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## Courmayeur: the perfect break

With its freshly fallen snow and fine Italian food, the pretty village of Courmayeur is ideal for a short skiing holiday, says Nick Trend.

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### Why go now?

After a slow start to the season compared with the rest of the Alps, snow has now fallen in abundance on the Italian side. Courmayeur, at the foot of Mont Blanc, has had more than its fair share, including at least a foot of fresh powder at the end of last week. It is also one of the best all-round resorts for a skiing break, with a pretty village, a grand setting and some of the finest mountain restaurants in Italy.



Courmayeur's grand setting - at the foot of Mont Blanc - adds to its attraction

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### Travel by...

Plane to Turin, then it is less than two hours' drive up the autostrada towards the Mont Blanc tunnel. Courmayeur is just five minutes off the motorway.

If you can take a week, **Crystal Ski** (0871 231 2256, [www.crystalski.co.uk](http://www.crystalski.co.uk) (<http://www.crystalski.co.uk>)) offers packages to the hotels

listed below. For a shorter break, you will have to make your own arrangements. **British Airways** (0870 850 9850, [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com) (<http://www.ba.com>)), **EasyJet** ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com) (<http://www.easyjet.com>)) and **Ryanair** ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com) (<http://www.ryanair.com>)) all fly there. Fares from about £60 return. For hire cars, try **Holidayautos** (0870 400 4461, [www.holidayautos.co.uk](http://www.holidayautos.co.uk) (<http://www.holidayautos.co.uk>)) - a Group A car costs from £120 a week.

### Stay in...

Courmayeur village - pretty, pedestrianised and a cable-car ride away from the ski area. The four-star **Grand Hotel Royal & Golf** (from £595), right in the centre of the village, is the pick of the top-end hotels and only a short walk from the cable-car station. The three-star **Hotel Del Viale** (from £445) is an excellent, family-run option. It's a little way out of the centre but runs a mini-bus shuttle to the lifts. **For sheer good value, go for the Hotel Bouton d'Or** (from £365 b&b), **a simple but comfortable hotel near the main square**. Prices are per person for a week's half board package (including flights from Gatwick) with Crystal Ski.

### Spend the day...

Exploring the mountain. The main ski area is fairly compact, with good, varied, mostly intermediate pistes weaving above and below the treeline. In clear weather, ski on the south side in the mornings and the north side, which has lovely views of Mont Blanc (Monte Bianco to the Italians), in the afternoon.

### Lunch on...

The piste, of course. Courmayeur mountain restaurants are not necessarily fancy or expensive, but they do offer excellent Italian cooking, which is just what you want after a hard morning's skiing. My favourites are as follows (no need to book, but try to arrive before 1pm). Le Petit Mont Blanc, opposite the Zerotta chairlift: crowded, but the service is very friendly and the pasta excellent. Main courses about 10 euros.

La Maison Vieille, by the Tzaly drag lift, a laid-back bistro and a great location on a sunny day: good value pastas and pizzas for 8 euros. Rifugio di Monte Bianco, on the black run down to the Zerotta chair: polenta specialties about 9 euros.

### Ski alternatives...

Courmayeur offers enough pistes (plus some off-piste opportunities, see below) for about four days of varied skiing. More than that and you might want to take a day trip to another resort. Tour operators like Crystal offer excursions, such as a day out in Chamonix (about an hour away through the Mont Blanc tunnel) for about 35 euros, Pila (35 euros) or La Thuile, accessible on a free bus and has links to La Rosiere.

### Enjoy your après ski at...

The bars on the Via Roma, the pedestrianised main street of the village. The best of these is the Bar Roma - relax in antique sofas and enjoy a huge buffet of free nibbles to go with your drink.

### Have dinner in...

Your hotel. If you can get a half board deal at a hotel you should make the most of it. I had excellent meals at the Hotel del Viale. If you prefer to go out, for budget evenings the best pizzas in town are at **Du Tunnel** on Via Circonvallazione (0039 0165 841 705 - from about 20 euros a head). For more of a treat, try the sophisticated French-Italian cuisine at **Cadran Solaire** (0039 0165 844 609), on Via Roma, where main courses cost from about 20 euros.

### Stay up late at...

**Poppy's Bar** on the Via Circonvallazione. Open until 4am, it has a small dance floor and occasional live music. Alternatively, try **Jimmy's** nightclub underneath the Hotel Astoria.

### Recover by...

Clearing your head on an off-piste excursion down the famous Vallée Blanche - the glacier immediately below Mont Blanc - which runs down to Chamonix. It is not technically demanding, but you must have a guide. Expect to pay about 70 euros per head (minimum group four) for the transfer to the Punta Helbronner cable car and the guiding.

Expert skiers can stay in Courmayeur and try the off piste there: the best areas are off the side of Cresta Youla down the Val Verny or from the top of Cresta d'Arp - but, again, do not go without a qualified guide.

### At all costs avoid...

Hiring your skis at the bottom of the cable car - choose a rental shop at the top which offers overnight storage, then you won't have to lug your equipment down the mountain each day.

### For more information...

Visit the Courmayeur Tourist Office (0039 0165 842 060).

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