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## Here comes winter!

There's a bigger choice than ever of ski holidays, so how do you decide? With our guide to the top 40 tour operators compiled by Peter Hardy.

Published: 12:01AM BST 07 Oct 2006

The ski season officially begins in just seven weeks. If you haven't already booked your holiday, now is the time to seriously consider the options.

Each year, as the choice of both destination and tour operator multiplies, making the right choice becomes fiendishly complicated. This winter there are more than 200 companies offering about 250 destinations in 20 countries in the northern hemisphere.



'Many tour operators are reporting a marked increase in bookings'

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Among the new offerings, Lebanon appears in one brochure that went to print before the latest conflict. Sales have understandably been suspended indefinitely.

Then there is Japan. Lower airfares are allowing the tour operators Inghams and Crystal to offer Rusutsu and Niseko on Hokkaido from £995 for seven nights' half board, and from £1,225 for b&b respectively. Both give the option of combining skiing and culture, including stays in Kyoto or Tokyo.

Alternatively, you could head for places such as Tahko in Finland, Katschberg in Austria, Beitostolen in Norway, and Humber Valley in Newfoundland, where you may see only a few dozen other British skiers and snowboarders. Or you could join the 90 per cent of us who opt for the familiar names of the 20 or so top resorts of the Alps, Andorra and North America.

The good news is that for most destinations increases in prices are relatively small - so you shouldn't end up paying much more this season than you did last. Typical examples are about £410 for a week's half board in January in a three-star hotel in the Dolomites; about £400 half board in a four-star hotel and about £270 per person for a self-catering apartment in Arinsal - all including return flight and transfers.

However, many tour operators are reporting a marked increase in bookings compared to this time last year, so if you want to travel at peak time - New Year, say, or February - it would be wise to make a move soon.

But which company should you book with? We open our coverage for the season with the ultimate guide to the top 40 ski operators - from the big names offering the widest choices and lowest prices to some of the smallest, single-resort specialists who know their chosen destinations inside-out.

We compare those offering luxury chalets, list the main family specialists, and look at those companies that offer a completely

tailor-made service.

After all, the quality of the service, the accommodation, the childcare, and the staff in the resort or the chalet will make a huge difference to how much you enjoy your ski holiday this season.

## THE TOP 40 TOUR OPERATORS

Unless stated, prices are per person, based on two sharing, for seven nights in mid-January. They include flights, transfers and half board.

### FOR A WIDE CHOICE <sub>0</sub>

**Airtours** (08 70 241 8964, [www.airtours.co.uk](http://www.airtours.co.uk) (<http://www.airtours.co.uk/>)). Low-cost holidays to 31 resorts in seven countries, but not the United States.

**Strength** Well-known name.

**Taster** Two-star Hotel Sonja, Niederau, £350 b&b, based on three sharing. Depart from Manchester.

**Crystal** (0870 160 6040, [www.crystalski.co.uk](http://www.crystalski.co.uk) (<http://www.crystalski.co.uk/>)) and **Thomson** (0870 606 1470, [www.thomson-ski.co.uk](http://www.thomson-ski.co.uk) (<http://www.thomson-ski.co.uk/>)). Both owned by the German travel giant TUI: virtually indistinguishable, they have 95 (Thomson) and 138 resorts (Crystal) in 15 countries. Both have crèches, children's clubs, and a nanny service in selected resorts. Crystal has a separate luxury chalet programme.

**New** (Crystal) Japan, and weekends to Courmayeur. (Thomson) nine more resorts in North America and eight in Europe.

**Strength** Flights from regional airports and efficient infrastructure for both.

**Crystal taster** Four-star Hotel Bergland, Sölden, £665.

**Thomson taster** Three-star Hotel Dolomiti, Passo Tonale, £409.

**First Choice** (0870 754 3477, [www.firstchoice.co.uk/ski](http://www.firstchoice.co.uk/ski) (<http://www.firstchoice.co.uk/ski/>)). Chalets, hotels and apartments in 55 resorts in eight countries, but not North America. Crèche from three months and children's clubs in selected resorts.

**Strength** Efficient infrastructure.

**Taster** Levi Cabins, Finnish Lapland, £445 b&b, based on four sharing.

**Inghams** (020 8780 4400, [www.ingham.co.uk](http://www.ingham.co.uk) (<http://www.ingham.co.uk/>)). The oldest and most upmarket operator in this category: 90 destinations in 14 countries. Hotels and chalets, but no dedicated childcare. Separate luxury programme, weekends and short breaks.

