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Skiing: Pick of the pistes

Peter Hardy clicks into his bindings and slaloms through the brochures to pick this winter's 50 best ski holidays.

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Prices given are per person for a seven-night holiday departing on January 29/30, the week that marks the transition between low and high season. They include flights, transfers and half board unless otherwise stated.



Taking off: the ski season is about to begin

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MORE THAN £1,000

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ST MORITZ, SWITZERLAND

Best for intermediates

If money doesn't matter, then stay in style in the world's original winter sports resort. The splendid Kempinski Grand Hotel des Bains reopened its doors after a complete makeover two years ago to a fanfare of accolades. The hedonistic hotel spa offers everything from massage to cosmetic surgery. The Grand also has a chic wine bar and a casino. It is situated on the edge of St Moritz Bad, an eight-minute walk from the resort centre. Flexiski, £1,825.

COURCHEVEL 1850, FRANCE

Best for Intermediates

Unfettered hedonism comes at a price in arguably the most expensive resort in the Alps. The St Joseph is a discreet boutique four-star (France has no fives) owned by Eric Tournier, who also has the night club La Grange. It has 11 rooms and three luxurious serviced apart-ments. Price is for b&b, but half board (lunch or dinner) can be arranged at a choice of Tournier restaurants. Kaluma Ski, £1,700.

VILLARS, SWITZERLAND

Best for Intermediates, Families

Whitepods is a bizarre five-star tented winter safari camp built this year on a remote corner of the mountain near La Bretaye. The igloo-shaped pods, made from weatherproofed cotton, are designed to withstand a 135mph blizzard. The heated sleeping units are on raised wooden platforms around a 19th-century chalet that houses the sitting room, dining room and library. Gourmet food, all

drinks and ski guiding or snowshoeing are included in the price. One catch: guests must share two bathrooms in the farmhouse. Sleeps 10 in five pods. Original Travel, £1,620, excluding flights.

WHISTLER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Best for Intermediates, Families, Experts

The Four Seasons Resort is a new five-star hotel poised to compete with the Fairmont Chateau Whistler. The Four Seasons group found success with its first ski venture in Jackson Hole, which opened last year. Other Canadian resorts rival Whistler and have better weather, but none can match its cosmopolitan Pacific Rim atmosphere. Ski Independence £1,480, meals not included.

LES GETS, FRANCE

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families

One of the most attractive and friendly resorts in the giant 207-lift Portes du Soleil area. Moudon is featured this year for the first time by Descent International, which leads the field by a clear length in creating five-star luxury chalets, complete with impeccable service and gourmet cuisine. The chalet, a 17th-century Savoyard farmhouse, is set in its own private grounds, a three-minute drive by chauffeured 4x4 from the centre of the village. The chocolate-box exterior belies a chic, contemporary sitting room and dining room. It sleeps 10 in five bedrooms. Descent International, £14,100 (£1,410 pp), travel not included.

BEAVER CREEK, COLORADO

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families

The Ritz-Carlton at Bachelor Gulch, a hamlet linked by piste to Beaver Creek, is the smartest address in a corner of Colorado that is full of glitzy ski hotels. In fact, it is more of a resort than a hotel, with 237 rooms and sumptuous suites, and a choice of restaurants. If you don't want to ski you can always take the hotel dog for a walk or relax alongside super-models in the lavish spa, which has a Hollywood following. Elegant Resorts, £1,345, transfers and meals not included.

MEGÈVE, FRANCE

Best for Intermediates, Families

Ferme de Hauteluce is a magnificent farmhouse renovated and furnished with antiques by Joceyln Sibuet, a celebrated local artist and designer, in a Heidi-meets-Ralph Lauren style. Hauteluce has an indoor swimming pool and "wellness" suite. The chalet sleeps nine in four en suite bedrooms. Breakfast and hotel maid service are included, and half board can be arranged. Ski-drive price includes ferry crossings. Peak Retreats, £10,296 (£1,144 pp).

LECH, AUSTRIA

Best for Intermediates, Families

The comfortable, friendly four-star Hotel Haldenhof is owned by Hubert Schwarzler, a committed Anglophile and former tourist director of the resort. Antlers on the walls reflect his passion for deer stalking in Scotland. His family runs the hotel to an extremely high standard. Ski Solutions, £1,100.

