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Ski season: your complete guide

There are just weeks to go before the official start of the ski season. Peter Hardy offers a month-by-month briefing on where to head for the best snow, at the best prices.

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Prices are per person for one week based on two people sharing a double or twin room. They include flights, transfers and half-board accommodation from the date of departure given, unless otherwise stated, and are subject to change and availability.

NOVEMBER – IF YOU CAN'T WAIT

Diehard snow addicts have been able to ski and board in the very highest resorts for much of the summer. But you need a dedication bordering on obsession to bother with heavy, wet snow on European glaciers or for the long journey to Argentina, Chile, Australia or New Zealand.

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However, the Alps are now chilling down after an encouragingly cool July and August. So much snow fell above Zermatt this summer that ascents of the Matterhorn were suspended — bad news for hungry climbing guides, but great news for skiers.

November glacier skiing can be surprisingly rewarding, with long runs and fresh powder. This winter I forecast that we can expect the best pre-season snow conditions at high altitude in at least five years.

Where to ski this month

Austria: Hintertux and the Stubai Glacier

France: Les Deux Alpes and Tignes

Switzerland: Saas Fee and Zermatt

Booking strategy

Now is the time to tune up technique for winter by booking a pre-season course, usually run by a ski school in conjunction with a tour operator. Few other packages are available this early. Alternatively, it's possible to book a short break independently, but you'll need to hire a car — transfer buses are a rarity before December 22 — and few hotels are open in November.

Budget guide

£599: Five days of instruction with Summit Ski & Snowboard School, Zermatt. Price includes lift pass, rail transfers and self-catering accommodation but not meals or flights. On The Piste (0871 871 8034, www.otp.co.uk (<http://www.otp.co.uk>)).

£879: Six days of instruction from Top Ski at the November Ski Clinics in Tignes. Weekend courses also available (£519-£669). Price also includes lift pass. Le Ski (0870 754 4444, www.leski.com (<http://www.leski.com>)).

DECEMBER – FOR EARLY PROMISE

This is the true start of the ski season, but not all low- or even medium-altitude destinations can be assured of snow. The number of European resorts where I would book a Christmas holiday is increasingly limited. Both the US and Canadian Rockies are more reliable than the Alps.

Christmas and New Year are expensive and crowded. But the week beginning December 15/16 is, by contrast, well-priced and people-free, although not all areas will be fully open yet.

Where to ski this month

Austria: Ischgl, Obertauern, Sölden

France: Alpe d'Huez, Les Deux Alpes, Tignes, Val d'Isère, Val Thorens

Finland: Levi

Italy: Cervinia, Livigno, Passo Tonale

Switzerland: Davos

US: Beaver Creek/Vail, Copper Mountain, Keystone

Canada: Fernie and Whistler

Booking strategy

Christmas and New Year need to be booked well in advance. For earlier weeks, wait and see where the snow falls before committing your money. For example, St Anton is normally a safe bet in December, but last year it failed to attract a single flake during the first half of the month.

Budget guide

£515: Three-star Hotel Wisenegg, Obertauern, from December 15. Thomson (0870 606 1470, www.thomsonski.co.uk (<http://www.thomsonski.co.uk>)).

£575: Four-star Hotel Bucaneve, in the centre of Cervinia from December 16. Thomson (0870 606 1470, www.thomsonski.co.uk (<http://www.thomsonski.co.uk>)).

£595: Christmas in the three-star Hotel Edelweiss, Passo Tonale, from December 22. Neilson (0845 070 3460, www.neilson.co.uk).

£677: Four-star Levitunturi Spa Hotel in Levi with family rooms for four (bunks in an alcove) from December 9. Inghams (020 8780 4433, www.ingham.co.uk).

£799: Chalet Ptarmigan, Vail, sleeps 12, from December 1 or 8. Ski Independence (0845 310 3030, www.ski-i.com).

£1,129: Christmas in Aspen Lodge, Val d'Isère from December 23. VIP (08701 123 119, www.vip-chalets.com).

