

LET IT SNOW

It's time to dust off those skis, pack up the thermals and plan a winter break to the snowy slopes

WORDS DAN SAVERY PICTURES GETTY IMAGES



FLY Flybe has regular flights to Geneva from Birmingham, Exeter, Isle of Man, Jersey, Newquay, Norwich and Southampton

While sun-worshippers live for the summer, others are just as fanatical about snow and can't wait for winter to arrive. Skiers will tell you there is nothing better than gliding through crisp snow down a mountain slope.

In Europe, winter sports enthusiasts are spoilt for choice. There are hundreds of ski areas to choose from and you don't have to be a world-class downhill racer to enjoy a winter break, as most resorts now provide activities for beginners and non-skiers.

Skiing has a long history; skis were originally used in northern Europe as a means of transport. What started out as a way to get around grew in popularity as a sport by the 1900s. If you're a novice skier, it's best to take lessons rather than attempting to brave a ski

slope on your own the first time. A competent instructor can show you and your family the proper techniques while also ensuring that you start on a slope that's appropriate for your skill level.

Majestic Mont Blanc

For their sheer size and range, the French Alps attract the most visitors. One of the few serious contenders for the title of "world's most famous ski resort," is Chamonix, Mont Blanc. It has the world's biggest lift-served vertical drop of 2,807 metres (9,209 feet) and one of the world's longest runs through the Vallée Blanche. Chamonix is 80 kilometres (50 miles) south-east of Geneva, the nearest airport.

Mont Blanc is Europe's greatest summit and for years it had a dangerous reputation. In the

18th century many climbers on expeditions died trying to reach its peak. Today, you can tour the summit by helicopter, but most visitors climb the mountain by cable car. There are several exhilarating cable car and train routes up the slopes around Chamonix. None are cheap, but a view of Mont Blanc close up is an unforgettable experience.

In 1924, Chamonix hosted the first-ever Winter Olympics, but although it hasn't held the games since, its facilities have kept up with the times. If you are not a keen skier, there is still plenty to do. There are innumerable walking possibilities, casinos, gourmet restaurants, health and spa clubs, and if you really want a bird's-eye view of Chamonix, you could try paragliding.

It is also home to the Musée Alpin, housed >

in the historic Chamonix-Palace, which retraces the history of Alpine life.

The nearby resort of Argentière is set at the head of the valley of Chamonix. It's the starting point for the cable car up to Les Grands Montets, a skiing area famous for its steep and demanding slopes. Within Argentière resort there are 16 ski runs, extending over a total of 30 kilometres (19 miles) and featuring 11 lifts.

One of a raft of purpose-built resorts that sprang up in the 1960s, Flaine, situated in a bowl on the edge of the Grand Massif, is experiencing a long-overdue resurgence. Its nearest airport is Geneva (44 miles), but it is also within striking distance of Chambéry (84 miles). Flaine is one of the highest resorts in Europe and was originally designed by architect Marcel Breuer in 1968. Flaine also has a wealth of non-skiing alternatives for which it has become famous, including the Renault Ice Driving school, the snowmobiling operation and the paragliding and hang-gliding schools. The resort is now hot property and giant developer Intrawest, (who built Whistler and Mont Tremblant resorts in Canada), are building their latest complex in Flaine. When finished in 2012, it will be the Alp's largest new resort – Flaine Montsoleil.

Britain's number one female skier Chemmy Alcott likes Flaine so much that she bought a property there. "Like Val d'Isere in France it's very English," says Chemmy. "But for someone like me who is always travelling, it's nice to hear familiar accents."

Into the Three Valleys

Slightly further south is the airport of Chambéry. This is an extremely useful airport for winter sports enthusiasts as it is just 60 miles from the Trois-Vallées ski area. Les Trois-Vallées boasts the largest interconnecting network of ski runs in the world. In other words, this is ski heaven!

Méribel is tucked away down its own private wooded valley, but is worth the trip as it is a fashionable and stylish resort. The neighbouring resort of Courchevel is set on three levels, the lowest (Courchevel 1550) is considered to be the most beautiful and is made up almost entirely of chalets.

Further up the valley is La Plagne, one of the biggest ski and snowboarding areas in the world. La Plagne makes a great destination for a family ski holiday or for a mixed-ability group. The Vanoise Express cable car links La >



FLY Flybe has regular flights to Chambéry from Birmingham (from 15th December, Saturdays), Exeter (from 15th December, Saturdays), Norwich (from 15th December) and Southampton (from 15th December, four weekly)

Plagne to Les Arcs to form the combined ski area Paradiski. This winter, La Plagne will be open for skiing from December 10th, with the Paradiski ski area from December 23rd.

In some ways La Plagne is the ultimate Alpine resort. It has an Olympic bobsleigh piste, open to public and professionals alike, ice rinks, youth clubs, dog-sled rides, swimming pools, fitness centres, squash courts, an indoor climbing wall, go-karting, paint ball, bowling and even natural waterfalls to practise ice climbing. It is also home to the Jean-Luc Cretier slalom stadium, purpose-built and floodlit for night skiing.



A touch of Swiss bliss

Crossing the border into Switzerland and heading east of Lake Geneva, the chic resort of Gstaad is part of a thriving ski circuit, south of Berne, the Swiss capital.

Tree-lined slopes provide gentle, undulating skiing, while mountain lakes and glaciers provide the backdrop. There are 85 kilometres (53 miles) of groomed slopes and the four valleys of the Bernese Oberland include at least six other resorts, which are accessible from Gstaad by a system of gondolas, mountain railroads and 70 lifts that transport a whopping 50,000 skiers per hour. The season at Gstaad runs from December to mid-April, but the Diablerets Glacier also offers skiing during the summer months.

