

## An avalanche of ski bargains

By Neil English, The Mail On Sunday

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Villars in the Swiss Alps is a lively spot for a little January skiing...

January Sales fever is as rife in the winter sports industry as it is on the High Street.

Considering there is plenty of snow across Europe and North America and that a vast swathe of the Alps is forecast to receive more this weekend, the bargains on offer are quite exceptional.

Villars in Switzerland tops the bill for those who can make a quick getaway next weekend. On Saturday and Sunday, an annual 24-hour charity ski endurance race is being held on these picturesque slopes.

Over the past ten years, this hugely successful event has raised £1.8million for a variety of children's charities, some of them in England.

Established through personalities in the world of Formula 1, some of whom have homes in Villars, such as driver Jacques Villeneuve, the event injects a carnival-style atmosphere to Bretaye, the epicentre of the ski area at 5,900ft.

The racecourse sweeps by a stage erected at Bretaye where a number of high-profile DJs and bands will get the crowds dancing in the snow and spur on the relay teams of skiers. Jordan F1 team founder Eddie Jordan will be on stage drumming with his band, Eddie And The Robbers.

Inghams (020 8780 4433, [www.ingham.co.uk](http://www.ingham.co.uk)) can get you to Villars throughout January at the following excellent low-season rates:

Seven nights' half-board at the luxurious Hotel Bristol cost from £554 per person, including return flights from Gatwick and transfers. Seven nights' self-catering at the four-star Eurotel apartments start at £317 on the same basis.

Three nights' half-board in the Eurotel Victoria, departing next Friday, including flights and transfers, cost from £459 per person. Flights are available from seven other UK airports at a supplement.

There is also added entertainment next weekend at La Plagne in the French Alps, where the Telemark World Cup is taking place in the satellite village of Montchavin-Les Coches.

Telemark is the oldest of all ski techniques, named after the town of that name in Norway where it was devised.

It involves changing direction by going down on one knee on skis fixed to boots only at the front (crosscountry-style), making it one of the most graceful things you will ever see in winter sports.

La Plagne boasts a skiable glacier above 9,800ft, 140 miles of ski trails and countless mountain restaurants to visit if Telemark spectating is not for you.

Ski Beat (01243 780405, [www.skibeat.co.uk](http://www.skibeat.co.uk)) offers seven nights' half-board in Chalet Perrier at Plagne 1800 departing January 12, including flights and transfers, for just £299 per person, a saving of £240 on the brochure price. Departing January 19, Ski Beat offers Chalet Laponia at Plagne 1800 for £299, saving £220.



...especially during this weekend's (Jan 12-13) 24-hour race

Crystal Ski (0871 231 2256, [www.crystalski.com](http://www.crystalski.com)) has some very tempting January deals to North America. One is to Winter Park in the Rockies, the closest ski resort to Denver international airport, where seven nights' room-only in the three-star Vintage Resort hotel including scheduled BA flights and transfers, departing January 22, cost just £329 per person saving £360 on the brochure price.

Here, after a hard day on the beautifully groomed runs, you can soak in the hotel's hot tub or relax in the swimming pool or sauna.

At Banff, one of Canada's premier winter-sports destinations, Crystal offers seven nights' room-only in the Banff International hotel, including charter flights to Calgary and transfers, from £299 per person departing January 25, saving £226.

And here is something new for off-piste skiers keen to improve their technique in safety. A team of internationally qualified mountain guides, led by founder Martin Ruggli, have pioneered the Progressive Off-Piste System (POS) in the Swiss resorts of Davos and Klosters.

There are three levels of ability and you are split into groups of no more than six for five days of intense offpiste skiing or snowboarding tuition.

Martin told me: 'People who ski with us always improve and generally we see only smiles, no grimaces!'

Prices are lowest in January and start from £780 per person including five nights in a three-star hotel, lift pass for the whole region and use of an avalanche transceiver, a device that allows stricken skiers to be found quickly.

For more information and available dates visit [www.swissfreeride.ch](http://www.swissfreeride.ch) or call 00 41 794 292 684.

Flights cost extra. The nearest airport is Zurich. Return fares on Swiss International Airlines ([www.swiss.com](http://www.swiss.com), 0845 601 0956) from Heathrow to Zurich can be had from about £100 in January.

Finally, if you want an idyllic short break to the Italian Alps for some excellent food, rustic charm and stylish simplicity, head to Courmayeur and stay at the delightful, three-star Bouton d'Or hotel, where the patrons' charm is eclipsed only by the views of the Mont Blanc glaciers high above the ski area.

Momentum Ski ([www.momentumski.com](http://www.momentumski.com), 020 7371 9111) offers three nights' B&B in the Bouton d'Or, including flights and hire car for the great low-season price of £339 per person.