ZERMATT, SWITZERLAND

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families, Experts

Chamois is a new penthouse apartment with four bedrooms on two floors that is being run by Scott Dunn this year as a top-end catered chalet. It is situated beside the Matterhorn Express gondola, a brisk seven-minute walk from the village centre. If you book before the end of October the price includes a free ski pass. Scott Dunn, £1,085.

SNOWBIRD, UTAH

Best for Experts

Home of some of the most perfect snow on the planet. Talcum-like flakes, freeze-dried in their long journey over desert from the Pacific Ocean, fall copiously on Little Cottonwood Canyon above Salt Lake City. Waiting to receive it are purpose-built Snowbird and the adjoining "retro" resort of Alta. The mirrored walls of Cliff Lodge, with its 11-storey atrium, dominate Snowbird. Only one experience beats basking in an outdoor hot tub on the rooftop spa - and that's floating through the dry powder on Upper Cirque. Ski Independence, £1,002, meals not included.

£700 TO £999

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VAL D'ISÈRE, FRANCE

Best for Learners, Families, Experts

Chalets Suisses is a new development of four chalets of stone and slate built by the tour operator in the Le Crêt district of the resort. The style is traditional Savoyard with reclaimed oak floors and tiles, but with a veneer of cool contemporary chic that includes

wireless internet access and plasma TV screens. A chauffeured 4x4 takes you to and from the slopes. Each chalet sleeps eight or nine guests. VIP, £849-869.

TREMBLANT, QUÉBEC

Best for Intermediates

L'Ermitage du Lac is a new apartment complex in this well-planned family resort in the Laurentians, 75 miles from Montreal. It is situated at the foot of the village, a short walk from the slopes lift. The price is based on a hotel room, but larger suites are available. Erna Low, £804, meals not included.

CHAMONIX, FRANCE

Best for Intermediates, Families, Experts

I used to consider Club Med expensive, but its prices have risen less than those of other operators and the all-inclusive formula now offers outstanding value for families. However, it is important to pick the right place. The refurbished Chamonix property has been upgraded to four tridents in the company's ratings. It is situated in a gleaming white fin de siècle mansion, a five-minute walk from the town centre, and has a sumptuous spa. Club Med, £799.

ST ANTON, AUSTRIA

Best for Intermediates, Families, Experts

Chalet hotel Schweizerhof is in the hamlet of Nasserein, a 20-minute walk or a shuttle bus ride from the centre of St Anton. Nasserein was the poor relation until a gondola link to the main ski area was built for the 2001 Alpine World Championships. The Schweizerhof is run to Mark Warner's usual high standard, with full childcare facilities. Mark Warner, £792.

SAN CASSIANO, ITALY

Best for Intermediates

This attractive village links neatly into the Sella Ronda and is covered by the 460-lift Dolomiti Superski pass. Hotel Rosa Alpina has been owned by the Pizzinini family for 65 years and the latest generation has transformed it into a cool designer hotel with a Michelin-starred restaurant run by Norbert Niederkofler. Momentum Ski, £788, b&b.

GRINDELWALD, SWITZERLAND

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families

This is one of the Edwardian cradles of skiing that has had a strong British following for 100 years. On one side of the village are the soaring peaks of the Eiger and Wetterhorn, and on the other the wooded slopes of First. Grindelwald shares a lift pass with Wengen and Mürren. The skiing is best suited to beginners and intermediates, but serious off-piste opportunities abound for the more accomplished. The Fiescherblick is a traditional chalet-style hotel. Powder Byrne, £780.

JACKSON HOLE, WYOMING

Best for Learners, Families, Experts

My favourite resort both for skiing and atmosphere - but not for the cost. The Inn at Jackson Hole, situated beside the slopes in Teton Village, is simply more sensibly priced than the recently-built clutch of fabulous five-star places. Mostly suited to advanced skiers and riders, but JH has good nursery slopes and an excellent ski school. Ski Safari, £775, meals not included.

