



Five places to go downhill fast

A weekend on the piste delivers an instant high. Sean Newsom picks the Alpine resorts for a quick getaway

It sounds exhausting. You've got to clear your desk early, fight your way to the airport and suffer the check-in queues. Then there's the cramped flight and the late-night drive to the resort. And that's before you've expended one ounce of effort on the slopes. There's no doubt about it: a weekend skiing break in the Alps can be an intimate dating prospect.

But that's only if you've never tried one. Because, no matter how much stress it takes to get there, people always seem to come back from the mountains with their tails up and their eyes shining. It's hardly surprising, really. There can't be too many better ways to pack a weekend with good things. Stunning scenery and high-speed adventure come as standard. Add a little sunlight, good company and some decent food and wine, and it's easy to see why this kind of break has become a fixture in so many calendars.

Interested? Then here are five of the best resorts to target for a high-speed winter escape. Each has some sensational skiing and boarding, and can easily be reached from an Alpine airport. Crucially, none is an A-list destination for a week-long skiing trip — which means the hotels will be keen to welcome you for just a weekend. In big-name resorts such as Val d'Isère, Zermatt or Courchevel, this is all but impossible, except in the middle of January or at the very last minute (though some tour operators have weekend room allocations there — see below). In each of our five suggested destinations, however, both independent and package travellers should find rich pickings.

COURMAYEUR, ITALY

If you're a laid-back intermediate or a plucky powder hound, you'll love Courmayeur. True, its suburbs straggle indecorously along the valley, and the cable car up to the slopes can be a bore: but in every other respect, it is tailor-made for your needs. The ski area has just enough wide, well-groomed trails to keep on-piste cruisers happy for two or three days, while experts will be salivating at the thought of the off-piste on offer on the Mont Blanc massif beyond.

Although Courmayeur lies only just beyond the Mont Blanc tunnel, it's refreshingly Italian in feel — from the exquisitely dressed weekenders to the brio of the mountain restaurants.

People tend to go on about the food in the French Alps, but I much prefer it this side of the border. At its best, it's effortlessly superior — simple, fresh, and often ridiculously cheap — and there's no better place to try it than at Maison Vieille, atop the lift of the same name.

Nearest airport: Geneva (90 minutes by car), although Turin is almost as near.

Where to stay: the three-star Bouton d'Or (00 39-0165 846729, www.hotelboutondor.com; doubles from £76, B&B) and the four-star Pavillon (0165 846120, www.pavillon.it; doubles from £150, half-board) are both close to the main cable car and Bar Roma, the best bar in town.

Tourist information: 0165 842060, www.courmayeur.net.

GRESSONEY, ITALY

Like Courmayeur, Gressoney is a resort that will delight both intermediate cruisers and hard-core, hairy-chested types. It's part of the Monterosa lift system, a bafflingly underrated area jammed up against the Swiss border and home to some of the finest skiing, both on piste and off, in the Alps. What's more, you're unlikely ever to queue for a lift here.

The only drawback is that after dark, the nearest thing to nightlife is usually a couple of off-duty Swedish adrenaline addicts strumming their guitars in the bar of the Hotel Dufour. Here, the skiing takes precedence over everything else, and after a day on its spectacular slopes, that will come as no surprise whatsoever.

Nearest airport: Turin (2 hours by car).

Where to stay: in Gressoney La Trinité, at the top of the valley, if you can. It's closer to the lifts, and to the best restaurant in the valley: the Capanna Carla (00 39-0125 366130), an exquisite little place that's strong on local food and wine. The three-star Hotel Dufour (0125 366139, www.hoteldufour.it) has doubles for £70, half-board. If availability is limited here, try the four-star Hotel Gressoney (0125 355986; doubles from £76, B&B), in Gressoney St Jean.

Tourist information: 0125 359915, www.gressoneymonterosa.it.

()

SAAS-FEE, SWITZERLAND

Of all the resorts here, this is the most difficult to reach — a three-hour drive (or four hours by train and bus) from Geneva that takes you into an isolated valley high in the Swiss Alps.

For those with only two days to burn, the journey is probably an hour too long to contemplate. For everyone else, however, the effort is entirely justified by the resort that awaits you: cute, car-free and blessed with some wonderfully long and varied descents. Because it's so far from the big airports and cities, Saas-Fee is also quieter than more famous neighbours such as Zermatt: by no means dead, but altogether less mass-market in feel.

Nearest airport: Geneva (3 hours by car).

Where to stay: for the young at heart, first choice has to be the Hotel Dom (00 41-27 957 5101, www.uniquedom.com; doubles from £104, half-board) — home to the liveliest bars in town and some very hip decor. For a quieter night and quicker access to the slopes, try the three-star Hotel Derby (27 957 2345; doubles from £86, half-board), a couple of minutes' walk from the lifts.

Tourist information: 27 958 1858, www.saasfee.ch.

DAVOS, SWITZERLAND

Davos shares its ski area with Klosters, which we Brits mainly know for Prince Charles, who skis there every winter with his sons. It's all a little odd. This is a vast area, and an unusually snowy one, too, because it sits close to the continental divide and seems to snag every storm going. Yet, like the Monterosa lift system in Italy, it attracts hardly any British attention.

