

# Snow business

Abigail Butcher finds out what's new in winter sports destinations around the world



MAP: BEK GRUDDACE

**S**kiers and snowboarders are fit, active people increasingly looking for adventure. According to research released in 2016 by the Ski Club of Great Britain, 80% of people who take a winter sports holiday participate in other sports all year round — with cycling at the top of the alternate list. This reflects the general mood in public health and activity levels and explains why mountain holidays are no longer just about skiing — now skiers and snowboarders want to try everything from snowshoeing and ski touring to fat biking, yoga and walking. People go skiing for the scenery, the social element and the activity — but acknowledge it's expensive, hence a marked trend towards smaller, lesser-known resorts and independent travel making the most of ever-increasing no-frills airline options.

Skiing is traditionally a family and friends activity, but increasingly skiers are going it alone — joining courses, ski touring weeks or single holidays which more tour operators are beginning to offer, such as single-parent family options from Esprit.

Following three seasons of poor snow in Europe, especially early in the season, skiers booking ahead for next winter are looking at high resorts well-known to have long, reliable seasons, particularly at Christmas.

Popular early-season resorts include Tignes and Val Thorens in France, Ischgl and Obergurgl in Austria and Cervinia in Italy. Switzerland has Zermatt and Saas-Fee to offer, but the whole country has seen a decline in popularity due to plunging exchange rates.

Finally, trips using no-frills airlines are becoming ever more attractive, with two notable new services — Powdair flying to Sion in Switzerland's Valais region from Edinburgh, Manchester, Bristol, Southampton, London Southend and London Luton, as well as Duerne (Antwerp) and Hamburg. It's not just European destinations which are seeing the benefit. Norwegian has now launched a direct flight to Denver, breaking the monopoly to the city that had long been held by British Airways. >

## Winter sports

| Top ski destinations |

# Europe

### **PARADISKI (LES ARCS, PEISEY-VALLANDRY AND LA PLAGNE)**

This ski area has almost 265 miles of pistes to suit all abilities across its three resorts, with much of the accommodation ski-in, ski-out or ski-to-door. It's immensely popular with families.

### **ESPACE KILLY (VAL D'ISÈRE, TIGNES)**

High and snow-sure, this is a favourite among British skiers, not least for its lively nightlife, extensive and challenging skiing (nearly 200 miles of slopes) and fabulous off-piste. Val d'Isère begins a £177m redevelopment of the town centre this year.

### **THREE VALLEYS (COURCHEVEL, MERIBEL, VAL THORENS)**

As well as these three big names, there are a number of smaller, satellite villages in the vast Three Valleys ski area, which has around 375 miles of pistes and accommodation for every budget.

### **MILKY WAY (SESTRIÈRE, SAUZE D'OULX, MONTGENÈVRE)**

This 250-mile family-friendly ski area straddling the French and Italian border is made up of small, traditional resorts that regularly receive fabulous snow.



### **Dolomites (Cortina D'Ampezzo, Val Gardena, Alta Badia and Arabba)**

Stunning scenery, great food and low prices are the big draw to this part of Italy; there are 34 ski resorts (many not linked) with artificial snow machines keeping pistes open.



# Rest of the world

### **WHISTLER, CANADA**

The largest ski area in North America, there are 8,171 acres of terrain to suit every type of skier, it's more like an Alpine resort than any other in Canada.

### **BRECKENRIDGE, COLORADO**

One of America's most-popular ski and snowboarding centres, with a laid-back vibe and fabulous apres-ski, this high, varied mountain offers slopes for all abilities spread across over 3,308 acres. Its high altitude and chilly climate have led to its nickname: Breckenfridge.

### **SUN PEAKS, CANADA**

The second-biggest ski area in Canada, car-free Sun Peaks receives an average of nearly 20ft of dry, light snow over its 4,270 acres of terrain, with skiing for everyone.

### **BANFF, CANADA**

This town is a popular base for skiers taking in Lake Louise, Sunshine Village and Norquay, which are all covered by a three-area pass. ➤

From top: Alta Badia, Dolomites; Lake Louise, Alberta



| Top trends |

# Europe

## ADVENTURE

Winter mountain holidays are no longer just about skiing and snowboarding. Ski touring (skiing uphill with synthetic 'skins' attached to the base of the ski) has exploded in recent years, with most ski resorts now offering specially designed routes for uphill skiers — also known as 'skinning'. Ski touring off-piste is also growing, with many courses on offer, notably those from Mountain Tracks which was last year bought by the Ski Club of Great Britain. Fat biking — mountain biking on fat tyres — is booming in popularity, as is racing of all types. Popular races include the legendary Inferno ski race in Mürren (which this winter celebrates its 75-year anniversary), the skiing equivalent of the Colour Run which takes place in Les Gets and the Three Valleys Enduro race are all popular.



