

Top 10 alternative ski bases

Swap big mainstream resorts for a stylish, more individual skiing holiday lower down the mountain. Chris Madigan picks 10 of the best valley-based places to stay

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Come down off the mountain ... and find an alternative ski holiday in the valley. Photograph: Cultura/Corbis

Purpose-built, high-altitude ski resorts can feel too much like holiday camps in places where there shouldn't be any. There are alternatives lower down the mountain...

1. Chalet Saskia, Vaujany, France

Alpe d'Huez is best known as the summit of switchback ascent on the Tour de France. Come winter it's a great ski area, but is often rejected because it embodies all that's wrong with French purpose-built resorts. Little Vaujany, over the ridge, is an attractive village alternative that's child-friendly and relatively car-free. Vaujany specialists Ski Peak run this smart, award-winning chalet that comes with balcony views from every room and a well-regarded Kiwi chef.

The skiing: With nearly 250km of pistes, Alpe d'Huez isn't quite in the Champions League, but it has its great days. It's good for beginners, intermediates and experts alike. Experienced skiers can pick from a black run accessed by a tunnel, the longest run in the Alps (also black), or a huge range of off-piste terrain.

Details: Book a week's stay in half the chalet (seven people) from £599, or the whole house (14 people) from £1353, half-board, including flights and transfer; skipeak.com

2. La Petite Auberge, Bourg Saint Maurice, France

Bourg has several advantages if you're staying down the valley. It's home to Tarentaise's rail terminus – and therefore a major bus depot for accessing the surrounding resorts. Everything is cheaper down here, making it a popular base for aspiring pro skiers and snowboarders - so it's not as dull as some valley towns. La Petite Auberge is run by a British couple but is palpably French; neat, cosy rooms and Savoyarde specialities in the restaurant.

The skiing: A funicular runs from the railway station up to Les Arcs' slopes, which in turn are linked by the Vanoise Express cable car to La Plagne. There's certainly a week's worth of skiing there, but if you have itchy ski boots, buses also run up to Val d'Isère, Tignes and, nearest of all, La Rosière, from which you can ski into Italy.

Details: From £368pp for a week's half board, including Eurostar from Waterloo to Bourg; ernalow.com

3. Casa dell'Ava, Pianazzola, Chiavenna, Italy

Representing what is hopefully a trend in winter holidays, Casa dell'Ava is a house in a mountain village just north of Lake Como that you can hire on either a catered or self-catering basis. It meets Responsible Travel standards for heating (using recycled paper pellets), (hydro)electricity and support for local conservation (with a donation to Orobic National Park).

The skiing: Not only is Casa dell'Ava eco-aware, it's also removed from the production line of ski resort life. The British owners will take you skiing in St Moritz and Madesimo, and run walks through villages, into the wildlife preserve and up the Dolomite peaks, providing a real insight into mountain life.

Details: One week's self-catering for up to six people costs from £390 (from £930 half-board); casadellava.com. For flights to Bergamo visit Ryanair (Stansted, Luton, East Midlands, Liverpool, Newcastle, Prestwick) and Jet2 (Manchester, Leeds,

Edinburgh, Belfast)

4. Naturhotel Moosmair, near Bruneck, Italy

Situated in the German-speaking Südtirol region of Italy, among the jagged Dolomite peaks, Moosmair has six rooms with distinct characters – some clad in reclaimed wood panelling; others with fresh larch; and one even has a glass-roofed bathroom. Sadly the option of a hay bed on the balcony is only available in the summer, but the on-site Hexenküche ("witch apothecary") runs a spa centre all year.

The skiing: The village of Acereto is short drive from the Sella Ronda ski circuit, which includes Val Gardena, ideal for a day's intermediate skiing. Also nearby is the chic resort of Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Details: From €285pp (£199) for a week's half board; moosmair.it. BA fly to Verona from London Stansted and Gatwick.

5. Piller d'Angle, Courmayeur, Italy

Courmayeur is an old valley town rather than a modern resort. Entrèves is its suburban hamlet and the site of this lovely auberge. Two cosy chalets provide accommodation in the form of bedrooms, suites and apartments. It has been recently upgraded to include a spa complex and a big-screen TV room for Six Nations rugby weekends.

The skiing: The hotel runs a free shuttle bus into Courmayeur, but Entrèves also has its own cable-car access to Courmayeur's largely gentle pistes. Where Courmayeur comes into its own is off-piste: the Punta Helbronner cable car allows you to ski over Mont Blanc's shoulder into the Vallée Blanche. There are also some great runs off Courmayeur's own Cresta d'Arp.

