

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 Take to the air 1 The tension of waiting for the weather to break, the expectation as the helicopter rotors begin to spin, the eagle's-eye view of pristine wilderness peaks as you're flown to the drop zone, the deep, dry snow you get to ride... all of these contribute to the thrilling experience of heli snowsports in Canada. With a week in a lodge in the middle of nowhere, being flown to new runs every day, that thrill can be repeated again and again.

Over 50 years since it pioneered this experience, CMH Heli-Skiing has now expanded to offer a huge choice of bases. There's the original Bugaboo Lodge in the Purcell Mountains or McBride in the Cariboo, which allows access to over 2,000 sq km of terrain. Or pick the very remote Adamant Lodge in the Selkirks, with spectacular views of the glaciers and forests you'll be riding in small groups of up to five. CMH Heli-Skiing (001 403 762 7100; www.canadianmountainholidays.com) offers five nights' full board in the Adamant Lodge and five days' heli-skiing from CA\$7,375 (£4,470). Flights not included.

Ski some classic off-piste 2 The Laub off-piste route in Engelberg, Switzerland, is a one-shot deal - 1,100m vertical in one go, a vast powder field with no cliffs, trees or other obstacles, and a pitch of around 40 degrees the whole way. It's north-facing, and about 500m wide for most of its length, so the day after a snowfall only the latest sleeper will fail to get untracked snow the whole way down.

However, Engelberg is not a place to be risk-taking on without a guide and avalanche safety equipment. The Laub experience combines spiritual euphoria, as you link endless off-piste turns in a natural rhythm, and femoral agony as you don't stop linking them. At just a 75-minute drive from Zurich, Engelberg is ideal for a weekend break.

Flexiski (020 8939 0862; www.flexiski.com) offers four nights' b&b at the three-star Hotel Bellevue Terminus from £696.

Experience ultimate aprÈs 3 The Mooserwirt in St Anton is the place that defined Austrian aprÈs in all its naughtiness and riotous excess. Whether in the disco cow barn interior or on the terrace, prepare to be swept up in a huge crowd of skiers and snowboarders of all ages. They happily leave their musical taste at the door, and dance on the tables in ski or board boots to the infectiously terrible tunes played by DJ Gerhard, such as DJ Ötzi's Hey Baby and oompah-techno versions of Take Me Home, Country Roads. Staff carry their body weight in beer steins, schnapps shots (complete with pear on a cocktail stick), vodka-Red Bulls and Jägerbombs to sustain the crowds. VIP SKI (020 8875 1957; www.vip-chalets.com) offers seven nights' chalet board at Hotel Montjola from £929.

Live the American dream 4 There are so many good reasons to go to North America. As a general rule the slopes are much quieter, the pistes better groomed, the queues more orderly and fellow slope users are politer. It's also safer. European resorts define safe and unsafe via poles at the sides of pistes that indicate when you're heading beyond the protection of ski patrol and avalanche control. But in North America, anywhere within the ski area boundary is designated safe, including off-piste ungroomed snow. All resorts have in-bounds off-piste, but some leave large chunks ungroomed to offer a backcountry challenge with an inbounds safety net.

If you're going to make the journey stateside, then a resort that encompasses all the best features of American skiing is Aspen in Colorado. The four-hour drive or short plane flight from Denver ensures very peaceful slopes, and with its three different areas to explore it really does offer something for all levels of skiers and snowboarders. Unlike many US resorts, the town is buzzing and filled with superb places to eat.

Ski Independence (0131 243 8097; www.ski-i.com) offers 10 nights in the five-star Little Nell, room only, from £3,588.

Wallow in luxury in Gstaad 5 "Ski-running" holidays began thanks to Swiss hoteliers persuading wealthy Britons to extend their summers in the Alps and experience winter delights. There is a special understated luxury and old-world charm to such places. Many of the most luxurious were in Gstaad and that holds true today - the small village has four five-star hotels. The Grand Hotel Park, which opened in 1910, underwent a huge refit a century later with designer Federica Palacios introducing a contemporary aesthetic with a masculine red and slate-grey theme, set against blond pine. Rooms are equipped with Bang & Olufsen home entertainment, while the GraffDiamonds and A Lange & Söhne lobby boutiques are reminders of the five-star status. As well as a fine-dining restaurant, the Park has an Argentine asado, a sushi bar and little wooden chalet in the grounds, where fondue etc is served. The leathercovered bar is a great place to sit and discuss cocktails and rare cognacs with knowledgeable bartenders, and a comfortable cigar room makes smokers feel unusually welcome. The spa area has a saltwater pool, Turkish baths and saunas, and treatment rooms with Aromatherapy Associates products, plus a gym (with personal trainer) and hair salon. The concierge, naturally, can organise any activities, be it local skiing, snowboarding on Glacier 3000 or hot-air ballooning in Château d'Oex.