From top: Ski touring in Brooks Range, Alaska; husky sledding

## HOLISTIC SKIING

The Ski Club of Great Britain's 2016 research pointed to skiers' growing desire to have health and spa facilities with their holiday accommodation, and last season saw a push towards more holistic experiences in the Alps, incorporating skiing into health and fitness retreats. Chalet Rosière, the world's first wellbeing chalet, opened in La Rosière, HIP Chalets started offering mindful skiing weeks; Element Concept in Verbier has been running women's weeks that incorporate life coaching, yoga and nutrition sessions; Mountain Therapy offers weeks of skiing, yoga and nutrition in Les Arcs; and Alikats in Morzine combines skiing with yoga, pilates and trail running.

## JOINING SKI AREAS AND SKI PASSES

Last winter, a final link in the lift system of the Arlberg was joined to form Austria's largest ski area — St Christoph, St Anton, Lech, Zurs and Warth-Schrocken — making up 190 miles of pistes, on a par with the Espace Killy (Val d'Isère-Tignes). The project to link Andermatt and Sedrun in Switzerland comes to fruition this winter with the installation of a gondola and chairlift to create the largest skiing destination in central Switzerland. This year, a new Magic Pass has gone on sale in Switzerland offering access to a host of smaller resorts. In France, the Eskimo Pass in the Haute Maurienne Valley is gaining publicity for its value offering.

## AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES

"More customers are looking for smaller, independent chalet operators with a growing interest in 'spending local' with their travel money," says Richard Sinclair of Sno. But that doesn't mean big resorts will lose out. Val Thorens now offers dinners in a mountain-top yurt with torchlit descent or a shepherd's hut beside Chez Pépé Nicolas restaurant on the road to Les Menuires. ▶



# Rest of the world

## NORTH AMERICA

An abundance of snow, a variety of winter activities, high service levels, more direct flights and good-quality accommodation have led to an increase in British skiers heading to the US and Canada for their ski holidays. Last winter, Crystal Ski Holidays added Sun Peaks in British Columbia to its programme and is this winter reintroducing Lake Tahoe, on the California-Nevada border, after a four-year hiatus. Spokesman Marion Telsnig says: "Canadian resorts have, in particular, had a substantial growth last season. Early booking is vital because there are huge discounts on flights, accommodation and lift passes and more and more customers are getting the best price by booking over the summer."

The new Norwegian flight to Denver will likely add to an increase in the number of Brits heading to Colorado's ski resorts this winter.

## BIGGER IS BETTER

The amalgamation of ski passes is a big trend that shows no sign of abating. The Epic Pass (£678 for adults) from Vail Resorts now includes unlimited skiing in Perisher (Australia), Whistler (Canada), Park City (Idaho), Vail, Breckenridge, Beaver Creek and Keystone (Colorado), Heavenly and Northstar (California), among others, as well as access to 30 resorts across Austria, Switzerland, Italy and France. The Mountain Collective is hot on its heels, offering two days' skiing in 16 resorts across the world that include Aspen-Snowmass (Colorado), Jackson Hole (Wyoming), The Remarkables and Coronet Peak (New Zealand), Thredbo (Australia) and Lake Louise in Canada — up 32 days — for a killer early price of £354. These are mainly aimed at US skiers but offer value to the adventurous Brit.

## CHINA

The ski and wintersports market in China has been rapidly expanding largely due to the forthcoming 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. There's an increase in the number of Chinese skiers coming to Europe and the ski offering available in China. The French resort of Val Thorens, for example, now allocates 20% of its overall marketing budget to China and will from this autumn offer a separate website in Mandarin. Tourism Switzerland and France Montagnes sent groups of ski instructors to teach in China and last winter Warren Smith opened a branch of his ski academy in Wanlong, where he's been operating one-off coaching weeks for several years. Last winter, Club Med opened its second ski hotel in China, in the resort of Beidau, following the success of its first hotel in Yabuli. ►



## OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Adventure-hungry skiers and snowboarders are now looking further afield to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Albania and Lebanon. Adventurers are seeking ski touring/split-boarding, heli-skiing and cat-skiing trips and staying in yurts or family homes for a more cultural experience. South Korea hosts the Winter Olympics in February, with accommodation offered in local temples.

From top: heli skiers, British Columbia, Canada; Buddhist temple in South Korea



# Wild white west

Abigail Butcher takes a Colorado road trip — with plenty of skiing thrown in

“Look up there, you can still see bullet holes in the ceiling,” said our guide, Ashley Bowling. “It was perfectly acceptable to ride your horse into the lobby here.”