**New** Japan from £995.

**Strength** Flights from 23 UK airports, high level of service.

**Taster** Four-star Hotel Deutschmann, Obergurgl, £594.

**Neilson** (0870 909 9099, [www.neilson.co.uk](http://www.neilson.co.uk) (<http://www.neilson.co.uk/>)). Chalets and hotels in 68 resorts in 10 countries. Childcare in Les Deux Alpes, Alpe d'Huez and Geilo.

**New** Kronplatz in the Dolomites, Katschberg and Rauris in Austria, Bietostolen in Norway.

**Strength** Good ski-guiding and well-trained staff.

**Taster** Four-star Hotel Perun, Bansko, £395.

### FOR THE INDEPENDENT-MINDED <sub>0</sub>

**Directski.com** (0800 587 0945, [www.directski.com](http://www.directski.com) (<http://www.directski.com/>)). Founded six years ago and based in Dublin, this is the most successful internet ski company and probably now the largest independent operator. Wide range of apartments, hotels, and chalets in 55 resorts in 10 countries.

**Strength** Hi-tech website.

**Taster** Self-catering St Moritz Apartments in Arinsal, £269.

**Erna Low** (0870 750 6820, [www.ernalow.co.uk](http://www.ernalow.co.uk) (<http://www.ernalow.co.uk/>)). Founded in 1932, it now takes 20,000 skiers a year to France, five other European countries and North America. Half of all clients travel by car to hotels and self-catering apartments. No fully-catered chalets.

**New** Free Eurotunnel upgrade for self-drive holidays.

**Strength** Complete package flexibility, personal service.

**Taster** Arc 1950, Radisson SAS two-room self-catering ski/drive apartment for four, £689 with Eurotunnel crossing.

**Skiworld** (08702 416723, [www.skiworld.ltd.uk](http://www.skiworld.ltd.uk) (<http://www.skiworld.ltd.uk/>)). Chalets, hotels and apartments in 17 resorts in North America, 10 in France, St Anton and Verbier.

**New** Specialist ski courses in Tignes, Verbier, and Breckenridge, and 23 chalets.

**Strength** Been around for 25 years.

**Taster** Chalet Louisa, Alpe d'Huez, £575.

## FOR IN-DEPTH RESORT KNOWLEDGE 0

**Mountain Rooms & Chalets** (0700 2000 456, [www.mountainrooms.com](http://www.mountainrooms.com) (<http://www.mountainrooms.com>)).

Established operator with a wide range of chalets and apartments in Val d'Isère.

**New** Flexible catering and all-season accommodation for executive ski bums.

**Strengths** Proprietor lives in resort.

**Taster** Studio Altitude, sleeps two, £521 for whole, travel not included.

**Collineige** (01276 24262, [www.collineige.com](http://www.collineige.com) (<http://www.collineige.com>)). Eight chalets in Chamonix for flexible stays, catered or uncatered.

**New** Chalet in Argentière.

**Strength** Owner lives in Chamonix and her husband is a well-known mountain guide.

**Taster** Villa Terrier, £4,140 for whole chalet (sleeps eight), including flights but not transfers.

**Four Winds Meriski** (01285 648518, [www.meriski.co.uk](http://www.meriski.co.uk) (<http://www.meriski.co.uk>)). A chalet hotel and 10 chalets in Méribel. Crèche from three months and flexible childcare with ski-school escort service.

**New** Chalet party adult-only weeks.

**Strength** Experienced operator.

**Taster** Chalet John Christmas (sleeps 12), £775 per person. Childcare extra £300.

**Ski Peak** (01428 608070, [www.skipeak.com](http://www.skipeak.com) (<http://www.skipeak.com>)). Small operator with a hotel, chalets and self-catering apartments in the resort of Vaujany, connected by cable-car to the Alpe d'Huez ski area.

**Strength** Intimate knowledge of resort, outstanding cuisine.

**Taster** Chalet Rostaing, £575 per person.

**Ski Verbier** (020 7385 8050, [www.skiverbier.com](http://www.skiverbier.com) (<http://www.skiverbier.com>)). Largest choice of good catered and uncatered chalets in Verbier.

**New** Four chalets.

**Strength** Good cuisine.

**Taster** Chalet Chineur (sleeps eight), £993, excluding travel.

**Stanford Skiing** (01603 477471, [www.stanfordskiing.co.uk](http://www.stanfordskiing.co.uk) (<http://www.stanfordskiing.co.uk>)). Four chalets in Megève, as well as a couple of luxury self-catering apartments and four hotels. Low season short breaks.