This is probably because the skiing is split into five separate areas and sits above a rather workaday town. But in an age where uncrowded slopes and good snow are at a premium, its virtues are too good to ignore, while its vices will barely register during a weekend break.

Nearest airport: Zurich (2½ hours by car, or 2-3 hours by train).

Where to stay: the three-star, chalet-style Sporthotel Parsenn (00 41-81 416 3232, www.hotelparsenn.ch; doubles from £114, B&B) is a good bet. Its immediate surroundings are a bit charmless, but you can't argue with its proximity to the Parsenn lift, which gives access to some fab on- and off-piste runs. For a more intimate atmosphere, try the three-star Davoserhof (81 414 9400; doubles from £60pp, B&B).

Tourist information: 81 415 2121, www.davos.ch.

CHAMONIX, FRANCE

Dominated by the mighty Mont Blanc massif, Chamonix has for years been the extreme- skiing capital of winter sports. Recently, it has also become its most popular short-break destination, thanks to its proximity to Geneva airport (barely an hour away by car) and the willingness of chalet-owners and hoteliers to take weekend bookings. So well trodden is the path from the UK to Chamonix that a private members' club in London's Soho will this week open a hybrid hotel and bar, the Clubhouse, right in the town.

Intermediates who want to build their confidence and technique on a big network of connected pistes should look elsewhere, but for sybarites, party people and adrenaline freaks, it's the place to be.

Nearest airport: Geneva (1 hour by car).

Where to stay: the Clubhouse (00 33-4 50 90 96 56, www.clubhouse.fr; doubles from £178, B&B) opens on Tuesday, and features such delights as sex toys in the minibar and double-size shower cubicles.

The Hameau Albert 1er (04 50 53 05 09, www.hameaualbert.fr; doubles from £252, B&B) is even swankier, mixing reclaimed timbers, high-tech mod cons and a Michelin-starred restaurant. But hard-core skiers will be happiest at the Hôtel Les Grands Montets (04 50 54 06 66, www.hotel-grands-montets.com; doubles from £80, B&B), in Argentière, next to the Grands Montets lift.

Tourist information: 04 50 53 00 24, www.chamonix.com.

()

Travel brief

Getting there: good flight deals to Geneva in January include EasyJet (0870 600 0000, www.easyjet.com) from Bristol, Gatwick, Nottingham, Liverpool, Luton and Newcastle, from £50; Jet2 (0871 226 1737, www.jet2.com) from Leeds/Bradford and

Manchester, from £100; and Aer Lingus (0818 365000, www.aerlingus.com) from Dublin, from about €160. Ryanair (0871 246 0000, www.ryanair.com) flies to Turin from Stansted; from £53 in January. Good January fares to Zurich include British Airways (0870 850 9850, www.ba.com) from Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester, from about £100; Swiss (0845 601 0956, www.swiss.com) from London City (from £88) and Birmingham (from £134); and Aer Lingus (0818 365000, www.aerlingus.com) from Dublin, from about €160.

Resort transfers: a hire car is the most economical option for a group of three or more; otherwise, the Swiss railway is an efficient and relaxing way to arrive in the mountains. Holiday Autos (0870 400 0010, www.holidayautos.co.uk) has three days' inclusive car hire from £77, from all three airports. Or try Carrentals.co.uk (0845 225 0845, www.carrentals.co.uk), Europcar (0870 607 5000, www.europcar.co.uk) or Sixt (0870 155 5900, www.e-sixt.co.uk). A return train journey to Saas-Fee from Geneva, or to Davos from Zurich, costs £54pp when booked through the Swiss Travel Centre (020 7292 1550, uk.myswitzerland.com). Another option for Chamonix is a coach. Several companies operate from Geneva airport; SAT (00 33 4 50 78 05 33, www.chamonix.com) has several departures a day at £37pp return.

Specialist operators: many weekend ski specialists have a favourite resort — Momentum Ski, for example, knows Courmayeur inside out — and they have the kind of relationships with hotels that can secure rooms not available to the likes of you and me. Of course, you'll pay a premium for their services — £100pp-£150pp extra is quite normal — but you'll also avoid spending hours on the internet. Operators include: Alpine Answers Select (020 8871 2728, www.alpineanswers.co.uk); Alpine Weekends (020 8944 9762, www.alpineweekends.com); Made to Measure (01243 533333, www.mtmhols.co.uk); Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111, www.momentum.uk.com); Ski Solutions (020 7471 7777, www.skisolutions.com); Ski Weekend (0870 060 0615, www.skiweekend.com); White Roc (020 7792 1188, www.whiteroc.co.uk).

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your [advertisement](#).

Times Online Services: [Dating](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Property Search](#) | [Used Cars](#) | [Holidays](#) | [Births, Marriages, Deaths](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [E-paper](#)
News International associated websites: [Globrix Property Search](#) | [Milkround](#)

Copyright 2009 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

