

# Israeli snow brings early winter to Austrian ski resort



by Luc Andre

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SANKT LEONHARD IM PITZTAL, Austria (AFP) – High in the Alps an Austrian ski resort has found an unlikely source of early season snow: Israel.

The sun-baked Mediterranean country might not appear on many lists of top cold-weather destinations, but an Israeli engineering firm has come up with a machine capable of generating snow in all weathers.

Six times as powerful as a traditional snow cannon, the All Weather Snowmaker, developed by IDE Technologies, produces flakes regardless of temperature, humidity and wind -- conditions which affect cannons' performance.

On Austria's Pitztal glacier, 2,800 metres (9,200 feet) above sea level, an oversized grey hut houses a tangle of pipes and huge white vats that looks for all the world like a small refinery.

"But it's a snow refinery," chuckles Willi Krueger, marketing chief of the Pitztal ski area in Austria's western Tyrol region.

"We just want to guarantee snow at the end of summer. For several years now we haven't had the right climate conditions. With this fake snow, natural snow has more grip."

The technology behind the machine was originally developed to desalinate sea water, and it took 15 years for someone to think of using it to make snow.

A refined version was being used to cool mines in South Africa when a Russian IDE engineer came up with the idea.

"During a mission in South Africa in 2005, he suddenly exclaimed: 'It's snow, I can ski on it!'," IDE spokesman Moshe Tessel said.

"We had been using this technology for about 15 years but since we're not really familiar with skiing in Israel, it never occurred to us."

The Pitztal Snowmaker started work in late August, and added a 40 to 50-centimetre (15.5 to 19.5-inch) layer of powder near the bottom of the glacier to prepare the slopes before they opened in mid-September.

The 2.5 million-euro (3.7 million-dollar) investment allowed Pitztal to increase its ski area threefold in time for the start of the season, and several World Cup ski teams invited to test the snow were impressed.

But ski fans hoping to whizz down the slopes all year round are in for disappointment -- Krueger said

opening in the summer was "out of the question".

And the Snowmaker will not replace ordinary snow cannons: its job is to prepare slopes before the start of the season, while cannons will be responsible for their regular upkeep.

IDE has also installed a Snowmaker in the Swiss resort of Zermatt, and the technology is attracting a lot of attention.

"Fifty resorts from around the world have come to see the cannon in Pitztal: from Norway, from the United States, representatives from the organising committee of the 2010 Olympic Games in Sochi, and even from Morocco," Felix Viehauser, IDE's representative in Europe, said.

One country that will not be buying a Snowmaker soon is Israel, as its only ski resort, on Mount Hermon in the Golan Heights, lacks the necessary water supply, according to Tessel.

In Pitztal, supply is guaranteed by two reservoirs holding 49,000 cubic metres (1.73 million cubic feet) of water, mostly melted snow.

The Snowmaker's creators insist their snowflakes could even save glaciers, but glacier expert Heinz Slupetzky said their effect would be limited.

"We would have to use millions of cubic metres of artificial snow, just to stop the glaciers from retreating," he said, and "that would entail enormous energy costs."

According to Krueger, the Snowmaker pumps out snowflakes more efficiently than any other cannon and keeps working whatever the weather.

But there is a cost: the Snowmaker uses as much power in a single day as a whole family does in a year.