**New** Chalet L'Etrier.

**Strength** Cult appeal, with clients returning annually.

**Taster** Chalet hotel Sylvana, £435 per person, flights not included.

**YSE** (0845 122 1414, [www.yeski.co.uk](http://www.yeski.co.uk) (<http://www.yeski.co.uk>)). Long-established operator to Val d'Isère with traditional chalets ranging from simple to smart.

**Strength** Director lives in resort, good service.

**Taster** Chalet Jasmine (sleeps six), £590 per person.

## FOR TAILOR-MADE SOLUTIONS 0

**Made to Measure** (01243 533 333, [www.mtmhols.co.uk](http://www.mtmhols.co.uk) (<http://www.mtmhols.co.uk>)). Personally tailored holidays to 60 resorts in five countries. Also agents for catered chalets and packages offered by other operators.

**Strength** Flexible length of stay.

**Taster** Four-star Schloss Lehenberg, Kitzbühel, £1,287 per person.

**Momentum Ski** (020 7371 9111, [www.momentumski.com](http://www.momentumski.com) (<http://www.momentumski.com>)). Knowledgeable, flexible-length operator offering a selection of premier league resorts in Europe and North/South America.

**Strength** Italy (half-Italian owners) and corporate trips.

**Taster** Three-star Hotel Bouton d'Or, Courmayeur, £535, b&b.

**Ski Solutions à La Carte** (020 7471 7777, [www.skisolutions.com](http://www.skisolutions.com) (<http://www.skisolutions.com>)). Tour operator wing of the specialist ski travel agency. Upmarket variable-length holidays to hotels, apartments and private chalets in major resorts, including Zermatt and Courchevel 1850.

**Strength** Knowledgeable staff, emphasis on a complete service.

**Taster** Four-star Hotel Jagdhaus Monzabon, Lech, £1,160.

**White Roc Weekends** (020 7792 1188, [www.whiteroc.co.uk](http://www.whiteroc.co.uk) (<http://www.whiteroc.co.uk>)). Variable-length holidays to 20 resorts in France, Switzerland, Austria, and Italy.

**New** Gastein Valley, Austria.

**Strength** Finding luxury hotels for short stays.

**Taster** Four-star Hotel Grünerbaum, Bad Gastein, £665.

## FOR SHEER LUXURY 0

**Descent International** (020 7384 3854, [www.descent.co.uk](http://www.descent.co.uk) (<http://www.descent.co.uk>)). Most luxurious (and most expensive) chalet operator in the world. Some 15 chalets for the very rich in eight French and Swiss resorts.

**New** St Moritz.

**Strength** Service, cuisine and attention to detail.

**Taster** Chesa Albertini, St Moritz, £23,200 (sleeps 12), travel not included.

**Elegant Resorts** (01244 897 777, [www.elegantresorts.co.uk](http://www.elegantresorts.co.uk) (<http://www.elegantresorts.co.uk>)). Top-of-the-market Chester-based hotel operator with five-star hotels in Europe and North America.

**Strength** Ski arm of a major luxury holiday company.

**Taster** Five-star Hotel Hermitage, Cervinia, from £1,210.

**Flexiski** (0870 9090 754, [www.flexiski.com](http://www.flexiski.com) (<http://www.flexiski.com>)). Up-market hotel holidays to 13 resorts in France, Switzerland and Austria. Chalets in Courchevel 1850, Chamonix, Verbier and St Anton.

**New** Val Thorens and Megève.

**Strength** Flexible-length holidays, 19 years in the business.

**Taster** Chalet Chinchilla, Courchevel, £9,020 (sleeps eight), travel not included.

**Kaluma** (0870 442 8044, [www.kalumatravel.co.uk](http://www.kalumatravel.co.uk) (<http://www.kalumatravel.co.uk>)). Famous and boutique hotels in the Trois Vallées, Arlberg and Whistler. Short breaks, five-star chalets in Courchevel 1850.

**New** Hotel Le Cheval Blanc in Courchevel, belonging to the head of Louis Vuitton, Bernard Arnault.

**Strength** Local knowledge and attention to detail.

**Taster** Four-star de luxe Le St Joseph, Courchevel, £1,314.

**Powder Byrne** (020 8246 5300, [www.powderbyrne.com](http://www.powderbyrne.com) (<http://www.powderbyrne.com>)). Gilt-edged operator to four- and five-star hotels in the Arlberg region, St Cassiano in the Dolomites, Courchevel 1850 in France and five Swiss resorts.

