



A flying visit to the Alps

With all those no-frills flights, planning a ski weekend is easy... if you can find a hotel. Sean Newsom picks the best beds for short-breakers

For several years now, the low-cost airlines have targeted the Alps, offering skiers and snowboarders the possibility of ultra-cheap, super-flexible holidays. And what started as a sprinkling of routes has now turned into a blizzard. In total, the no-frills carriers are offering flights to the Alps from 18 UK regional airports, as well as the hubs of Gatwick, Stansted and Luton, with return fares starting at about £40, including tax.

But where are we going to stay? The Alps are still not geared up for the kind of flexible, do-it-yourself holidays the low-cost carriers encourage. In many A-list resorts, such as Verbier and Val d'Isère, demand for beds is so high, hotels and apartment agencies can sell almost everything in week-by-week blocks. But if you know where to look, you can find the ideal hotels for turning cheap flights into great ski breaks.

CUBE Tröpolach, Austria

Why: Cube doesn't belong in Tröpolach. A super-cool modernist block of concrete and metal, it seems to have crash-landed in the middle of this conservative Carinthian village. Part-hotel, part-hostel, part-nightclub, it's a perfect base for gung-ho, twentysomething weekends, with doorstep access to Nassfeld's excellent 100km of pistes.

But: Nassfeld is for on-piste carvers and cruisers — off-piste options are limited.

How: fly to Ljubljana from Stansted with EasyJet, and pick up a hire car — the drive takes about 90 minutes. Carrentals.co.uk (0845 225 0845, www.carrentals.co.uk) has Ford Focus-size cars for £205 for four days.

00 43 4285 841 2020, www.cube-hotels.com; *doubles from £53 per night, B&B. You have to buy a ski pass as part of the package — £20pp per day*

HOTEL LES GRANDS MONTETS Argentière, France

Why: a good three-star hotel only three minutes' walk from the cable car to the Grands Montets. The nightlife is a bus ride away in Chamonix, but with the world's best lift-serviced extreme skiing on your doorstep, who cares?

But: there's not much point in being here unless you want to ski hard. Novices will be much happier at La Tania (see below).

How: fly to Geneva with EasyJet, Flybe, BA, Aer Lingus, Ryanair, BMI Baby or Jet2. Pick up a hire car, for example from Europcar (0870 607 5000, www.europcar.co.uk), or jump on a coach — SAT (00 33 4 50 78 05 33, www.sat-montblanc.com) offers return transfers for £38pp.

00 33 4 50 54 06 66, www.hotel-grands-montets.com; *doubles from £81 per night, B&B*

HOTEL TELEMAR La Tania, France

Why: it's almost unheard of — a hotel in the Trois Vallées offering short breaks. The 12-room Telemark is new this season and has been set up with the short-hop market in mind. Book early — it's bound to be popular.

But: La Tania is on the outer limits of Courchevel's lift system, at only 1,350 metres, and at the beginning and end of the season, you may have to ride the lifts to reach the snow.

How: fly to Grenoble with BA, EasyJet or Ryanair; to Lyons with BA, BMI Baby, Ryanair, EasyJet or Thomsonfly; or to Chambéry with Flybe or Jet2. Chambéry is the closest — 90 minutes away by car, at most. Hertz (0870 599 6699, www.hertz.co.uk) has hire cars at all three airports: a four-day rental from Grenoble costs from £100.

01202 653456, www.hoteltelemark.com; *doubles from £74 per night, B&B*

SPORTHOTEL IGLS

Igls, Austria

Why: if you live near Gatwick and can take advantage of GB Airways's new flights to Innsbruck, Igls is by far the most convenient short-break ski spot in the Alps. The four-star Sporthotel is the place to stay — central, comfortable, well organised and only 10 minutes by taxi from the airport.

But: Igls has a gorgeous, three-mile, intermediate-level descent, but not much else. You'll want to catch the free 25-minute shuttle bus to Axamer Lizum on day two.

How: fly to Innsbruck with GB Airways (see BA for contact details) or Austrian Airlines — then get a cab. Public transport is well organised and a hire car is pointless.