COPPER MOUNTAIN, COLORADO

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families, Experts

This Intrawest-owned enclave has remained in the shadow of nearby Vail during its four-year \$400 million makeover. But Copper now shines as the reburnished star of the region. Its outstanding terrain, suited to all standards, has 19 lifts. Ski The American Dream offers a no-catch, free VIP lift pass throughout the season for all guests. Hotel and apartment accommodation is graded by precious-metal price bands. Price based on Silver Lodging hotel room. Ski The American Dream, £765, meals not included.

SAALBACH-HINTERGLEMME, AUSTRIA

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families

This underrated 55-lift ski circuit near Zell-am-See in Salzburgerland is home to some of the best intermediate pistes in Austria. The circuit can be skied in either direction and the north side of the valley has outstanding powder opportunities. The mountains are dotted with welcoming huts and the nightlife is unrestrained. Hotel Dorfschmiede, in the centre of Hinterglemm, has comfortable traditional rooms and high-quality food. Neilson, £759.

ST MARTIN DE BELLEVILLE, FRANCE

Best for Intermediates

St Martin is an old cheese-making village in the Trois Vallées. The construction of a gondola for mountain access has greatly increased its appeal as an alternative to better-known rivals. La Bouitte, in the neighbouring hamlet of San Marcel, is a gourmet restaurant set in an ancient Savoyard farmhouse. It has now become a boutique hotel with five romantic, heavily-beamed suites. Kaluma, £700 b&b.

£600 TO £699

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ENGELBERG, SWITZERLAND

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families

Traditional Engelberg faded as a popular resort during the ski boom of the 1970s. But it is back, with a modern lift system and plenty of terrain for all standards of skier. Hotel Europe is a magnificent belle époque building in the resort centre. Its high glacier ensures a long season and an influx of wealthy visitors at weekends from nearby Luzerne means the nightlife lasts until dawn. Momentum Ski, £695.

ZERMATT, SWITZERLAND

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families, Experts

My only problem with Zermatt is that beauty has her price. No other Alpine panorama can match the magnificence of the Matterhorn, but I spend a disproportionate amount of time here queuing at the cashpoint. Hotel Perren is reasonably priced and is my favourite family hotel. It is situated by the river, close to the Sunnegga lift station, and second-stage renovations were completed this summer. Ski Solutions, £690.

LA TANIA, FRANCE

Best for Families

This little resort near the lowest part of Courchevel was built, but not used, as a dormitory for the 1992 Winter Olympics. It is now an attractive destination in the Trois Vallées in its own right. Chalet Titania sleeps up to 14 in six bedrooms with en suite bathrooms. It is ideal for families with young children as the building also houses Le Ski's crèche. La Tania's wooded slopes offer the best skiing in the Trois Vallées. Le Ski, £679.

MAMMOTH, CALIFORNIA

Best for Intermediates, Families

This high-altitude resort has had a complete makeover since the Canadian resort developer Intrawest acquired a majority shareholding. Village at Mammoth, next to the new Village Gondola, is an impressive apartment complex below the Canyon Lodge base. Mammoth's 27 lifts make it the largest single mountain resort in the US. The usually abundant snow lasts from November to June. Virgin Snow, £669, meals and car hire not included. Price is based on four sharing a two-room apartment.

MORZINE, FRANCE

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families

This pleasant market town in the Portes du Soleil has the advantage of having a year-round life outside skiing and tourism. Montana, an award-winning chalet built last year, successfully mixes traditional and contemporary values. Morzine is less than 90 minutes by car from Geneva and has piste links to Avoriaz, Les Gets and the other nine resorts in the circuit that collectively offer 207 lifts and 650km of skiing. Snowline, £669.

VAL D'ISÈRE, FRANCE

Best for Intermediates, Experts

The only reasons for staying in Le Fornet used to be low prices and the tranquil setting, two kilometres from the razzmatazz of Val. But now the attractive stone-built hamlet has fresh appeal. The much-needed development on the lift system at this end of the ski area means that you now have some of the best and most easily accessed terrain in the whole of Espace Killy on your doorstep. The Val specialist YSE has given Le Fornet its stamp of approval by taking on Chalet Grand Torsai (sleeps 10) and another newly-built chalet. Nevertheless, late party-goers will find it a long, sobering walk home from Dick's Tea Bar. YSE, £665.