**Strength** Widest range of specialist ski and snowboard courses for children.

**Taster** Five-star Hotel Mont Cervin, Zermatt, from £1,609.

**Scott Dunn** (020 8682 5050, [www.scottdunn.com](http://www.scottdunn.com) (<http://www.scottdunn.com>)). Descent's main rival at the top of the chalet market, with hedonistic properties in St Anton, Val d'Isère, Courchevel 1850, Méribel, Zermatt. Childcare available.

**New** Smart complex of four chalets in St Anton.

**Strength** Year-round staff who also work in the company's Mediterranean catered villas in summer.

**Taster** Chalet Chamois, Zermatt (sleeps eight), £1,065 per person.

**VIP** (08701 123 119, [www.vip-chalets.com](http://www.vip-chalets.com) (<http://www.vip-chalets.com>)) and **Snowline** (08701 123 118, [www.snowline.co.uk](http://www.snowline.co.uk) (<http://www.snowline.co.uk>)). Very successful sister companies with an expanding portfolio of chalets in Val d'Isère, Méribel, Morzine and La Tania. VIP has the pick of the properties in Val and Méribel. Both firms have crèches in Val and private nannies elsewhere.

**New** Zermatt for VIP.

**Strength** Company develops its own properties and thereby keeps prices lower than many others.

**VIP taster** The Farmhouse, Val d'Isère (sleeps eight), £699 per person.

## FOR CHALETS 0

**Finlays** (01573 226 611, [www.finlayski.com](http://www.finlayski.com) (<http://www.finlayski.com>)). Small chalet company with a dedicated following in Courchevel, Val d'Isère, and Paradiski.

**New** Chalet in Les Coches (Paradiski) for short breaks and weekends.

**Strength** Family-run business, one partner based in the Alps.

**Taster** Chalet Piera Menta, Les Coches (sleeps eight), £595 per person.

**Le Ski** (0870 754 4444, [www.leski.com](http://www.leski.com) (<http://www.leski.com>)). Family-run Huddersfield-based chalet operator to France, now in its 23rd season. Some 27 medium-priced en-suite chalets in Courchevel 1650, La Tania and Val d'Isère. Crèche in La Tania.

**New** Five chalets.

**Strength** Owns many of its chalets, dynamic management.

**Taster** Chalet Juniper, Courchevel (sleeps eight), £659 per person.

**Ski Beat** (01243 780 405, [www.skibeat.co.uk](http://www.skibeat.co.uk) (<http://www.skibeat.co.uk>)). Catered chalets in Méribel, La Tania, La Rosière, Val d'Isère, and Paradiski. Crèches in four resorts.

**New** Six purpose-built chalets in La Rosière.

**Strength** Flexible travel.

**Taster** Chalet Bouc Blanc, Plan Peisey (Les Arcs), sleeps eight, £499 per person.

**Ski Miquel** (01457 821200). Lancashire-based operator with long pedigree. Medium-priced holidays to Bad Gastein, Serre Chevalier, Alpe d'Huez, Whistler, Baqueira Beret in the Spanish Pyrenees, Lauterbrunnen near Mürren in Switzerland.

**New** Own hotel in Lauterbrunnen.

**Strength** Owns its hotels.

**Taster** Three-star Chalet Salana, Baqueira Beret, £410.

## FOR NORTH AMERICA

**North America Frontier Ski** (020 8776 8709, [www.frontier-ski.co.uk](http://www.frontier-ski.co.uk) (<http://www.frontier-ski.co.uk>)). Custom-made holidays to apartments and hotels in 15 resorts in Canada, also Alaska.

**Strength** Sound knowledge of resorts.

**Taster** Three-star Brewster's Mountain Lodge, Banff, £788, no meals.

**Ski Independence** (0845 310 3030, [www.sk-i.com](http://www.sk-i.com) (<http://www.sk-i.com>)). Edinburgh-based hotel, condo and chalet specialist, with the lion's share of the independent market. Also separate drive/fly programme to apartments and hotels in France.

**New** Alta in Utah, Apex in Canada. Free lift passes in Copper Mountain and Kicking Horse.

**Strength** Flight specialist, personal service.

**Taster** Chalet Ptarmigan, Vail, (sleeps 12), £879 to £929 per person.

**Ski Safari** (01273 224 060, [www.skisafari.com](http://www.skisafari.com) (<http://www.skisafari.com>)). Hotels and apartments in 42 resorts in North America, three in Chile.