If you really want a white-knuckle ride, then you could also take part in the relatively new sport of heli-skiing (which is off-trail, downhill skiing only reached by a helicopter).

Non-skiing attractions include curling, ballooning, swimming and tennis. Nearby, Switzerland's first casino and the 13th century Château de Chillon are worthy attractions at Montreux, on the banks of Lake Geneva.

Also in Switzerland, Les Collons lies in the Thyon ski area, two hours from Geneva. Less of a resort and more of a village, Les Collons has an obvious edge over neighbouring settlements.

"All the other villages face north and have a view looking down to the Rhône Valley," says Simon Malster of Investors in Property, who

specialise in ski properties. "But Les Collons is much higher with some wonderful uncrowded pistes and a view of Switzerland's most famous mountain, the Matterhorn."

If you are flying into Berne, then pay a visit to the very pretty, historic, year-round resort of Grindelwald. Located just 75 kilometres (50 miles) from Berne's airport, it is the largest on the Jungfrau region pass, which includes Wengen and Murren.

As well as excellent skiing for all abilities, Grindelwald has around 50 kilometres (30 miles) of winter footpaths to explore, a variety of toboggan runs, a ski and snowboard school, museums and a cinema. It's the perfect resort for everyone, from families to couples. >



FLY Flybe has regular flights to Berne from Birmingham (from 2nd February, Saturdays) and Southampton (from 15th December).

Austria's winter wonderland

Some people say Austria is the perfect country for ski holidays. Of the total area of Austria, only about a quarter can be considered low lying and as the Alps cover most of the country, there can be no worries about finding new terrain. You can fly into Salzburg Amadeus Mozart Airport and enter a winter wonderland. Salzburgerland is full of world-class ski resorts such as Flachau (pictured here), Kleinarl, Wagrain and Mühlbach. Each of these towns is filled with fairytale country houses and hotels that offer skiing from your front door.

One of the fastest-growing resorts in Salzburgerland is Zell am See. Located 80 kilometres (50 miles) from Salzburg, it is a small town originally founded by monks on the shores of Lake Zell. Today it has a car-free centre with a wide range of shops, restaurants and off-slope activity options. Zell offers year-round skiing thanks to its bus link to the glacier

of neighbouring Kaprun. Advanced skiers can choose from several long, medium-steep black runs descending through the forest back down to the resort. Zell has a reputation for good off-piste powder when conditions are right.

In terms of property, prices tend to be much cheaper here than France and Switzerland. For example, it is still possible to find two-bedroom apartments in quiet rural area on the outskirts of Salzburg for less than £140,000, (see www.investorsinproperty.com).

Austrians are very protective of their tourist industry and do their best to keep improving their resorts, but without encroaching too much on the surrounding environment.



FLY Flybe has flights to Salzburg from Exeter (from 15th December, Saturdays) and Southampton (from 15th December, Saturdays)

Responsible skiing

Top tips from the Ski Club of Great Britain's *Respect the Mountain* campaign



1. Be aware of your environmental impact as skiers and boarders and do what you can to minimise it.
2. Do not litter the slopes.
3. Respect the natural habitat of mountain animals and plants. If you ski through
4. Choose a resort which uses environmentally-friendly practices (see www.respectthemountain.com).
5. Encourage tour operators to adopt green policies.
6. Do your bit to reduce climate change on holiday and at home. Reuse your towels each day and switch off electrical appliances.
7. If you are desperate to go off-piste, use a recommended guide who can show you the best places to go without damaging the area.

PROPERTY FOCUS



CHALET CHIC

Where: Vercorin, Switzerland.

What: These three luxurious chalets in Vercorin have three bedrooms (one en-suite), set on 500 square metre plots.

Price: £380,000

Contact: Alpine Property Investments: www.alpinepropertyinvestments.co.uk



ALPINE APARTMENTS

Where: Tignes, France

What: Stunning two, three and four-bedroom apartments at Le Nevada, with heated pool, Jacuzzi, sauna, gym and steam rooms in one of the most snow-sure regions in the French Alps.

Price: €354,000 (£240,660)

Contact: MGM: www.mgm-constructeur.com



SUPERB SKI HOMES

Where: Les Collons, Switzerland

What: Fantastic three-bed and four-bed apartments with spa.

Price: £315,000

Contact: Alpine Property Investments: www.alpinepropertyinvestments.co.uk

TOP GEAR

So, you've booked your winter break – now all you need is to get kitted up. Here's our selection of some of the best clothing and equipment you'll need to give you that cutting edge on the slopes...

ESSENTIALS MUST BUYS

1. Just for women

The Roxy range from Quicksilver includes poles, skis and boots designed for women. www.ellis-brigham.com

2. Smokin' sunglasses

Tag Heuer Sport Vision ski shades. Six colours, three shapes and five lenses. £111. www.tagheuer.com

3. Mind your head

Protect your head with this fabulous Giro Helmet G10 MX Matt Sepia. £109.99. Filarinkis: 02392 499599 or order on 02392 476100; www.filarinkis.co.uk

4. Toasted toes

Dry out your boots and heat them up with a pair of £25.95 Therm-ic Boot Warmers. Snow and Rock. 0845 1001000

5. Ladies ski helmet

High impact Giro Encore Signature Model Gretchen Bleiler for ladies. Filarinkis: 02392 499599 or order on 02392 476100; www.filarinkis.co.uk

6. Keep your hands warm

Dakine Sequoia GT Silver Glove with nose and goggle wipe thumb panels. £30. Filarinkis: 02392 499599 or order on 02392 476100; www.filarinkis.co.uk

7. Watch this space

Swiss-made water-resistant Oakley Orbital Brushed Sunburst Red Blade 2 watch. £227.50. Filarinkis: 02392 499599 or order on 02392 476100; www.filarinkis.co.uk

