of these involves the Emperor Charlemagne. It claims that Charlemagne, together with

his most loyal knights and a posse of dwarfs, took refuge in the heart of the Untersberg. It is there that he sleeps in a subterranean throne room, his beard now grown so long it is wrapped three times around the marble table. When he reawakens, he will fight mankind's final battle – Good versus Evil.

Every culture has its own myths and legends that are spread around by locals. From rumors of murder to the true story behind Vienna's original coffee houses, here are a few of Austria's favorite fables.

The First Coffee House

Vienna's love affair with coffee is well known, with its coveted coffee houses being at the forefront of the city's culture. The drink even extends into Austrian folklore.

The story goes that during the Turkish siege of Vienna in the 1600s, a Polish man called Kolschitzky, who spoke excellent Turkish, strategically mingled with the Ottomans, taking them up on their numerous invitations of coffee. At this time, Vienna remained largely unacquainted with the caffeinated drink that it has become so synonymous with. Kolschitzky, who had developed a taste for coffee after these meetings, passed on his notes about the Ottomans to the Polish King, who organized a "lightning Calvary strike" on them. During this time, the Turkish food stores were raided and Kolschitzky searched for the sacks of brown beans that he knew to contain the key ingredient to his new drink. He kept the secret of brewing to himself and was later rewarded with a license to open his own "coffee cupboard"—the very first coffee house.

King Laurin's rose garden

According to the legend from **Eggental**, the **dwarf king Laurin** had a hard-working people, mountains full of precious ore and a beautiful rose garden of which he was very proud. He lacked only one thing: a wife. When the king on the Etsch was looking for a groom for his daughter Similde, Laurin wanted to take part in the knight tournament organised in her honour. However, all noblemen of the environs were invited, excepting King Laurin. Enraged, he went anyway – but by means of a **magic hat** as an invisible guest.

As the dwarf king saw Similde, he immediately fell in love with her. Without further ado, he abducted her. Together with some knights, Prince Dietrich of Bern set out to save the princess. With a **magic belt** that made him as strong as twelve men, King Laurin awaited them in his rose garden. But his was still not strong enough to beat Dietrich of Bern, and so he once again used the magic hat. However, the knights saw where Laurin was jumping around by the **movements of the roses**. So, they finally succeeded in capturing the dwarf king.

Laurin felt betrayed by his rose garden, and so **he cursed it**: No one should ever see it again – neither by day nor by night. But he had forgotten about **twilight** in his curse. This is why King Laurin's rose garden can always blossom anew at sunrise and sunset – in the form of the **alpenglow**, which is also called "**Enrosadira**" in this country.

The Water Maidens

Throughout the Alps, it is whispered that there lives hidden clans of water nymphs in rivers, ponds and mountain lakes in the most remote corners of the alps.

These water nymphs take the appearance of beautiful young women and hide their true nature. Some are half snake, others have the hooves of a horse, the legs of a goat or wrinkled legs covered in moss, some even have skin made of bark. Long red hair and an enchanting nature help the maidens bewitch those who stray into their territory.

Centuries ago in Val Sassina, lived a clan of water maiden who protected the crops in the area from harm. One day, a young farmer heard noises coming from his

basement, and found one of these maiden stealing cheese from his shepherds. Her beguiling beauty captivated him, and he fell instantly in love.

Following her into the woods, the farmer confronted her, and she agreed to marry him if he promised not to tell anyone of her true nature.

The couple lived happily for many years and had a child together, but after a while, the farmer began to grow tired of their union. One night after an argument, he revealed her true nature to their friends. Having witnessed her promise being broken, the water maiden cursed her husband and child “neither you nor your heirs will ever have children, because they will all be born with goat hooves”.

As the son grew up, he fell in love with and married a kind woman. When his wife pleaded for children, the man grew full of despair and threw himself off a cliff in order to break the wretched curse.

It is said that each summer, wailing can be heard coming from where the earth swallowed up this young man as his restless spirit lives on, unable to find peace.

The Devil's Bridge

Beware crossing the Devil's Bridge!

Deep in the Swiss Canton of Uri, is the Schöllenen Gorge, a steep and dangerous cleft, impossible to cross. Many years ago, the locals needed to access the St Gottard Pass across the sheer granite walls of the gorge.

In order to build a bridge across this difficult ravine, the locals were forced to enlist the help of none other than the devil himself, so challenging was the task.

And so the bridge was built. When it came time for the devil's payment, Satan demanded the soul of the first living creature to walk across the newly built bridge.

In an attempt to spare a life, the villagers sent first a goat across to be taken. Enraged by this treacherous trick, Satan lifted an immense rock to destroy his creation. However, when the devil paused for a moment, one local woman snuck out across the bridge and marked it with a cross, forcing the Devil to flee.

You can still see the Devil's stone where it was abandoned in fear if you dare to cross the Devil's Bridge!

The Tatzelwurm Monster

Some say it's part snake, part cat, some say it's a dragon-like serpent. What most can agree upon, is that the Tatzelwurm is a terrifying creature that lives beneath the ground in the Eastern Alps.

Be careful not to disturb its burrow, as one drop of its blood can kill.

One day back in the 1700s, Hans Fuchs was walking in the mountains, when he was startled by two creatures. Fuch rushed back to his family to tell of a hideous creature with a seven foot long body of a serpent, clawed feet and the head of a cat before dying promptly of a heart attack from fear.

There have been many sightings of this strange and elusive creature, so when you're travelling through the Alps, watch out for darkened caves and places where creatures could lurk.

The bear and the missionary (St Gallen)

Numerous Swiss legends are centred around bears, recalling a time when these ursine creatures once roamed the land. In the 7th century, the Irish missionary Gall is said to have encountered a bear while out one night. The rest of the story differs according to the version told. One version says that the holy man gave the hungry bear some bread. The bear was so grateful that he helped Gall build a hut that eventually became the monastery at St Gallen. In another version, Gall feeds the bear to thank it for helping him collect firewood, but makes it promise not to come back. Whichever story we take, the bear remains an important symbol for St Gallen, adorning the city's coat of arms.



Der Bär und der Missionar - The bear and the missionary

The Matterhorn (Valais)

Wherever there are mountains, there must be giants. Gargantua, a giant immortalised by Rabelais, is said to have left his mark on plenty of landscapes as he stomped across the country. There is a story, for example, that the hill on which Monthey (Valais) now stands is a sack of earth the giant was carrying and accidentally dropped. He was accompanied in his antics by another giant, Cervin, who was so heavy he caused a mountain to collapse, leaving only the space between his legs. This triangular peak, soaring to an altitude of 4,478 metres, is now known as the Matterhorn (or Cervin, in French) and is one of the most photographed scenes of Switzerland.

