

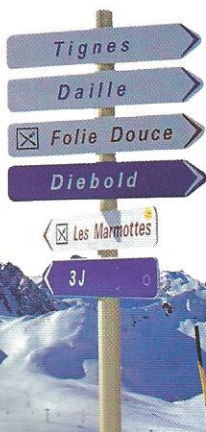


Country Life
30-Nov-11

The cream of the ski resorts

Felice Hardy profiles the destinations that boast world-class snow, shopping, eating and *après-ski*

All roads lead to snow: visitors to Val D'Isère can ski the superb space Killy terrain



VAL D'ISÈRE, St Anton, Zürs and Aspen are the skiing world's most significant resorts. All of them offer the highest quality of skiing and snowboarding, some fabulous off-*piste* skiing, lots of village atmosphere and a good range of shops, restaurants and bars. All of them have a distinguished history, and are very much the opposite of the modern, purpose-built eyesore resorts.

St Anton, Austria

St Anton is to skiing what St Andrews is to golf. The ancient village at the foot of the Arlberg Pass was the 19th-century birthplace of modern technique, and for 120 years, it has maintained its place as one of the top five ski resorts in the world.

The village has evolved into a blend of old and new, with a compact, traffic-free centre lined with shops, cafes and high-quality hotels. It's also home to some of the most exciting nightlife in Austria.

This winter sees new hotels and restaurants springing up all over the resort. They include Hotel M3 (00 43 5446 2968; www.m3hotel.at), which is a Minimalist, four-star establishment. A new boutique hotel will also be opening its doors—the Mooser (00 43 5446 2644; www.themooser.at) is on the *piste* right next to the MooserWirt, a former cowshed that's the resort's famous

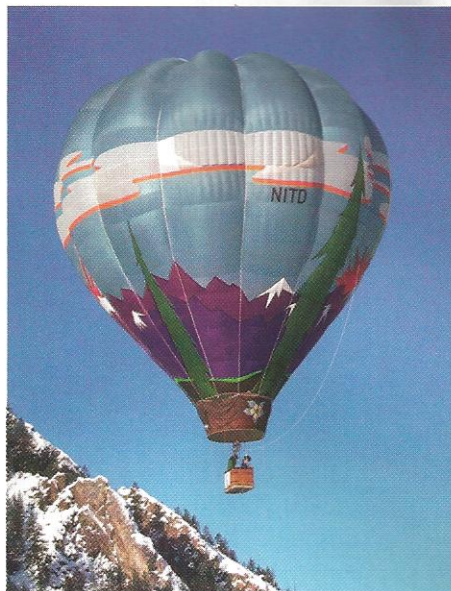
watering hole. However, the new hotel isn't aimed at the young, beer-swilling *après-ski*ers who dance on the tables, but at an older, wealthier clientele who'll appreciate the smart accommodation.

But it's the sensational skiing that St Anton is all about. The off-*piste* is superb, with the only disadvantage being that the resort attracts large numbers of experts who are on the first lift when there's fresh powder. Wherever you decide to ski, it's essential to hire a local guide to find the area's best off-*piste*. Without this, you'll be floundering around, failing to discover the highest-quality terrain. Beginners and nervous intermediates should steer well clear of the resort—unless they're party animals wanting to do a little fair-weather skiing. The easier Rendl area does provide a modest amount of gentle slopes.

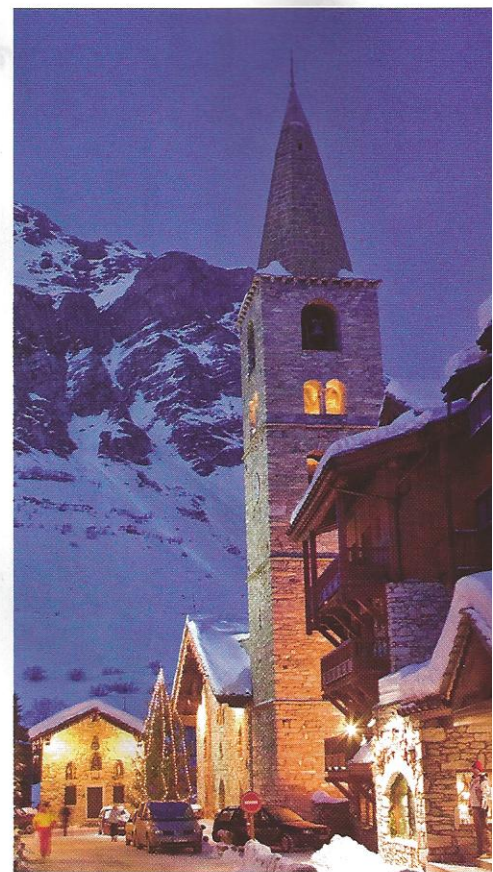
From £145pp per night B&B at the Mooser Hotel, through Kaluma (01730 260 263; www.kalumatravel.co.uk). Alternatively, from £2,500pp per week half board at Chalet Artemis, including flights and transfers, with Scott Dunn (020-8682 5450; www.scottdunn.com/ski)

