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How the top resorts compare

Lift passes, equipment rental, lunches and drinks can increase the price of a ski trip dramatically. So when they are all added on, where is the best value for money? Peter Hardy finds out

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Skiers and snowboarders trying to decide where to travel this winter can now compare the spiralling "hidden" costs of a holiday in different resorts and countries - thanks to the euro.

These inescapable extras - lift passes, equipment rental, mountain lunches and drinks, and more - all strongly contribute to the overall cost of a ski holiday.

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The strong pound means that most flight and accommodation packages are much the same or even lower in price this season than last. But the euro is being blamed for a minimum 10 per cent across-the-board hike in resort retail prices for everything from new skis to food in mountain restaurants.

Monetary unification, however, has sharpened competition between rival European resorts, while near parity between the euro and the US dollar highlights the growing gulf between many European and North American ski holiday costs.

We drew up a shortlist of 40 top resorts in Europe and North America and paired up 14 of them, balanced in terms of overall appeal and quality of accommodation, in order to compare prices. The surprising results blow away previous conceptions of the best-value destinations.

- Sample holiday prices are for week beginning Feb 1/2. Per person price is based on two sharing a twin or double room. It includes flights, transfers and half board unless otherwise stated.

MAYRHOFEN V LES ARCS

MAYRHOFEN

has worked hard over the past four years to maintain its position as one of Austria's much-loved internationals. New lifts and a link into a neighbouring valley have allowed it to rebrand itself as Ski Zillertal 3000, but it remains better known for its frenetic apres-ski than for its predominantly easy intermediate skiing.

The holiday The four-star Alpenhotel Kramerwirt opposite the church was the village's original 17th-century inn and provides traditional Tyrolean comfort. £495 with Inghams (020 8780 4433, www.ingham.co.uk (<http://www.ingham.co.uk>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£106
Skis and boots	£26-£97
Ski tuition (24 hrs)	£77

Resort kindergarten £90
Spaghetti bolognese £4
Small beer £1.50
Dinner for two (+wine)£38

LES ARCS

celebrates its 25th birthday next year and is at the peak of its career. Work has already started on both the cable-car link to La Plagne and the new Intrawest North American style village of La Daille d'Arc 2000.

The holiday Grand Hotel Mercure is a smart and welcoming three-star in the Charmetogger section of Arc 1800, with doorstep skiing. Family rooms sleep four in comfort - with two bunks in an alcove separated by a sliding door. £399 per person for a family of four, self-drive including ferries, with Erna Low (020 7584 2841, www.ernalow.co.uk (<http://www.ernalow.co.uk>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day) £112
Skis and boots £50-£80
Ski tuition (18 hrs) £73
Resort kindergarten £110
Spaghetti bolognese £5.50
Small beer £1.65
Dinner for two (+wine)£38

Comment Les Arcs has the edge on basic holiday price. Ski passes are similarly matched, although Les Arcs offers much greater and more demanding terrain for your money. Equipment hire and kindergarten are closely contested. Lunch on the mountain is cheaper in Austria, while a medium priced dinner for two with a bottle of wine is tied.

WINNER: LES ARCS

SESTRIERE V CRANS MONTANA

SESTRIERE

is the Italian capital of the Milky Way, a circuit of 93 lifts and 400km of skiing that straddles the border with France. The resort is a three-hour drive from Grenoble and one hour from Turin.

Sestriere is currently in training for the Winter Olympics, which it will host in February 2006. This is a point of bitter contention for its Swiss opponent. Crans Montana, together with the valley town of Sion, thought it had the Games in the bag and was about to open the Champagne when Sestriere snatched it on the Olympic Committee's final vote.

