

Museum goes to great lengths to preserve Ötzi the Iceman

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Image 1. This is what Ötzi would have looked like when he was alive 5,300 years ago. Ötzi is the name given to the frozen mummy of a man from around 3300 B.C. found by two German tourists in 1991 in the Schnastal glacier in the Oztal Alps. Photo by Patrick Landmann/Getty Images

Oliver Peschel has a very unusual patient. He has 61 tattoos. He holds his left arm funny and insists on lots of air conditioning.

Also, he's been dead for about 5,300 years.

So why the need for a few checkups a month? Because Ötzi the Iceman, pronounced OOT-zie, as he's been nicknamed, must be kept in good shape. "For science," Peschel explains.

Ötzi The Iceman

There have already been an astounding number of discoveries made about Ötzi. Today, the Iceman is famous. But he could never have predicted his future fame the day he was killed in the Alps, near the current border between Italy and Austria. After being shot in the back by an arrow, Ötzi

was naturally mummified. He was preserved in a glacier for thousands of years until he was found by hikers in 1991.

Since then, studies of Ötzi have helped scientists learn a lot about him. They know what he ate for his last meal, which turned out to be cooked grain and goat bacon. They know that he wore a warm outfit with a fur hat. They also know what health problems bugged him. He suffered from bad teeth, joint pain and more.

Decades of technological advances continue to reveal details. Peschel says he expects that trend to continue.

"We will find things we're not even dreaming about now," he said.

On Display

So it's Peschel's job to make sure the Iceman stays in good shape. The scientist keeps Ötzi looking like he just came out of his glacier. When he's not getting a checkup, the Iceman is on display at the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology in Bolzano, Italy.

Peschel has a routine for his checkups. The first thing he does is take a peek at Ötzi through the window museum visitors use. When someone stands on the viewing platform, lights shine on super skinny, brownish Ötzi. He's lying faceup on a large plate, his left arm bent across his body. The walls around him are made of blocks of ice, kind of like an igloo. And Ötzi himself is covered in a thin layer of ice.



Most visitors just marvel at Ötzi's sunken figure. But Peschel focuses on that ice layer. Although Ötzi is kept in climate-controlled conditions, he has trouble keeping his cool. The plate is connected to a scale, which shows that Ötzi loses a small amount of water weight each day. The right hand sheds ice most rapidly. On a recent visit, Peschel points out that the pinkie has no ice at all.

Re-Icing A Glacier Mummy

That means it's time for Peschel to do a "humidification process." This is a 15- to 30-minute shower than Ötzi takes every eight weeks. Ötzi is moved into another freezing room behind the museum walls.

Then, Peschel, dressed in surgeon's clothes, uses a special water gun to get Ötzi icy in all the right spots.

Ötzi's treatment has been relatively consistent since he arrived in Bolzano 20 years ago. That may change soon, though. Plans are being developed to create a larger museum. To prepare for the move, Peschel and the rest of the technical staff have started studying other ways to preserve him.

One option is to consider suspending Ötzi in a giant block of ice. He'd still be visible, but access to scientists would be limited. Another idea is switching from an oxygen atmosphere to a nitrogen one. That would be less friendly to bacteria. A third option is to put Ötzi in a vacuum-sealed package like a steak. "But we don't want to eat Ötzi," Peschel says.

Unique Specimen

"No one has experience with these methods. So we can't ask anyone," says Peschel. Ötzi is unique. Peschel says that other bodies have been discovered in melting glaciers, but what typically happens is they drift to the bottom and are destroyed.

"The most interesting thing about Ötzi is that he's there," Peschel adds. And hopefully, he'll stick around for a while longer.

Quiz

1 Read the paragraph from the section "Ötzi The Iceman."

There have already been an astounding number of discoveries made about Ötzi. Today, the Iceman is famous. But he could never have predicted his future fame the day he was killed in the Alps, near the current border between Italy and Austria. After being shot in the back by an arrow, Ötzi was naturally mummified. He was preserved in a glacier for thousands of years until he was found by hikers in 1991.

Which sentence from the paragraph BEST supports the idea that scientists have learned details about Ötzi because his body is in good condition?

- (A) There have already been an astounding number of discoveries made about Ötzi.
- (B) But he could never have predicted his future fame the day he was killed in the Alps, near the current border between Italy and Austria.
- (C) After being shot in the back by an arrow, Ötzi was naturally mummified.
- (D) He was preserved in a glacier for thousands of years until he was found by hikers in 1991.

2 Read the section "On Display."

Which sentence from the section shows that without special care, Ötzi would not remain well-preserved?

- (A) The scientist keeps Ötzi looking like he just came out of his glacier.
- (B) When he's not getting a checkup, the Iceman is on display at the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology in Bolzano, Italy.
- (C) The walls around him are made of blocks of ice, kind of like an igloo.
- (D) The plate is connected to a scale, which shows that Ötzi loses a small amount of water weight each day.

3 One MAIN idea of the article is that scientists are studying Ötzi the Iceman.

What is another MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) Ötzi has given scientists special opportunities to learn about a 5,300-year-old body.
- (B) Scientists now know about the ancient human diet because they discovered what Ötzi ate as his last meal.
- (C) Ötzi is the only body found in a glacier to be displayed in a museum.
- (D) Scientists need to find a better way to preserve Ötzi so they can continue studying the 5,300-year-old body.

4 Read the summary of the MAIN ideas of the article below.

The body of a man who died 5,300 years ago was found preserved in a glacier in 1991. Scientists are studying the body, which was given the name Ötzi and is on display in a museum.

Which answer choice would complete the summary?

- (A) Ötzi is also called the Iceman because he must be kept frozen.
- (B) Scientists believe that Ötzi was killed by being shot in the back with an arrow.
- (C) Keeping Ötzi frozen preserves his body for future research.
- (D) Scientists have discovered the health problems that Ötzi suffered from before he died.