We’re in the New Sheridan Hotel, Telluride, part-way through a walking tour that takes in some of the greatest historical sites of the former mining town Colorado, famed for its brush with one of the world’s most famous outlaws. In 1889, Butch Cassidy staged his first bank robbery in this town at 129 W Colorado Avenue, the site of San Miguel Valley Bank, from which he and three associates made away with \$24,580.

The skiing in this now well-heeled town in the San Juan Mountains isn’t too bad either; no wonder celebrities including Tom Cruise, Jerry Seinfeld and Oprah Winfrey own houses here. Although it’s known for its extremes, Telluride has an extensive selection of green and blue runs, along with three terrain parks and plenty of choice places to fuel up.

My friend and I embarked on a road trip across Colorado, ticking off Wild West ski resorts that have been on our bucket lists for years.

From Denver, we drove four hours south-west to the cult resort Crested Butte (2,860m). Though best known for its extreme terrain — hosting a qualifier event for the Freeride World Tour for many years — this place

has a unique selling point in that from the top of every lift is a blue run, so families and friends of different abilities can ski together. The snow is incredible — Colorado enjoys around 300 sunny days a year, with light, dry powder falling at night (ski resort Steamboat has trademarked the term ‘Champagne Powder’ to describe its snow).

We carried on to Silverton — a wild, experts-only ski area with a yurt for a ‘base lodge’, one rickety old lift and powder galore — followed by Telluride, then on to Aspen-Snowmass. Aspen has a wide variety of runs over its four separate mountains — Aspen Highlands, Buttermilk, Snowmass and Aspen Mountain or ‘Ajax’ to the locals. Don’t be fooled by its glitzy reputation: it’s packed with serious athletes; varied, extensive skiing and is a well-preserved historic silver-mining town with a world-class food scene.

We finished with 24 hours in Denver, driving 1,200 miles over 10 days with relative ease. Although it would’ve been possible to fly between the resorts, these historical Wild West towns, brimming with character, are not to be missed.



Clockwise: Aspen slopes; family on a ski lift; Telluride; kids at Umbrella bar; Crested Butte



IMAGE GETTY IMAGES/SOUTH KOREA RYAN BOWNE/COURTESY OF VISIT TELLURIDE



## EUROPE FOR FAMILIES

To ski as a family is a wonderful, fulfilling experience — and one that doesn’t have to break the bank. All the dry and indoor snow slopes in the UK now offer private lessons where families can learn to ski or snowboard together, and get the basic skills they need in place before heading out to the mountains — many having linked with ski areas in the Alps, for example Hemel Hempstead with the Valais in Switzerland, to offer good-value ‘club’ type holidays for regulars.

Neil Lodge, Inghams product manager for Austria says: “There are families who want to spend quality time together, while others want to ensure their children are learning in a safe lesson environment, while the adults get some time together.”

Obergurgl in Austria is very popular among families, given its high altitude, short airport transfer and ski to/close to door in most hotels, which offer high-standard hospitality with family rooms.

“There’s also a great local ski school in Obergurgl. Generally, the resort has everything it needs to make it very easy for families to enjoy,” he explains. “In other resorts, hotels which have a swimming pool are often very popular.”

There’s a big shift among the family market towards the Easter holidays instead of February half-term. And with uncertain exchange rates leading to increasingly squeezed wallets, families and beginners are seeking out smaller,

less well-known resorts that offer better value for money.

Action Outdoors, which partners the UCPA (a French non-profit organisation that provides excellent-value accommodation for younger people, families and individuals up to the age of 55) recently expanded its Easter family programme from one week to three — Les Contamines on 24 March, Serre Chevalier on 31 March and La Plagne on 7 April. “Since we introduced our family ski programme at the UCPA centres three years ago, we’ve seen a real growth in interest for Easter weeks,” says Action Outdoors managing director Tina Gale. “Two of our family resorts — Les Contamines and Serre Chevalier — might not be that well known to the UK market, but they’re more traditional and offer great value for money.”

Because this winter Christmas and New Year fall on a Monday and Sunday, some tour operators are offering shorter breaks — Esprit and Ski Total, for example, are selling five-day holidays this winter that are proving popular with families.

“This December, all holidays to Austria and France will depart on Tuesdays. As a result, the departure on Tuesday 2 January is for five nights, to Sunday 7 January,” says Hotelplan head of marketing Louise Newton. She added: “Despite the poor recent snow record, there’s also been a surge of interest in New Year bookings, showing that people believe the Alps are a fabulous place to spend the holidays.” ▶