VAUJANY, FRANCE

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families, Experts

The sleepy hamlet of La Villette has seen many changes during its long history. It was burnt almost to the ground by the Nazis in retaliation for attacks by the Resistance. The handful of elderly farmers who remember those dark days view with amusement the new British invasion of skiers. Four of the houses have been converted into comfortable chalets in an idyllic rural setting by tour operator Ski Peak. The resort is a one-kilometre shuttle bus ride away, or you can walk to the gondola station. Chalet Lucette sleeps eight. Ski Peak, £660.

SÖLDEN, AUSTRIA

Best for Intermediates

Sölden is a high, glacial resort that yo-yos in and out of popularity among tour operators, depending on the contract prices they can obtain against stiff Dutch and German opposition. At the moment it is ``in''. The high 3,250m top lift ensures snow cover during a long season from November to the end of April, as well as summer skiing. Some 35 lifts provide skiing for all standards and a ridiculously raucous nightlife. Four-star Hotel Sunny Sölden has an indoor pool and a wellness suite. Thomson, £659.

ST ANTON, AUSTRIA

Best for Intermediates, Experts

St Anton is the birthplace of modern skiing but, unlike many of its rivals from the days when skis were made of wood, it has never rested on its laurels and constantly reinvents itself. It remains one of the most challenging resorts in the world. Anyone who is less than a confident red run skier or rider is advised to go elsewhere. Chalet Harry is a former 18-bed pension that was taken over as a chalet last season by Total Ski. It is eight minutes' walk from the resort centre and six minutes' from the Rendlbahn. However, the ski bus and evening village bus both stop near the door. Total Ski, £649.

MEGÈVE, FRANCE

Best for Intermediates, Families

La Ferme de Châtel (sleeps 10) has to be the bargain of the year, a designer chalet at a mass-market price. This and its even smarter neighbour (see Ski Holidays over £1,000, above) are owned by the artist Jocelyn Sibouet, who also developed Les Fermes de Marie and other fashionable hotels in the resort. Daily maid service is included, and a half-board option at Les Fermes de Marie is available. Peak Retreats, £6,354 (£635 pp) b&b, including ferry crossings.

£500 TO £599

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HEAVENLY, NEVADA AND CALIFORNIA

Best for Intermediates

Heavenly, on the outskirts of the functional state-line gambling town of South Lake Tahoe, used to be anything but celestial. In the Horizon Casino Resort, the dice roll by day and night, and the local hospital says the commonest cause of upper body injury comes not from skiing but from fruit machines. However, ownership by Vail has resulted in a substantial revamp of the ski area and a ski village has developed around the bottom of the main gondola. Use this as a base and explore Squaw Valley and the other resorts around the lake. Skiworld, £599, meals not included.

SESTRIERE, ITALY

Best for Intermediates

This resort on the Italian/French frontier between Turin and Briançon was created - along with Fiat cars - by the Agnelli family. It will host the 2006 Winter Olympics, and lots of improvements to the lift system and accommodation are well under way in readiness. Hotel Belvedere and its adjoining apartments have been completely renovated. First Choice, £599.

VALLANDRY, FRANCE

Best for Intermediates, Families

Vallandry is one of several little Tarentaise resorts that have been thrust into the limelight by the construction last season of the Vanoise Express double-decker cable car that links Les Arcs and La Plagne. With this in mind, Ski Olympic built Chalethotel La Foret just above Vallandry on the Les Arcs side of the lift. Ski Olympic, £585.

CHAMPOLUC, ITALY

Best for Intermediates, Families

Together with adjoining Gressoney and the daunting powder bowls of Alagna, Champoluc is one of the least known major ski areas of Italy. Some 180km of enjoyable linked skiing served by 30 lifts is tucked away in the northwestern corner of the Aosta Valley. Champoluc is a charming family-oriented resort with plenty of intermediate skiing. Chalet Biancaneve, in a quiet wooded area of the village, was built by the celebrated local instructor Giovanni Favre. Esprit Ski, £585.

