

10 top ski resorts

The Guardian, Saturday 20 October 2007

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)



Best for food ... Courmayeur, Italy. Photograph: Alamy

Best for something different - Gulmarg, Kashmir, India

In years past, a ski trip to India's Kashmir province would have had "niche" written all over it, but with locations such as Japan, Russia and New Zealand having become real options for adventurous skiers and snowboarders, India isn't as far-fetched as it first appears.

Gulmarg, an old Raj hill station, has reinvented itself as a ski resort, boasting the highest gondola on earth and guaranteed Himalayan snow. Expect ludicrously empty slopes (it was estimated that fewer than 500 people visited last year), epic scenery and unrivalled snow quality at 4,000m.

• Wild Frontiers Adventure Travel (020-7736 3968, wildfrontiers.co.uk) run 11-day trips from £1,545pp inc half-board accommodation, internal flights and transfers, ski guides and liftpass.

Best for beginners - Soldeu, Andorra

Soldeu Ski School in the Pyrenees is the best in the world for British beginners. The vast majority of the teachers are native English speakers, they keep the class sizes smaller than in the Alps yet charge roughly €30 less for a week's lessons.

And at 2,250m, the Espiolets nursery slopes are a lot higher than most and give you a better chance of learning on decent snow - and there's plenty of room. They are reached by a gondola (or "bubble") and once there, moving carpets take you up the gentle hill. Both are easy lifts to ride, so you don't have to cope with trickier drag or chair lifts until you're more comfortable on skis or a snowboard. And at that stage, Soldeu has loads of good blue runs to progress on to.

Best for all-round activities - Zell am See, Austria

If you are not planning to ski the whole time, or at all, it's best to pick a resort based around a reasonably sized valley town. Zell am See has a lovely town centre on the edge of the frozen lake. It is a year-round holiday destination that doesn't rely entirely on skiers; in fact, hiking is its chief activity and marked paths are kept open through the winter, even at high altitudes, with the 2,000m Schmittenhöhe mountain having the best views.

The views are even better if you take off from there attached to a paraglider. Or you can head below sea level - into a 40km limestone cave system. There is of course skating on the lake, along with cross-country skiing, ice sailing and snowkiting (kitesurfing on snow). You can go horseriding, ice driving, tobogganing and even try the rifle range, before relaxing in the spa centre.

· Erna Low (0845 863 0525, ernalow.co.uk) has one-bedroom apartments for four people from a total of £455, inc Eurotunnel crossing. For details on activities: europasportregion.info.

Best for food - Courmayeur, Italy

This is a ski resort so well-endowed with restaurants that you could line-up for the first cable car, get up the mountain for breakfast and then crawl from restaurant to hut to snack bar all day, skiing perhaps 500 yards in total.

Highlights include the frogs' legs, polenta and famous pizzas at **Christiana**; the suckling pig and pasta at **Maison Vieille**; and the grappa and salamis at **Courba Dzeleuna**.

At night **Pierre Alexis** offers twists on Valdostan regional specialities; **La Piazzetta** specialises in seafood; and in neighbouring Entrèves, **Maison de Filippo** serves a 36-course blow-out.

· Momentum Ski (020-7371 9111, momentumski.co.uk) has a week's B&B at the three-star **Bouton d'Or** from £495pp inc flights and car hire.

Best for couples - St-Marcel-de-Belleville, France

La Bouitte is a cosy little hotel in the lovely little village of St Marcel, with very little to do in the evening. Looking like a converted cowshed (it was in fact constructed from reclaimed wood to look like that), it has only five bedrooms, but its restaurant has one Michelin star. Situated on the piste above the village, you can easily access the vast skiing kilometres of the Trois Vallées.

But in the evening you return to this idyllic spot, relax together in the Jacuzzi or steam room, eat one of the palette-blowing meals, have a post-prandial stroll around the hamlet, then, hmmm, it's only 10pm. All that's left is the call of the warm wood and woollen bedcovers in your room.

· Kaluma Ski (0870 442 8044, kalumatravel.co.uk) has a week's B&B from £847pp inc flights and transfers.

Best for snowboarding - Morzine, France

It's only an hour from Geneva, with a mercifully short airport transfer; it has links to the

enormous Portes Du Soleil region (which connects the town to Avoriaz, Chatel and Les Gets); plus there are two world-class funparks, a fairly decent halfpipe, the new Stash run, and a town choc-full of like-minded riders looking to have as much fun off the hill too.

- The Lodge Morzine (0033 450 790333, thelodgemorzine.com) has four-person, self-catered apartments from a total of €890 per week. EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies to Geneva.

Best for early snow - Whistler, Canada

On October 5, Whistler scored its first powder day, leading some to tip the coming winter season as being another La Niña year like the fabled snow-heavy winter of 1999/2000.

Either way, expect the resort to be fully open on November 22 although if the snow keeps on falling it may be even earlier. However, with no packages starting until December, you'll have to DIY it if you want to go early.

- Whistler/Blackcomb tourist board (001 800 4422 1122, whistlerblackcomb.com) has accommodation from C\$80pp, per night, a saving of 33% for early season visitors. Zoom Air (0870 240 0055, flyzoom.com) flies Gatwick-Vancouver for £327 rtn inc tax on November 3-10.

Best for off-piste - Niseko, Japan

It's never possible to guarantee powder snow, but this is as close as you can get. Add to these unique conditions a brilliant resort with several funparks and features for all progressive riders and skiers to enjoy, as well as the most incredible, and often bizarre, nightlife, and the makings of an amazing holiday are all there.

- Crystal Ski (0870 160 4090, crystalski.co.uk) has seven nights' B&B from £1,182 inc flights.

Best for intermediates - Engelberg, Switzerland

Although hugely popular among Swiss skiers, Engelberg has a relatively low profile among us Brits. Why this should be is something of a mystery. The mountain with its mix of easily accessed off-piste riding and fantastic forested trails is intermediate heaven, and the town, with its historic ambience and relentlessly friendly, youthful après scene, is a perfect hidden gem. It is surely only a matter of time before it challenges the bigger and better known Swiss resorts.

- Made to Measure (01243 533333, mtmhols.co.uk) has seven nights' half-board from £669pp inc flights and transfers.

Best for families - Flaine, France

Bauhaus architect Marcel Breuer's design for the resort was based on "function and integration", and one of the elements of that design was to make a safe environment for children. With cars stopped at the edge of the village, older kids can run about the central square, dotted with art installations, nip off to get a pizza on their own and, in most of the hotels and apartment blocks, find games rooms etc to entertain themselves.

Flaine has plenty of creches and kids' clubs too. Ecole du Ski Française is more child-

friendly here than in some of its neighbours; and there is a big terrain park with its own lift and a gentle line of jumps where young kids will have a ball. And what's more, the transfer from Geneva takes less than an hour, a real grief-saver.

• Crystal Ski (0870 060 1370, crystalski.co.uk) has a week's half-board at Totem hotel for £505pp inc flights and transfers (two children up to 11 travel free if sharing a room with two adults).