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Resort report: Courmayeur, Italy

Don't be fooled by the flashy Italians who come for the food as much as the skiing - you can do Courmayeur on the cheap



(Courmayeur.ch)

Kate Whittaker

Compiled by Kate Whittaker from www.maddogski.com

Courmayeur is the kind of place that oozes sophistication, surrounded by majestic peaks, and bustling with Italians accessorised with fur coats and matching lapdogs.

It is in the Aosta Valley, famous for its fine wines and obsessive dedication to good food. If you feel like splashing the cash, there is no shortage of boutiques in the historical village's picturesque streets.

It's not style above substance, either. Although the ski area is relatively small, with just 100km of pistes, there are good opportunities for off-piste skiing whether you are an advanced skier, or even a confident intermediate.

Not least among the attractions is the famous Vallée Blanche route, which takes you 24km down to Chamonix on the French side of the Italian-Swiss border. Whilst accessible to strong intermediates, guides are essential for anyone embarking on the Vallée Blanche. You can also sample heli-skiing on the Mont Blanc Massif.

Other good news is that 80 per cent of Courmayeur's slopes are covered by snow cannons. For intermediates building their confidence, there are some good blue runs off the top of the Pra Neyron six-seater chair. And, if you feel like a change and want to venture further afield, you can easily visit the nearby resorts of La Thuile and Pila.

Alternatively Chamonix is only 24km away through the Mont Blanc tunnel if the off piste route doesn't appeal.

Full of Brits > 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 > [Test my languages](#)

You can attempt to speak in tongues to the locals, many of whom are bilingual in Italian and French. French used to be the official language of the region, called Piedmont, and is still used in courts and for local administration. If you're no linguist, then there is no cause for concern, as most resort staff people speak English too.

This is particularly essential for ski school instructors, such as at the friendly [Snowboard and Ski School Courmayeur](#). On the weekends the resort swells with Italians from the nearby towns of Milan and Turin.

Quiet bars > 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 > [Beerhalls and clubs](#)

When the Italians come out in their droves on the weekends, the nightlife can get lively. To scout for the super-glamazons, head to The Cadran Solaire. The Privé is a cocktail bar and the American Bar, which is next door, has delicious wines.

Otherwise, the nightlife can be pretty laid-back. Bar Roma serves free antipasti in the early evening: These are so good, be sure to leave room for dinner. Other relaxed and sophisticated joints include Café della Posta and Bar des Guides, both of which have slouchy sofas and a fireplace.

Cheap cheerful food > 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 > [Haute cuisine](#)

Many claim the main reasons to ski in Courmayeur is for the food, otherwise you are missing the point. Italian food is of course, excellent and some of the best can be consumed at Cadran Solaire, [Terrazza](#) and Pierre Alexis.

A famous culinary attraction is a taxi ride away. [Maison de Filippo](#) at Entrèves serves a fixed price 36-course banquet.

On the slopes there are many restaurants, outnumbering the lifts, in fact. A lot of offer good rustic food, local pizzas and pastas.

It is worth booking ahead to get a table, especially for Chiecco and [Maison Vieille](#). There are also great self-service restaurants with sun terraces.

DIY apartments > 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 > Mountain boutique hotels

Hotels range from five-star and bedecked with antique furniture (Gran Baita) to one-star Christiania based in Plan Checruit, via several family-run, cosy, three-star establishments. These include charming [Bouton D'Or](#), Berthod and Maison St Jean. The Grand Chalet apartments offer spa facilities to unwind after a day on the slopes.

Grown-ups only > 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 > Family friendly

Courmayeur's beginner slopes can be quite crowded, especially as there aren't many easy runs to progress to – so it is not ideal for young children. Teens may be miffed by the lack of terrain park if they are into jumping or half-pipe. On the other hand, what child doesn't like pizza and pasta?

This is a resort well-suited to adults, from its classy nightlife and its romantic setting to its fine wines. True wine aficionados might even consider taking a break from the skiing for an afternoon to taste Aosta valley wines. Some tour operators organise winery tours with an English-speaking sommelier.

Wide open pistes > 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 > Ski the trees

There is some tree skiing in Val Veny, where there is one long blue or a couple of black runs from the Zerotta chair down into Val Veny. There is also a home run down through the trees in Plan Checruit, although the area above that, Checruit, is more exposed if murky weather comes in. The Checruit area has a very wide red slope that is ideal for intermediate cruising and carving.

Easy skiing only > 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 > Red and blacks

The majority of pistes here are red, 62 per cent in fact, making this an ideal resort for intermediate skiers and boarders, while 11 per cent are blacks.

Most piste-hungry advanced skiers can ski the entire resort in a day, which makes Courmayeur a good ski weekend destination.

There really aren't that many blues, only about quarter of the runs, so if you are a beginner or very unconfident intermediate it is probably best to hone your skills elsewhere.

The run with the biggest vertical drop is the Cresta Youla to Dolonne with a vertical drop of 1,400m, which requires some stamina.

Swanky shopping > 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 > Extra adrenaline activities

If you are looking for adrenaline, you can't get much better than heli-skiing. Rack up the vert until your legs wobble from drops on the Mont Blanc Massif. Heli-skiing is legal on the Italian side of the border, but not in France.

The [Mountain Guides Society](#) of Courmayeur runs heli-skiing and guiding. A two-day heli "Discovery" costs €360 per person and operates in groups of four.

However, there is also quality shopping to appease the Milanese and Torinese appetite for all things fine. Expect to see women in fur coats shopping in designer boutiques, jewellery shops and galleries.

Young in body > 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 > Young in mind

You could easily have two separate types of holiday in Courmayeur. One, you could hit the off-piste hard, and perhaps even venture into the realms of heli-skiing. Or, two, you could have a nice cruisy time of it, long, lingering lunches, munch your way through several antipasti with your pre-dinner aperitif, and having a long, lingering dinner before reclining in a cosy sofa in a firelit bar.

Add a wine tour in the nearby gourmet Mecca of Alba to the itinerary and the verdict for Courmayeur definitely comes out in favour of the young of mind.

Bargain basement > 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 > Push the boat out

Courmayeur is pretty average as far as resorts go in terms of the price of food and drink, but then there is a large variety of different eateries, and so there is scope to spend less, or considerably more. It's not as expensive as popular resorts in France

and Switzerland when it comes to consumables.

If you really want to spend a lot of money you could stay in a five-star hotel, heli-ski and eat your way through 36-course tasting menus. Oh, and visits to the well-heeled shops could disarm you some cash. Equally, you can do Courmayeur on the (relative) cheap.

Nearest airport: Geneva and Milan airports are 1.5-2 hours away

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