00 43 512 377241, www.sporthotel-igls.com; *doubles from £66pp, half-board*

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HOTEL GRESSONEY

Gressoney St Jean, Italy

Why: there are hotels closer to the lifts in Gressoney, but you can't be sure of getting rooms for short breaks. So, target the Hotel Gressoney instead, a five-minute drive down this stunning Alpine valley. It's a clean, bright and friendly place — although I wouldn't book it on a half-board basis. Instead, head up the valley to the gorgeous Capanna Carla (00 39 0125 366130) for dinner. It's the kind of Italian mountain restaurant that knocks its French rivals into a cocked hat.

But: Gressoney is not beginner-friendly terrain. Off-pisters and confident, carving intermediates will, on the other hand, be gobsmacked by the quality of the skiing on offer here.

How: fly to Turin with BA, Ryanair or EasyJet; or to Milan with BA, Aer Lingus, BMI Baby or EasyJet. Turin is the closer — two hours by car. From there, four days' car hire starts at £109 with Avis (0870 010 0287, www.avis.co.uk).

00 39 0125 355986, www.hotelsgressoney.com; *doubles from £75 per night, B&B*

HOTEL BOUTON D'OR

Courmayeur, Italy

Why: Courmayeur can be as gracious or as gnarly as you want — everything's on offer here, from immaculately groomed pistes to some of the most hair-raising couloirs in the Alps. **The Bouton d'Or is an ideal base: used to weekenders, and offering good three-star accommodation on the edge of the town centre.**

But: it's a bit of a hike to the cable car — 10-15 minutes. Bear in mind, too, that Courmayeur is best skied before the middle of March. Late season, the pistes can become very slushy.

How: fly to Geneva (see Argentière, above). Courmayeur is only 30 minutes on from Chamonix, through the Mont Blanc tunnel. (The Fréjus tunnel has reopened, so Mont Blanc is queue-free at last.)

00 39 0165 846729, www.hotelboutondor.com; *doubles from £60 per night, B&B*

RIDERS PALACE

Laax, Switzerland

Why: having opened in 2001, the Riders Palace became an instant classic — a high-tech, modernist vision of wood, concrete and glass, set against a backdrop of pines. But there's more to Laax than architecture. The resort is only 90 minutes from Zurich and many of the city's young guns congregate here at weekends, putting on a stunning display of acrobatics in the half-pipe. For anyone who's caught the freestyling bug, it's a place of pilgrimage.

But: there's no food available at the hotel, even at breakfast. The nearest restaurant is a 150-metre walk away. And the hotel's bar and nightclub are the social hub of the resort — early nights are out of the question.

How: fly to Zurich with BA, Aer Lingus and Swiss, and pick up a hire car. Sixt (0870 156 7567; www.e-sixt.co.uk) has four-day rentals from £159.

00 41 81 927 9700, www.riderspalace.ch; *doubles from £52 per night, room-only, including lift ticket*

Airline contacts (with their each-way ski-carry fee, per ski bag, in italics): Aer Lingus (0818 365 000, www.aerlingus.com), €25; Austrian Airlines (0870 124 2625, www.aua.com), free; BA (0870 850 9850, www.ba.com), free within 23kg allowance; BMI Baby (0870 264 2229, www.bmibaby.com), £15; EasyJet (www.easyjet.com), £15; Flybe (0871 700 0535, www.flybe.com), £15-£20; Jet2 (0871 226 1737, www.jet2.com), £10; Ryanair (www.ryanair.com), £17; Swiss (0845 601 0956, www.swiss.com), free; Thomsonfly (0870 190 0737, www.thomsonfly.com), £15.

Too lazy? Want someone to sort your ski break for you? Tailor-made specialists include Momentum (020 7371 9111, www.momentumski.com) and Ski Solutions (020 7471 7700, www.skisolutions.com). Or try off-the-peg breaks, such as those from Ski Weekend (0870 060 0615, www.skiweekend.com) and Alpine Weekends (020 8944 9762, www.alpineweekends.com).

...or buy a place

Ski pads in Austria start at just £47,000.

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