**New** The Humber Valley in Newfoundland, Taos and Solitude in the US. Short breaks to Davos, Klosters and Engelberg in Switzerland.

**Strength** Knowledge of resorts.

**Taster** Four-star Summit Lodge, Whistler, £969 per person, no meals.

**Ski The American Dream** (0870 350 7547, [www.skidream.com](http://www.skidream.com) (<http://www.skidream.com>)). A specialist to North America, this company is undergoing a renaissance under new ownership. It offers 30 resorts in the region.

**New** User-friendly brochure and competitive pricing.

**Strength** Long-established name.

**Taster** Five-star Lodge at Vail, £1,475 per person, no meals.

## FOR SPECIALIST CHILDCARE

Prices include lift pass, lunch, children's ski equipment and transfers, but not flights.

**Club Med** (08453 676767, [www.clubmed.co.uk](http://www.clubmed.co.uk) (<http://www.clubmed.co.uk>)). Eighteen resorts in France, Italy, USA, Japan and Switzerland, with childcare.

**New** Snowboarding for eight-year-olds, freestyle, teenagers' ski programme.

**Strength** All-inclusive with flights, childcare, lessons, ski pass, insurance, full board and all drinks.

**Taster** Adult £806 per person, children £135-£688 per person, Avoriaz.

**Esprit Ski** (01252 618300, [www.esprit-holidays.co.uk](http://www.esprit-holidays.co.uk) (<http://www.esprit-holidays.co.uk>)) and Total Ski (08701 633633, [www.skitotal.com](http://www.skitotal.com) (<http://www.skitotal.com>)). Esprit is dedicated to childcare, with its own crèches from four months, and ski-school classes in 17 resorts in France, Austria, Switzerland and Italy.

**New Esprit** Les Gets in France. Total is more adult-oriented, with a rapidly expanding portfolio of chalets in 14 premier-league destinations in France, Switzerland, Austria and Italy.

**New Total** Chamonix, 24 chalets.

**Strength** (particularly Esprit) flexible crèche and ski school.

**Esprit taster** Chalet Annahof, Saas Fee, adult £599 per person, first child between two and 10 free.

**Total taster** Chalet L'Hermine, Les Gets, £479 per person.

**Family Ski Company** (01684 540333, [www.familyski.co.uk](http://www.familyski.co.uk) (<http://www.familyski.co.uk>)). Small operator with simple chalets, kindergarten, and its own ESF classes in three French resorts.

**Strength** British nannies for each ski class.

**Taster** Chalet Les Arolles, Les Coches (sleeps 14); adults £419 per person, children £409 per person, childcare £195; flights not included.

**Mark Warner** (0870 770 4228, [www.markwarner.co.uk](http://www.markwarner.co.uk) (<http://www.markwarner.co.uk>)). The original childcare specialist with crèches and clubs from four months to 12 years at clubhotels in seven resorts in France, as well as in St Anton in Austria.

**New** Ski-school escort service in adult-only hotels.

**Strength** Many have tried, but no one does it better.

**Taster** Hotel Schweizerhof, St Anton; adult £768, child £568, childcare £150-£285.

**Ski Famille** (0845 644 3764, [www.skifamille.co.uk](http://www.skifamille.co.uk) (<http://www.skifamille.co.uk>)). Chalets in Morzine and Les Gets with childcare included in the price. Ski-school escort service.

**New** Two chalets in Les Gets.

**Strength** Entirely geared towards small children.

**Taster** Chalet Marjorie, Les Gets (sleeps 20), adults £545 per person, child £440 per person, flights not included.

**Ski2** (01962 713330, [www.ski-2.com](http://www.ski-2.com) (<http://www.ski-2.com>)). Small, friendly operator to Champoluc and San Cassiano in Italy. Crèche in Champoluc. Weekends and short breaks.

**Strength** Runs its own BASI ski school in Champoluc.

**Taster** Four-star Hotel Relais des Glacier, Champoluc, £845. Childcare £34 per day.

- Order Peter Hardy's new book, 'The Great Skiing & Snowboarding Guide 2007' (Cadogan Guides), for £15.99 (free p&p) by ringing 01903 828503 ([mailorders@lbsltd.co.uk](mailto:mailorders@lbsltd.co.uk)).

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