SAAS FEE, SWITZERLAND

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families

Saas Fee is a car-free resort in a beautiful glacial setting and has wonderful nursery slopes. It is ideal for beginners and lower intermediates, but glacial activity outside the marked pistes makes it of limited appeal to more advanced skiers. Plus points: guaranteed snow and a hectic nightlife. Hotel Waldesruh is run by the Supersaxos, one of Saas's ruling families, and is situated next

to the nursery slopes. Swiss Travel Service, £582.

MÉRIBEL, FRANCE

Best for Intermediates

The La Plagne specialist Ski Beat has seen fit to expand into chalet-saturated Méribel at a time when some of the other 54 bonded operators here are talking of pulling out. Success could result from reasonable prices for such a high-profile resort. Chalet de Méribel is centrally located and sleeps 10-12 in five en suite rooms. Ski Beat, £569.

ALPBACH, AUSTRIA

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families

This pretty, traditional Tyrolean village has avoided the trap of overdevelopment. The ski area is far more entertaining than the lift map suggests and is suited to all standards of skier and snowboarder. Hotel Alphof is close to the village centre and nursery slope. It also has a new pool and "wellness" complex. Crystal, £566.

BAD GASTEIN, AUSTRIA

Best for Intermediates

The spa resort of Bad Gastein is the main base in a valley that has 201km of varied intermediate skiing and lots of literary and musical associations. Thomas Mann wrote a novella here, and this was where, in 1825, Schubert composed his piano sonata in D major. Hotel Mozart is a cosy, traditional three-star named not after Wolfgang Amadeus but his mother and widow who, curiously, stayed here at the same time as Schubert. First Choice, £469.

LEVI, FINLAND

Best for Learners, Families

This resort in the Arctic Circle has enormous charm and low prices. I like to visit in mid-winter whenever I can to watch the sun drop below the horizon and the days pass in gentle, soft twilight. Floodlights help you negotiate the 22 lifts. By night, with luck, you will be treated to a display of the Northern Lights, nature's natural laser show. In spring, the days are long and the snow is at its best. Plus points: Kittila airport is only 11 miles away. The four-star Hotel Levitunturi has some of the best accommodation. Inghams, £520.

KOPAONIK, SERBIA

Best for Learners

Thomson and First Choice tried without success to reintroduce Kopaonik in the small window between bloody conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo. Unfortunately, the main mountain is home to the key radar station in the region, which gives the 21-lift ski area more than piste appeal to invading armies. Hotel Grand, an eastern Europe four-star, is by far the best billet. Thomson, £509.

SKI UNDER £500

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BAQUEIRA, SPAIN

Best for Intermediates

Chaletotel Salana is a free-standing traditional chalet that was built by Ski Miquel. Somehow the British contingent manage to maintain a monopoly on Baqueira, a resort fit for a king (the Spanish monarch Juan Carlos has a house here). It offers some of the best skiing for all standards to be found in the Pyrenees and the nightlife is nothing short of exhausting. Ski Miquel, £499.

BANSKO, BULGARIA

Best for Learners

Bansko is the only one of Bulgaria's clutch of resorts, which are still fairly primitive, that has been targeted for development. A £21 million investment programme has resulted in new lifts, including a gondola. The ancient town, situated 150km south of Sofia, has enormous charm and is listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site. The four-star Hotel Grand Arena is new for this season. Neilson, £489.

SÖLL, AUSTRIA

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families

In recent years, the once lager-logged capital of the 93-lift SkiWelt area has undergone a renaissance and rediscovered its traditional values. Personally, I find this enormous area rather lacking in variety, with too many similar-looking slopes of a benign gradient. However, I know several skiers who think comments such as that are tantamount to blasphemy. No one knows Söll better than Thomson, which established its European HQ here in the 1970s. The Hotel Gansleit is a family three-star owned by an English holidaymaker who never left. Thomson, £489.

WENGEN, SWITZERLAND

Best for Intermediates

Hotel Falken is a comfortable, old-fashioned hotel with a quirky charm. It opened its doors 109 years ago when skiers wore plus-fours and tweed jackets, and only lip service has been paid to modernisation. The Falken attracts an equally zany regular clientele, which thrives on its eccentricities and low tariffs. The 41 lifts in Wengen and adjoining resorts are linked by piste and mountain railway and offer scenic and primarily intermediate skiing. Kuoni, £488.