Exosphere (020 7591 4972; www.exosphere.com) offers three nights' b&b at Grand Hotel Park, Gstaad, from £1,260.

Last for longer in the Alps 6 Alpe d'Huez in France presents one of cycling's greatest tests of endurance - a 1,100m vertical climb over 13km of road, via 21 hairpin bends to the summit. Equally challenging, its winter downhill equivalent comes as a pair - the black pistes of Le Tunnel and Sarenne. They both begin at Pic Blanc (3,330m), but they're not identical twins. At 16km, Sarenne is the longest piste of any colour in the Alps, but Le Tunnel is steep, bumpy and often icy - do it first, with fresh legs. The route begins when the eponymous tunnel, rough-hewn out of the mountain, emerges on to a ledge at the top of a lumpy 800m-high wall of www.snow. Be sure of your first turn but don't wait too long before taking the plunge - nerves build with time and, anyway, there is extra kudos to be had from descending it all in a smooth, continuous rhythm. After the initial extremely steep pitch, there's a brief respite before a merely steep one. On the run-out, don't miss the Lac Blanc chair, which links to Pic Blanc for part two of the challenge.

Sarenne is never frighteningly steep, but it is relentless, can be bumpy and occasionally dives down suddenly. Take your time - it's also beautiful and worth savouring. From the high, wide-open, sunny

ridge at the top, it flows like the glacier it is into the valley. When the steep part ends after about 8km, what's left is a green trail through the pretty Gorges de Sarenne, past little chalets in the trees, along with a babbling brook in spring - eight more kilometres in which you can figuratively put your feet up and take pride in your achievement. Ski Total (01483 345 553; www.skitotal.com) offers seven nights' chalet board in Chalet La Brêche from £719.

Say cheese!

7 In Switzerland, fondue nights are a much loved tradition that's stood the test of time. First there's the out-of-hours fun of riding a lift at night - in Mürren in the Jungfrau region, this is the funicular up to the Allmendhubel restaurant, which hosts fondue evenings in archetypal Swiss style. Then there's the fun of heading back outside for a sedate torchlit ski or snowboard descent, or, for the younger and more adventurous, heading down on the Alps' best toboggan route.

Snow-Wise (020 3397 8450; www.snow-wise.com) offers seven nights at the four-star Hotel Eiger from £1,395.

Ski across a border 8 A day's heli in the high Alps lets you fly over some of Europe's most dramatic peaks to reach its remotest terrain - and get back in time to regale companions in the bar with jargon such as "LZ" and "vert" (landing zone and vertical descent to the uninitiated). Italy has the most permissive rules on helicopter activity and the Monte Rosa massif offers the most variety, with dozens of routes.

The classic is the Zermatt Tour. A day's outing with Guide Monterosa starts at Gressoney in Italy, airlifting to an impressive 4,151m on the Colle del Lys (or another high pass, depending on conditions), before you head into Switzerland over the stunning serac-strewn glacial terrain of the Grenzgletscher. You use the Zermatt lifts to return to the border at the Breithorn pass, hike a little, then come back into Gressoney via Champoluc. The last leg is a full afternoon's descent in itself, over the Verra Grande glacier. Ski Total (01483 345 553; www.skitotal.com) offers seven nights' chalet board in the four-diamond Chalet Hotel Breithorn in Champoluc from £639. It can arrange a day's heli-skiing with Guide Alpine Champoluc-Ayas from (EURO)200.

Head south for the winter 9 Surrounded by sharp Andean peaks, including South America's highest mountain (6,961m Aconcagua), the Portillo hotel, on the Chilean side of the border with Argentina, feels a little like a luxury cruise liner tossed on a frozen sea, with condors in place of albatrosses. It has formal service to match (although there is also a staffbar with a more genuine local feel, offering pisco sours and Andean folk music) and almost exclusive use of the ski area.

As well as the pistes, including long blue runs, there are numerous off-piste opportunities accessed by traverses, notably from the top of the resort's unique va-et-vient lifts (which translates as "go and come"). These are slingshots designed especially for Portillo's avalanche-prone black runs, where

pylons are impractical. A sort of five-person T-bar is winched to the base of the lift, held like a crossbow while riders load, and then released. You are shot straight uphill, over bumps and ruts, until the tension eases - at which point you have to make a jump turn off the lift to avoid sliding backwards and flipping over.