The holiday Hotel Fraitevino is a well-positioned and comfortable four-star without a restaurant. £495 b & b with Neilson (0870 333 3347, www.neilson.com (<http://www.neilson.com>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day) £77-98
Skis and boots £41-60
Ski tuition (15 hrs) £75
Resort kindergarten £85
Spaghetti bolognese £9.90
Small beer £1.80
Dinner for two (+wine)£38

CRANS MONTANA

is a resort for intermediates with 35 lifts and 160km of snow-sure skiing. It sits on a sunny plateau above the Rhone Valley and is easily reached by Saturday flights to nearby Sion or daily flights to Geneva. Lack of lift queues, wide pistes, and glorious views give it appeal.

The two towns of Crans and Montana have long since merged into a single bustling conurbation, with chic shopping in Crans and plenty of late-night action in both. Like its hated Italian opponent, it attracts a wealthy clientele.

The holiday Hotel de la Foret is a smart three-star situated on the outskirts of Montana. £576 with Swiss Travel Service (0870 727 5955, www.bridge-travel.co.uk (<http://www.bridge-travel.co.uk>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day) £115
Skis and boots £74

Ski tuition	£74
Resort kindergarten	£103
Spaghetti bolognese	£7
Small beer	£1.50
Dinner for two (+wine)	£34

Comment Given that Hotel Fraitevino does not provide dinner, the hotels are evenly matched. The Milky Way lift pass, however, offers much more skiing at a lower price.

Sestriere's equipment rental is also cheaper but the quality of Swiss rentals is usually higher. Italy wins on tuition, while kindergarten costs are identical.

The Swiss resort, however, fights back with cheaper food and drink.

WINNER: SESTRIERE, THANKS TO ITS BETTER-VALUE LIFT PASS

WHISTLER V VERBIER

WHISTLER

is a rumbustious contender for the title of world's best ski resort: in the space of 15 years, it has come from nowhere to dominate North American skiing. Its twin mountains have what is arguably the longest vertical drop on the continent, as well as an endless variety of pistes, powder bowls and couloirs.

Just recently the resort has become overtly expensive by Canadian standards. Old die-hards are also complaining of the busy weekend lift queues created by enormous commercial expansion.

The holiday Cascades Lodge provides well-positioned four-star accommodation. £775 room only with Ski Safari (01273 223680, www.skisafari.com (<http://www.skisafari.com>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£109-156
Skis and boots	£54-110
Ski tuition (12 hrs)	£148
Resort kindergarten	£239
Burger	£3.50
Small beer	£1.26
Dinner for two (+wine)	£35

VERBIER

is a newcomer to the international ski hall of fame. The first lift did not appear until 1946 and not enough were built over the following half century. It has, however, put its lift system in supreme order during the past five years, and where there were the worst queues in Europe, there are now none.

The holiday Ski Verbier is one of the leading chalet operators. It has quietly been accumulating a major share of the prime chalet market here over the past 10 years. Its new venture this year is the Hotel Les Rois Images, an intimate four-star that panders in particular to weekenders. £570 b & b, excluding travel, with Ski Verbier (020 7385 8050, www.skiverbier.com (<http://www.skiverbier.com>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£133
Skis and boots	£100
Ski tuition (15 hrs)	£76-87
Resort kindergarten	£172
Spaghetti bolognese	£7.40
Small beer	£1.60
Dinner for two (+wine)	£65

Comment These two heavyweights are remarkably well-matched. Basic costs are similar, if you add in travel for Verbier. Lift passes and equipment hire are comparable; the first big difference is in tuition, which is more than twice as expensive in Canada. Kindergarten is also £10 a day more expensive in Whistler.

With food and drink, tables are turned: mountain lunch snacks and dinner in Whistler are half the price.

WINNER: WHISTLER

BANFF/LAKE LOUISE V SÖLL

BANFF/LAKE LOUISE

remains the single most popular destination in Canada for British skiers, although there are strong arguments for moving on to other newer resorts in the region, as well as equally famous Whistler. Prices are competitive in the Banff region because British skiers provide the area with a steady winter income.