COURMAYEUR, ITALY

Best for Intermediates

Hotel Bouton d'Or is a fairly modest, family-run three-star affair that's set back from the main road. The cobbled centre of this old climbing resort is just a five-minute walk away and I always stay here when I can get a room. The hotel does not have a restaurant but half board can be arranged with a choice of local restaurants. The piste is mainly intermediate, the mountain eating places are outstanding, and the views of Mont Blanc never fail to make the heart race. Momentum Ski, £485, b&b.

HEMSEDAL, NORWAY

Best for Intermediates, Families, Experts

Norway's mountains tend to lack vertical descent and challenge, but Hemsedal is the exception. Its craggy terrain provides the highest lift-served slopes in Scandinavia and the new Hollvinheisen gondola serves some genuinely steep runs that will keep any experienced Alpine skier happy for a week. Intermediates and beginners will also find lots of suitable gradients in the 42km of pistes served by 17 lifts. Skarsnuten Mountain Village is situated in a ski-in, ski-out position reached by chair-lift. The price is based on a two-room apartment for four people. Crystal, £444.

SOLDEU, ANDORRA

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families

Soldeu and El Tarter joined up last year with Pas de la Casa and their neighbours to form the 60-lift Grand Valira ski area. Price rises since Andorra entered the euro zone mean budget accommodation is harder to find. Xantal is a pleasant catered chalet apartment for eight in El Tarter. Crystal, £415.

POIANA BRASOV, ROMANIA

Best for Learners

Hotel Pietra Mare is a gleaming new four-star situated a 10-minute walk or free bus ride from the lifts in what I consider to be the most enjoyable resort in eastern Europe. The small, 14-km ski area offers ample challenge to beginners and wobbly intermediates. Prices are delightfully low, ski and snowboard tuition is efficient and friendly, but do avoid folklorique evenings with barbecued bear. Inghams, £399.

ÅRE, SWEDEN

Best for Intermediates, Families, Experts

Sweden's only resort with truly world-class skiing has 40 lifts spread across four villages. The Arefjällby apartments are well located both for skiing and nightlife. The complex has a fine restaurant and its own nightclub. The price is based on an apartment for two, though it can sleep three. Snow cover is reliable and alternative activities include snowmobiling in the forest and ice-fishing on the lake. Neilson, £300 b&b.

LES ARCS, FRANCE

Best for Learners, Intermediates, Families, Experts

The new Intrawest village of Arc 1950 opened last winter to bring Canadian know-how to French ski accommodation. As the village comes of age, it is proving a big success. Resort-level snow is virtually guaranteed and you have easy access to the 141 lifts and 425km of pistes in the Paradiski area. Three-room Club apartment sleeps six. Erna Low, £1,016 (£169pp), self-catering, including ferry crossings.

TOUR OPERATORS

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Club Med (0845 367 6767, www.clubmed.co.uk (<http://www.clubmed.co.uk>)) Crystal (0870 160 6040, www.crystalski.co.uk (<http://www.crystalski.co.uk>)) Descent International (020 7384 3854, www.descent.co.uk (<http://www.descent.co.uk>)) Erna Low (0870 750 6820, www.ernalow.co.uk (<http://www.ernalow.co.uk>)) Esprit Ski (01252 618300, www.esprit-holidays.co.uk (<http://www.esprit-holidays.co.uk>)) First Choice (0870 754 3477, www.firstchoice.co.uk/ski (<http://www.firstchoice.co.uk/ski>)) Flexiski (0870 909 0754, www.flexiski.co.uk (<http://www.flexiski.co.uk>)) Inghams (020 8780 4433, www.inghams.co.uk (<http://www.inghams.co.uk>)) Kaluma Ski (0870 442 8044, www.kalumatravel.co.uk (<http://www.kalumatravel.co.uk>)) Kuoni (0870 990 9905, www.kuoni.co.uk/ski (<http://www.kuoni.co.uk/ski>)) Le Ski (0870

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