Scott Dunn (020 8682 5050; www.scottdunn.com) offers seven nights' full board, including lift pass, at Hotel Portillo, Chile, from £3,700.

Do four valleys in a day 10 The Trois Vallées ski area in France boasts 600km of connected pistes shared between the valleys of Courchevel, Méribel and Belleville (which includes the resorts of Val Thorens and Les Menuires), but the name is too modest. Although it indicates three, there is a fourth valley, on from Val Thorens - the sunny Maurienne, with some almost deserted runs. A thighstraining challenge is to ride all four valleys in one day.

Plan the route the night before, then fly down some of the most dramatic, best-groomed pistes in the Alps with joyful abandon. The blue Creux speedway from Saulire into Courchevel; the picturesque Pyramide on the eastern extreme of the area; the wild red Combe du Vallon in Méribel (although the Mont du Vallon detour is only for the fastest); the lovely quick black Combe de Caron above Les Menuires; Christine in Val Thorens, with its 700m drop down the Péclet glacier; Jérusalem, rolling and banking like an oversized boardercross run above St Martin; and Corala in the Maurienne valley, starting at 3,230m - the highest point in the Trois Vallées - and also the start point of a zipwire crossing high above the glacier du Bouchet to the col de Thorens. Wherever you're staying, be sure to catch your final connecting lift home in time!

Méribel-based Meriski (01285 648518; www.meriski.co.uk) offers seven nights' chalet board accommodation in Chalet le Grenier from £22,000 for the whole chalet (six bedrooms).

Go downhill all the way 11 There is something truly special about skiing in the tracks of downhill racers, imagining what it must be like to complete a course at the warp speeds they reach. There are many resorts where you can do this at your own, much more sedate pace, from the Dave Murray Downhill course in Whistler to the 1992 Winter Olympic Downhill run down La Face in Val d'Isère.

The one that really stands out from the crowd, though, is Kitzbuhel's the Streif, renowned among racers for its fearsome test of bravery. Like an F1 track, this piste has features with world-famous names that echo in the mind from watching Klammer or Cuche on Ski Sunday - Steilhang, Seidlalm, Hausberg and Mausefalle. The latter, with a name that translates as "mousetrap", is a jump with a pitch of more than 40 degrees, so racers hitting it at nearly 100kph fly almost 80m. Elsewhere, the highest speeds approach 150kph. A few days after the race - this year on Saturday, January 21 - much of the course is opened to the public, with the jumps removed, until the end of the season. Even when going slowly, this unpisted ski route can be steep and tricky and by the time you reach the bottom you'll be in even greater awe of the professionals who ski it flat out.

Daily Telegraph

20 ultimate ski experiences - Hit the heights with heli-skiing, pamper yourself in a luxury chalet, or try Michelin fine dining on the slopes. Chris Madigan takes his pick of the world's greatest winter wonders

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Crystal Ski Holidays (020 8939 0726; www.crystalski.co.uk) offers seven nights at the four-star Hotel Jägerwirt in Kitzbühel from £655.

Get Michelin-star struck 12 The French Alps have become a serious foodie destination - in fact, with 12 Michelin-starred restaurants, the Trois Vallées has more than cities such as Bordeaux. The most celebrated is La Bouitte near St Martin de Belleville, where father-and-son team René and Maxime Continued on page 4 WHAT'S INCLUDED Prices are per person, based on two people sharing a double or twin, half board, for seven nights including flights and transfers unless stated otherwise. Chalet board includes breakfast, afternoon tea and dinner with unlimited wine.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3 Meilleur have lived up to their name with the award of their third Michelin star this month and contributed to the resort winning "gastro resort of the year" at the recent Telegraph World Snow Awards. However, the restaurant to watch in the future is L'Azimut in Courchevel 1300 (Le Praz). It's a humble bistro at first glance, but chef-proprietor François Moureaux uses state-of-the-art techniques, regional produce and the occasional exotic ingredient to wonderful effect. Dishes could include scallop coral (the orange bit) mousse with cauliflower and curry foams and Iranian black lime, or veal in liquorice with Jerusalem artichoke. His (EURO)35 three-course lunch is incredible value; booking is essential. L'Azimut (0033 479 062590; www.restaurantazimut.com).

Le Ski (01484 548996; www.leski.com) offers seven nights' chalet board accommodation in L'Orchidee, Courchevel, from £644.

Hike to a legendary run 13 In the world's great resorts, there are often boot-packed tracks at the top of lifts, leading up another few hundred metres. These are left by people who know that 15 minutes or so spent tramping uphill can lead to a snowy paradise. The best example of this is the aptly named Stairway To Heaven on the Col des Gentianes at 2,950m in Verbier,...