The holiday Banff International Hotel is a comfortable three-star in a central position. £715 room only with Frontier Ski (020 8776 8709, www.frontier-ski.co.uk (<http://www.frontier-ski.co.uk>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£156
Skis and boots	£48-59
Ski tuition (24 hrs)	£126
Resort kindergarten	£126
Burger	£3.75
Small beer	£1.36
Dinner for two (+wine)	£32

SÖLL

is a central component of the Austrian SkiWelt, a circuit of nine resorts and 250km of piste served by 93 lifts. It was the first super-circuit to be developed in Austria.

Other giant lift passes such as the Ski Verbund Amade give access to as many as 270 lifts in 25 villages, but the British remain loyal to Söll and the undulating pastures of the Tyrol.

The holiday Hotel Postwirt is a traditional four-star in the village centre. £569 with Thomson (0870 606 1470, www.thomson-ski.co.uk (<http://www.thomson-ski.co.uk>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£83-£98
Skis and boots	£57-£92
Ski tuition (20 hrs)	£76
Resort kindergarten	£158
Spaghetti bolognese	£4
Small beer	£1.30
Dinner for two (+wine)	£40

Comment Söll scores heavily on the hotel, as well as lift pass and tuition. Banff fights back on the kindergarten and dinner, but it's no real contest.

WINNER: SÖLL

COURCHEVEL V JACKSON HOLE

COURCHEVEL

has the best skiing and the best atmosphere of the principal resorts of the Trois Vallees. It consists of four quite separate villages at different altitudes, with the glitz focused entirely on Courchevel 1850, the highest and most fashionable - as well as the most expensive.

Well-groomed members of Parisian society, uniformly clad in designer suits or fur coats, come here to see and to be seen, while the rest of us come to ski.

The holiday Chalet Rikiki - equivalent to a four-star - is situated in what the French call Le Vrai Courch, Courchevel 1650. £679 with Le Ski (0870 754 4444, www.leski.co.uk (<http://www.leski.co.uk>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£127
Skis and boots	£62-£92
Ski tuition (10 hrs)	£95
Resort kindergarten	£150
Spaghetti bolognese	£9-£20
Small beer	£3.30
Dinner for two (+wine)	£33-£40

JACKSON HOLE

in Wyoming is my favourite resort in the world; it is also among the most expensive. The skiing takes place on the steep mountains above Teton Village, a 20-minute drive from the cowboy town of Jackson with its Wild West boardwalks, bars and exotic art galleries.

The skiing is good for beginners, difficult for intermediates, and sensational for powderhounds.

The holiday Virgin Ski (0870 990 4210, www.virginholidays.com/ski (<http://www.virginholidays.com/ski>)) is new here this year and has extremely competitive prices. £619 room only at the four-star Inn at Jackson Hole.

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£160-£220
Skis and boots	£80
Ski tuition (18 hrs)	£130
Resort kindergarten	£360
Spaghetti bolognese	£5.70
Small beer	£1.40
Dinner for two (+wine)	£53

Comment The French chalet and American hotel compare favourably, with one including food and the other the transatlantic flight. Courchevel easily wins on lift pass, while equipment rental is a draw.

Jackson's kindergarten is more than twice as expensive. But one of my children once investigated both in a single season and Jackson was the undisputed winner for both care and enjoyment.

On-mountain food and drink is iniquitously expensive throughout the Trois Vallees, but dinner in Jackson is less appealing yet more costly.

WINNER: JACKSON, FOR OVERALL HOLIDAY ENJOYMENT

COURMAYEUR V BRECKENRIDGE

COURMAYEUR

has resumed its status as an international resort after a period of enforced isolation caused by the rebuilding of the Mont Blanc tunnel.

The main ski area of this charming resort is best suited to intermediates, but a cable-car from nearby Entreves gives access to the Vallee Blanche and other classic off-piste descents on both the French and Italian sides of the Mont Blanc massif. Courmayeur is also famed for its cuisine and nightlife.