£2,036: Christmas in a junior suite at the five-star Westin Resort & Spa, Whistler, from December 23, meals not included. Frontier Ski (020 8776 8709, www.frontier-ski.co.uk).

JANUARY – FOR COLD DAYS AND LATE DEALS

January is suffering from an identity crisis. What used to be a time of low prices and uncrowded slopes was undermined last season by poor snow cover in Europe.

But that's not the kernel of the problem. Newly rich Russians, Serbs and their neighbours now head to the likes of Courchevel and Kitzbühel in search of fun and snow over the Orthodox Christmas and New Year holidays during the first half of the month. In the most popular big-name resorts it's hard to find a hotel room or a table — and prices have risen accordingly.

An alternative is to head for a quiet resort, west to North America or east to Japan.

Where to ski this month

Andorra: Arinsal /La Massana, Soldeu

Austria: Alpbach, Bad Gastein, Lech/Zürs, St Anton, Wagrain, Zell-am-See

France: Les Arcs, Chamonix, Courchevel, Flaine, Méribel, Serre Chevalier

Italy: Kronplatz, Madonna di Campiglio, La Thuile

Switzerland: St Moritz, Verbier

US: Aspen, Jackson Hole, Taos, Park City, Deer Valley, The Canyons

Canada: Big White, Sun Peaks, Silver Star

Japan: Niseko, Furano, Rusutsu

Booking strategy

For Europe, play the waiting game. Discounts appear earlier and earlier each winter as the larger operators lose their nerve over the volume of holidays that remain unsold. It also makes sense to see how the snow lies before committing yourself.

Budget guide

£415: Four-star Hotel Magic Ski, La Massana, well-positioned for the gondola, from January 13. Panorama (0871 664 7897, www.panoramaski.co.uk) (<http://www.panoramaski.co.uk>).

£549: Chalet Antika, Verbier, sleeps 10, from January 5 or 26. Price does not include travel. Powder White (020 8877 8888, www.powderwhite.com) (<http://www.powderwhite.com>).

£815: Chalet Caribou, Courchevel 1650, sleeps six, from January 27. Le Ski (0870 754 4444. www.leski.com) (<http://www.leski.com>).

£825: Chalet Virage, Méribel, sleeps 18, free childcare, from January 20. Four Winds Meriski (01285 648 518, www.fourwindsresorts.com) (<http://www.fourwindsresorts.com>).

£1,095: Three-star deluxe Hotel St Martin, St-Martin-de-Belleville (Trois Vallées) from January 12, Kaluma Travel (0870 442 8044, www.kalumatravel.co.uk) (<http://www.kalumatravel.co.uk>).

£1,199: Five-star North Colter Lodge, Jackson Hole, sleeps 11, from January 26. Skiworld (0870 7879720, www.skiworld.ltd.uk) (<http://www.skiworld.ltd.uk>).

£1,335: Arlberg Lodges, St Anton, a complex of four luxury chalets just outside the town, each sleeping eight or 10, from January 6 or 30. Scott Dunn Ski (020 8682 5000, www.scottdunn.com) (<http://www.scottdunn.com>).

£1,588: Four-star Prince Hotel, Furano, from January 2. Inghams (020 8780 4433, www.ingham.co.uk) (<http://www.ingham.co.uk>).

FEBRUARY – DESPITE THE HIGH PRICES

This is the time to find the best snow of the winter, the highest prices, and the biggest crowds. But my advice is to give the French Alps a miss altogether during the half-term bunfight (February 9 and 16), which clashes with French school holidays. There are plenty of better places in which to enjoy a family break at a more reasonable price.

President's Weekend (February 14) is the start of the busiest North American week, but the volume of visitors even to Whistler and Vail is negligible compared with the crowds in the Trois Vallées.