Zürs, Austria

Away from the bustle of St Anton, but with access to the whole Arlberg ski area, is the charming and discreet resort of Zürs. Consisting mainly of upmarket, well-run, privately owned hotels, it's favoured by



Above Ballooning in Aspen. **Left** Venturing off-piste in St Anton, famous for its powder



Val D'Isère's bars, restaurants and hotels are a welcome sight at the end of the day

geographical situation, which creates a snow-sure micro-climate. You can ski in the giant area shared by Val and Tignes from late November until early May.

Eight access points take you up the mountain, ensuring that, even during high season, queuing isn't a major problem. The quickest way into the lift system is to catch either the Funival funicular from La Daille or the jumbo Olympique gondola at the foot of the nursery slopes.

The best lunches are to be found at the table-service restaurant upstairs at Le Signal at the top of Le Fornet's cable car, and in the village, the Michelin-starred La Table de l'Ours at Les Barmes de l'Ours is the brightest star in town. When it comes to partying, Dicks Tea Bar is one of the best-known clubs in the Alps.

It shouldn't, therefore, come as much of a surprise, given the terrain and night-life here, that many of the best ski instructors in the Alps work in the resort. The quality of Val d'Isère's ski schools and guiding companies is consequently very high, with two of them—Progression Ski and The Development Company—owned by British instructors.

Chalet Santons Isère is close to the slopes and town and sleeps six in three double rooms, from \$425pp per week, half board, with Fish & Pips (0845 474 1054; www.fishandpips.co.uk)

Aspen, Colorado, USA

Aspen is one of those rare resorts where the variety of terrain means it suits everyone, from beginner to expert. In the 1880s it was briefly the silver-mining capital of the world, and the grand Victorian buildings proudly remain today, housing smart hotels and more than 200 shops and art galleries that provide Bond Street-calibre retail therapy

The skiing is made up of four quite

separate mountains all linked by ski-bus. Buttermilk is the beginner area, with lots of easy green runs; it also has an enormous terrain park. Snowmass is the largest area and suited to all standards. Aspen Highlands has the most rugged skiing, and Aspen Mountain is conveniently set above the town, with terrain classified as difficult to discourage beginners and wobbly intermediates, although any reasonably confident skier can enjoy the superb top-to-bottom runs.

The dazzling array of activities in the resort includes hot-air-ballooning over the mountains at sunrise or sunset, or for more down-to-earth entertainment, there's dog-sledding, snowmobile tours or private Snowcat rides up the mountain.

The Aspen Recreation Center is home to a vast ice-skating rink, two pools, a two-storey water slide and a 32ft climbing tower. The hedonistic Aspen Club & Spa is the second largest spa in Colorado, with 34 treatment rooms. Deciding which area to stay in is tricky. Aspen undoubtedly has the best atmosphere and most of the restaurants and nightclubs, but Snowmass is the ski-in, ski-out family centre, and Highlands is for serious skiers who catch the first lift of the morning.

From \$1,125pp B&B at the Limelight Lodge, including flights and transfers, with Ski Safari (01273 224060; www.skisafari.com)

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families who come back year after year. Don't be surprised by the number of people whose names begin with Mac—the denizens of the Scottish Highlands seem to have made this their corner of the Alps.

There are free buses everywhere, but don't muddle Zürs with Zug or you'll be subjected to an undeniably scenic but inconveniently lengthy tour of the valley. The ski school is friendly and cosy and holds a slalom tournament at the end of the week. Zürs is great for the Easter holidays, as it's the highest resort in the area.

Seasons (01244 206030; www.seasons.co.uk) offers seven nights from £1,825pp based on two sharing a double/twin room at Thurnher's Alpenhof, a delightful, family-owned hotel with just 14 rooms and 24 suites. Local guide Roman will reveal the secrets of the slopes, and, on your return, the swimming pool and panoramic restaurant await

Val d'Isère, France

Val d'Isère is a major centre for dedicated skiers and snowboarders from all over the world. The quality of the terrain is so varied and demanding that its most devoted followers never ski anywhere else. The focal point of the resort is Val Village, a cluster of old-style buildings housing a range of boutiques and sports shops.

Val d'Isère's biggest plus point is its fortunate combination of altitude and

Roger Crackness/Classic/Alamy; Dreamstime; Kennan Ward/Corbis; Jean-Daniel Sudres/Hermès/Corbis; Ben Filthmore/Alamy