Details: A week's half-board stay costs from £660pp, including flights and hire car; skisolutions.com

6. Schloss Prielau, Zell-am-See, Austria

Schloss Prielau, on the shore of Lake Zell, is not your run-of-the-mill Austrian family-run hotel. All towers, gables and shuttered, leaded windows, this modest castle has been owned at various times by Richard Strauss's librettist and the Porsche family. It has all the trappings of Renaissance Mitteleuropa – brass chandeliers, wood-panelled walls – plus the Michelin-starred Mayer's restaurant.

The skiing: Zell-am-See and the glacier of Kaprun combine to make one of Austria's most varied and entertaining resorts to ski, especially as the town of Zell excels at après.

Details: The Hugo von Hofmannsthal Suite costs €620 (£432) a night and accommodates up to six people; schloss-prielau.at or chicretreats.com

7. Hotel La Vallee, Lourtier, Switzerland

Close to the busy resort of Verbier, the village of Lourtier is a quiet spot which accesses the remoter parts of the Vallée de Bagnes. Hotel La Vallée has a guilty secret in the form of an H marked out in the grounds - heliskiing can be done from the door. Those keen to keep their carbon footprint down can go ski touring (walking up on skins) and snowshoeing from the back garden.

The skiing: Verbier is a must-ski for anyone above a beginner. The semi-off-piste runs from Mont Fort and Mont Gelé are classics and there is legendary backcountry skiing.

Details: From €65pp (£45) or €90 ensuite (£63) a night B&B; vallee.ch. The nearest airport is Geneva served by swiss.com, ba.com, easyjet.com, flybe.com, bmibaby.com, jet2.com.

8. Wildflowers B&B, Salt Lake City, USA

It may seem odd to combine a city break with a ski holiday, and even odder still for the bibulous British skier to consider the Mormon capital as a base, but hear us out. As well as sound skiing credentials, SLC is more fun than you'd imagine - despite the nominal entry fee to bars. It has a vibrant music scene (it's a university town) and a good NBA team, the Utah Jazz. Wildflowers is an historic Victorian house with wooden features and stained glass windows. Americana stretches to the breakfast table: pancakes with black beans and salsa verde or blueberry-stuffed French toast should set you up for skiing.

The skiing: Basing yourself in SLC means you can strike out every day for a different one of Utah's resorts. Snowbird and its linked neighbour Alta are amazing powder playgrounds up Little Cottonwood Canyon; in Big Cottonwood, Brighton and Solitude are underrated gems; Robert Redford's Sundance resort is well-known, but the film festival and better skiing are found in and around Park City.

Details: Rooms from US\$75 (£37) a night; wildflowersbb.com.

9. Designhotel Binders, Innsbruck, Austria

Another city base for skiing is the Tirolean capital, Innsbruck. On the one hand, the small city revels in its Habsburg imperial history, but on the other it has a youthful air – as a university town and a magnet for sports enthusiasts year-round. The Designhotel Binders is cut-price-hip, with some twists. There are six-person loft rooms with waterbeds (boggle away, minds); and Top Gear fans can hire vintage cars in which to tool around mountain roads.

The skiing: Several small areas are reachable from the city, including the Stubai glacier, Seefeld, Axamer Lizum, Igls and Nordpark Seegrube (via mountain railway stations designed by Zaha Hadid). Bigger areas, including Mayrhofen and Kitzbühel, are do-able day trips.

Details: Double rooms, B&B, from €78 (£54) a night; arthotel.at. For flights to Innsbruck see easyjet.com, ba.com.

10. Chalet Merlo, Sainte Foy, France

With its insistence on ski-to-the-door convenience, the Tarentaise valley in France has become synonymous with purpose-built mega-resorts. But all have small villages dotted around the mountain below, with wood and stone chalets, rustic restaurants and views uninterrupted by 10-storey apartment blocks.

With the new Chalet Merlo in Le Miroir we are seriously pushing the boat out. Based in one of the hamlets that make up Sainte Foy, below Tignes and Val d'Isère it's bookable as a whole, sleeping 12, and deftly combines the bucolic and the luxurious. Think exposed beams and rough-hewn woodwork vying with names like Ralph Lauren and Kelly Hoppen; a 4x4 at your beck and call; plus gourmet cooking, sauna, gym, 50" plasma and broadband.

The skiing: As well as the vast and varied Espace Killy just up the road, the local slopes of Ste Foy are worth exploring. Although new lifts have increased the pisted skiing and reduced the off-piste, it is still a fairly untapped well of adventurous skiing.

Details: From £10,000 per week (ouch) for the entire chalet, all-inclusive; chaletmerlo.eu. Or for more affordable options, see ski-accommodation.saintefoy.net Flights to Grenoble: ryanair.com, easyjet.com, ba.com, flyglobespan.com, thomsonfly.com.