Where to ski this month

Austria: Ellmau, Kitzbühel, Neustift, St Anton, Westendorf

France: Avoriaz, Les Gets, Megève, Morzine, Sainte-Foy, Samoens

Italy: Cortina d'Ampezzo, Corvara, Courmayeur, Sauze d'Oulx, San Cassiano, Selva, Sestriere

Spain: Baqueira-Beret

Sweden: Are

Norway: Hemsedal

Romania: Poiana Brasov Slovenia: Bohinj, Kranjska Gora, Krvavec

Switzerland: Klosters, Mürren, Champéry

US: Alta/Snowbird, Heavenly, Stowe, Squaw Valley, Sun Valley

Canada: Kicking Horse, Red Resort

Booking strategy

If you want the best chalets and the pick of the hotels you need to book months — in some cases even a year — in advance. Certainly you must hit the phone straight away if you have not yet booked for February 2008.

Flights, too, are hard to come by for the half-term weeks. Before booking, make sure that ski school and kindergarten places are still available.

Budget guide

£495: **Three-star Hotel Bouton d'Or, Courmayeur**, from February 3, b?&?b. Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111, www.momentumski.com (<http://www.momentumski.com>)).

£514: Four-star Hotel Zlatorog, Bohinj, 900m from the main ski area with bus stop outside, from February 9. Balkan Holidays (0845 130 1114, www.balkanolidays.co.uk (<http://www.balkanolidays.co.uk>)).

£565: Solana, Baqueira-Beret, simple, popular, convenient chalet hotel, from February 24. Ski Miquel (01457 821 200, www.miquelhols.co.uk (<http://www.miquelhols.co.uk>)).

£569: Chalet Igloo, Selva, sleeps eight, from February 3. Total Ski (08701 633 633, www.skital.com (<http://www.skital.com>)).

£609: Chalet Hofer, Neustift, family suites for up to six, childcare, from February 3 and 24. Esprit (01252 618300, www.esprit-holidays.co.uk (<http://www.esprit-holidays.co.uk>)).

£979: The Reselehof, St Anton, a three-star, 15th-century chalet-hotel that sleeps 27 and has been refurbished this summer, from February 10. Albus Travel (01449 711 952, www.albustravel.com (<http://www.albustravel.com>)).

£1,250 Four-star Hotel Monzabon, Lech (£100 off if booked in October), with taxi transfers, from February 3. Ski Solutions (020 7471 7700, www.skisolutions.com (<http://www.skisolutions.com>)).

£1,350 Yellowstone Chalet, Sainte-Foy, is a fine luxury chalet that has been refurbished throughout and sleeps up to 15, from February 3. Première Neige (0870 3831000, www.premiere-neige.com (<http://www.premiere-neige.com>)).

£1,589 Comfortable and central four-star Hotel Alpina, Klosters, from February 16. Powder Byrne (020 8246 5300, www.powderbyrne.com (<http://www.powderbyrne.com>)).

MARCH – FOR SPRING SNOW

Normally tour operators have a problem filling beds in March, despite the fact that the days are longer and warmer and snow conditions are some of the best of the winter. However in 2008 the Easter holiday falls at its earliest possible date — Good Friday is on March 21.

With the onset of spring, the snowline is now creeping up the mountain. The lower resorts in Austria and elsewhere are in their final weeks and you can expect slushy conditions at valley level as the month progresses.

Where to ski this month

Austria: Mayrhofen. Niedereau, Saalbach-Hinterglemm

Bulgaria: Bansko

France: Châtel, Barèges, La Plagne, Serre Chevalier

Germany: Garmisch-Partenkirchen

Italy: Arabba, Canazei, Champoluc, Ortisei

Norway: Trysil

Spain: Sierra Nevada

Switzerland: Andermatt, Arosa, Laax/Flims

US: Big Sky, Breckenridge, Steamboat, Taos, Telluride

Canada: Banff/Lake Louise, Kimberley, Panorama, Tremblant.

Booking strategy

March 22/23 is the busiest week and consequently the most expensive, with little chance of discounts. March 8/9 is the best value, with prices liable to drop further nearer to departure dates.

Budget guide

£223: Four-star Hameau du Rocher Blanc, a new block of MGM apartments in Serre Chevalier. Two-bedroom apartment for four, from March 22, priced per person, self-drive price includes Eurotunnel crossings. Peak Retreats 0870 770 0408, www.peakretreats.co.uk (<http://www.peakretreats.co.uk>).