The holiday A stay at the **three-star Bouton d'Or** includes dinner at different gastronomic venues in the price. £616 with Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111, www.momentum.uk.com (<http://www.momentum.uk.com>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£100-£111
Skis and boots	£49-£77
Ski tuition (15 hrs)	£90
Resort kindergarten	£118
Spaghetti bolognese	£5.30
Small beer	£2
Dinner for two (+wine)	£34

BRECKENRIDGE

formed the bridgehead for the invasion of America by British skiers in the early 1980s, and it still remains enormously popular. It is part of Vail Resorts and shares a lift pass with Vail, Keystone, Beaver Creek and Arapahoe Basin.

The restored Victorian mining town, the oldest inhabited community in Colorado, has considerable charm and a wide choice of restaurants.

The holiday Victoria is an elegant weatherboarded chalet sleeping eight - equivalent to a three-star - situated three blocks from Main Street. £779 with Ski Independence (0870 555 0555, www.ski-independence.co.uk (<http://www.ski-independence.co.uk>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£130-£166
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Skis and boots	£80
Ski tuition (18 hrs)	£115-135
Resort kindergarten	£364-£404
Spaghetti bolognese	£5.70
Small beer	£2
Dinner for two (+wine)	£40

Comment The hotel and catered chalet prices are well matched. But Breckenridge, like all US resorts, cannot at first glance compete on lift-pass prices. Discounts on the full ticket window price are often available if you shop around.

Equipment hire is cheaper in Courmayeur and usually of a high standard. The American kindergarten is considerably more expensive. A mountain lunch costs much the same in both, while dinner in Breckenridge is likely to be more expensive and inferior in quality.

WINNER: COURMAYEUR

LEVI V PAS DE LA CASA

LEVI

in Finnish Lapland is rapidly assuming an international status previously not attained by any Scandinavian resort apart from Are in Sweden.

The reason for its new-found popularity is largely based on its position in the Arctic Circle, where snow cover is assured. For this reason alone, equipment manufacturer Rossignol has established one of its three worldwide test centres here.

A modern gondola acts as the core of a network of 19 lifts. The skiing is essentially intermediate, but there are other activities on offer such as reindeer- and dog-sledding.

During the early winter, skiing at midday takes place under floodlights. In the springtime, endless hours of daylight allow skiing to continue into the evening.

The holiday The three-star Crazy Reindeer is a friendly hostelry in a quiet spot in the woods, 250m from the lifts and the village. £464 with Inghams (020 8780 4433, www.ingham.co.uk (<http://www.ingham.co.uk>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£79
Skis and boots	£43-£78
Ski tuition (7.5 hrs)	£90
Resort kindergarten	£197
Spaghetti bolognese	£6.50
Small beer	£2
Dinner for two (+wine)	£66

PAS DE LA CASA

in duty-free Andorra earned its enormous popularity on rock bottom prices and youth culture, but in recent years costs have increased. Every weekend the youth of Toulouse cross the border in search of day-time snow and night-time action in a town where the pub crawl has been raised to an art form.

Pas has the best skiing in Andorra, with 31 lifts and 100km of piste. Neighbouring Soldeu is joined on piste and also has abundant terrain. A long-standing dispute between the two, however, means that the Andorran multi-resort lift pass is not valid in both on the same day.

The holiday Much of the accommodation here is tired, but Hotel Camelot was built only two years ago on a hill 100m from the slopes and a pleasant 400m from the bustle of the town. It has no official rating yet but should be three star. £409 with Panorama (0870 750 5060, www.panoramaholidays.co.uk (<http://www.panoramaholidays.co.uk>)).

The extras

Lift pass (6-day)	£83-£91
Skis and boots	£44-£60
Ski tuition (15 hrs)	£58
Resort kindergarten	£67
Spaghetti bolognese	£6.50
Small beer	£1.32
Dinner for two (+wine)	£33

Comment The Crazy Reindeer is the more expensive of the two hotels but also slightly superior in quality. Levi's lift pass is cheaper,

but Pas does offer a greater variety of slopes.

Pas is slightly cheaper on equipment rental, but scores heavily on ski lessons for which it has an excellent reputation.

WINNER: PAS DE LA CASA

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