£375: Four-star Hotel Perun, Bansko, a five-minute walk from the gondola, from March 8. Crystal (0870 160 6040, www.crystalholidays.co.uk (<http://www.crystalholidays.co.uk>)).

£806: Four-star Hotel Relais des Glaciers, Champoluc, from March 16. Price includes lift pass and airport transfer, but not flights. Ski2 (01962 713 330, www.ski-2.com (<http://www.ski-2.com>)).

£849: Summit View, La Plagne, a smart new complex of chalet apartments at Plagne Centre, each sleeps 6-12 people, from March 16. Snowline (0844 557 3118, www.snowline.co.uk (<http://www.snowline.co.uk>)).

£1,499 Fairmont Banff Springs, in a junior suite from March 3. Meals not included. Ski Safari (01273 224 060, www.skisafari.com (<http://www.skisafari.com>)).

£1,564 Two-bedroom apartment in L'Ecrin des Neiges, Tignes, sleeps four comfortably or six at a pinch, from March 8. Self-catering ski-drive price is for whole apartment and includes Eurotunnel crossings. Erna Low (0845 863 0525, www.ernalow.co.uk (<http://www.ernalow.co.uk>)).

£1,679 Five-star Tschuggen Grand Hotel, Arosa, from March 1. Kuoni (01306 742500, www.kuoni.co.uk (<http://www.kuoni.co.uk>)).

APRIL – SAVE THE BEST FOR LAST

Mass-market tour operators like to start shutting up shop two weeks after Easter, which in 2008 takes us to only April 5. But there is still excellent skiing to be found throughout the month.

In recent years winter has shifted forward by at least a fortnight and some of the biggest snowfalls have been in April. However, at modest altitudes the pistes tend to turn to slush by late morning, making conditions difficult for learners.

Only in the highest resorts will you find guaranteed good conditions that will last until early May, when the last lifts close for the season.

Where to ski this month

Austria: Hintertux, Kaprun, Sölden, Obertauern, Obertauern,

France: Chamonix, Val d'Isère/Tignes, Les Deux Alpes, La Grave, Val Thorens, Les Arcs, La Plagne, Vaujany

Italy: Bormio, Passo Tonale, Val Senales

Switzerland: Saas-Fee, Verbier, Zermatt,

US: Mammoth, Killington

Canada: Whistler

Booking strategy

As the month progresses, it becomes more difficult to find package deals and booking DIY on the internet may produce the best bargains. Good snow cover in these higher resorts is a certainty, so there's little advantage in leaving it until the last minute.

Budget guide

£303: Santons, Val d'Isère, is a well-furnished self-catering or semi-catered four-bedroom apartment close to the piste, from mid-April, travel not included. Mountain Rooms & Chalets (0700 2000 456, www.mrooms.co.uk (<http://www.mrooms.co.uk>)).

£597: Chaletotel Aiguille Percée, centrally located in Lac de Tignes, from April 13. Mark Warner (0871 703 3888, www.markwarner.co.uk) (<http://www.markwarner.co.uk>).

£598: Hotel Rissiou, Vaujany, a simple two-star renowned for its cuisine, from April 13. Ski Peak (01428 608070, www.skipeak.com) (<http://www.skipeak.com>).

£889: Studio in three-star Cascade Lodge in Whistler Village North, from April 5. Directski (0800 587 0945, www.directski.com) (<http://www.directski.com>).

£1,240: Westin Monache, Mammoth, a new five-star hotel, from April 21, price does not include meals. Ski Dream (0870 350 7547, www.skidream.com) (<http://www.skidream.com>).

£1,835: Chalet Zen, Zermatt, sleeps eight, travel not included, from April 13. Descent International (020 7384 3854, www.descent.co.uk) (<http://www.descent.co.uk>).

£1,833: Septième Ciel, Verbier, superb luxury chalet for 12 above the resort, from April 6. Ski Verbier (020 7385 8050, www.skiverbier.com) (<http://www.skiverbier.com>).

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