

Europe For Less

You can ski Europe's legendary pistes for the same amount or less than what it costs to ski the Rockies. Here's how.

BY EVERETT POTTER

Greg Gulik took his first ski trip to Europe last year and had the time of his life. He and his friends chose Innsbruck, Austria, and they weren't disappointed. "The runs on the Stubai Glacier were absolutely enormous—longer and wider than anything we've experienced in the U.S.," the Chicago-based Web consultant says. "And, strangely enough, we found it cheaper to go to Innsbruck than to Colorado. A month before our trip, my sister paid more for five days in Vail than we did for seven days in Austria."

Gulik's experience isn't unique. Mimi Hunt and her husband have skied in Europe every winter for the past five years, taking their now 13-year-old son with them. "It's such a good deal that you can't pass it up," says Hunt, who works in the insurance business. Like Gulik, Hunt used a Houston-based tour operator called Ski Europe to create their trips. Last year, Ski Europe sent several thousand Americans to resorts such as St. Anton, Cortina and Zermatt. The rock-bottom deal-of-deals was a "Super Ski Week" in Innsbruck for \$500 per person, including round-trip airfare, seven nights' lodging and daily breakfast. (While American ski packages typically include lift tickets, European packages usually don't. Not to worry: Lift tickets are less expensive in Europe than in the U.S. See By the Numbers on page 70.)



ILLUSTRATION Chris Pyle

ski traveler SAVVY SKIER



In Austria's Arlberg, Alpine rustic meets mountain high life—and more than 250 miles of skiable terrain.

It doesn't get any cheaper than that. But frankly, a more likely figure for skiing in Europe is \$900-\$1,200 per person for a similar low-cost package. At the high end, the differences are less profound. David Brewer, a Manhattan attorney, and his wife have been staying at the five-star Hotel Hospiz in St. Christoph in the Arlberg region every year since they began skiing back in 1988. The rest of the season, you'll find them in Vail and Beaver Creek, Colo.

"Europe just *sounds* more expensive," Brewer says. "The airfares were similar. We stayed at the Hospiz in January and at the Sonnenalp in Vail in March, and there was really no difference in the per-night cost, but the Hospiz is not charging \$100 or \$150 a night per couple for dinner—it's included. And Austrian ski schools are a much better value."

By the Numbers

There are several simple reasons why Europe can be a

Room to Roam

Les Trois Vallées in France is the world's largest ski resort, with 320 miles of groomed runs, 1,500 ski instructors, 1,400 snow guns and 200 lifts.



good bet for cost-conscious skiers. Start with the fact that transatlantic airfares during January, February and March are at their lowest, with flights from the East Coast to Europe often costing far less than those to the Rockies.

Another reason is that lift tickets are always cheaper in Europe. A six-day ski pass for Austria's Arlberg region, which includes such fabled mountains as St. Anton, Zürs and Lech, costs \$162. In Switzerland, a six-day pass for Zermatt is \$227. Compare that to Aspen, Colo., which charges \$384 for a six-day lift ticket, or Park City, Utah, which asks for \$275 for five-out-of-seven days of skiing.

Then there's the hotel factor. Unlike in the States, where most of us are used to booking a couple of nights or a long weekend, Europeans traditionally take seven-night ski vacations, from Saturday-to-Saturday or Sunday-to-Sunday. On a per-night basis, the cost is often cheaper in Europe. And there's even greater value when you figure that European hotels typically include breakfast and a multi-course dinner in their rates.

Why Fly So Far?

"My first-time clients tend to be awed by the mountains and the amount of skiing," Chips Lindenmeyr says. Lindenmeyr is the president of Lindenmeyr Travel, a boutique agency that works with select resorts in Switzerland, Austria and France. "The biggest European ski areas are much

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larger than those in the United States. You've got a lot of terrain to explore, so you get great value for your money."

The terrain is largely above timberline, and while the runs are marked, there is no such thing as out-of-bounds. Off-piste is fair game, and skiers are responsible for their own safety. Given the topography and that vast resorts like Les Trois Vallées in France could swallow Vail three or four times, most European ski tour operators recommend hiring a guide for a day or two. In Zermatt, a private guide for a full day of exploring will run about \$218 for two people. Each additional person costs \$14 per day. In Vail, by the way, a private guide is \$485 per day, for up to six people.

When & Where

To get the most bang for your buck, plan on skiing Europe in January or in mid-March. In February and early March, prices are higher and ski hotels are usually booked solid with Europeans on winter holiday.

European ski towns differ greatly in personality. Cortina attracts the glitterati from Rome and Bologna; St. Anton is a major watering hole for hard-partying young Scandinavians; and Zermatt offers the kind of storybook experience that most Americans crave. If price is a major factor, then Innsbruck is invariably the least expensive destination. But while Innsbruck is a charming and historic mountain city, it is not a resort, and it requires you travel 30-45 minutes by bus to get to the slopes.

"Some in our group didn't ski at all and spent the week touring," says Gulik, who chose Innsbruck for this very reason. "One couple skied all week, while most of us split our time between skiing and touring." With all due respect to Denver and Salt Lake City, skiing in Europe means a chance to spend a day or two in Venice, Vienna or Paris after a week on the snow.

The Dark Side

It's not all powder mornings and schnapps evenings in the Alps. Drawbacks include dealing with jet lag. There's nothing like feeling woozy at 10 a.m. on a steep run. And overall, the snow is far more consistent in the Rockies. For some, lack of grooming, the legendary pushing in liftlines and chain-smoking on the chairlift color the enjoyment. The crowds can also be overwhelming in high season.



In Chamonix, France, first-time tram riders hold their breath for the final ascent up the Aliguille du Midi, where sheer rock walls loom inches from the tram wall.

Packages or à la Carte

Packages that combine airfare, transfers, hotel and some meals are invariably the cheapest option for European ski trips. Ski Europe has a deal Jan. 10-18 in Zermatt for seven nights at the three-star Hotel Jaegerhof, with daily breakfast, round-trip airfare on Lufthansa from JFK to Geneva and second-class Swiss Rail transfers for \$898 per person (based on double occupancy, as are all prices here). For that same week in St. Anton, the price is \$869 per person. That package includes seven nights at the three-star Hotel Stefeler, daily buffet breakfast, round-trip airfare on Lufthansa from JFK to Zurich, plus shuttle transfers. Lindenmeyr Travel, which specializes in high-end European packages, offers seven nights at the four-star Hotel Julien in Zermatt, round-trip airfare on Swiss from JFK to Geneva, first-class round-trip rail transfers, buffet breakfast and five-course dinner daily, use of the hotel's pool and spa facilities, a six-day Zermatt ski pass and an eighth night in Geneva. The price is \$1,965 per person. (Turn to page 88 for three European deals that are exclusive to SKI readers.)

You can also do it yourself. If you have a lot of miles saved, this is the time to put them to good use. In winter, there are few if any blackout dates and mileage requirements are at their lowest. Before you redeem miles, however, check the Internet, where winter airfare sales to Europe abound. For example, log on to smarterflying.com and you may be able to fly from Chicago to Zurich for \$298 this winter. And thanks to well-developed websites, booking a ski hotel on the Internet doesn't require insider knowledge. You'll find that most hotels are reluctant to book you for less than a week, so just find the best value for a seven-night stay at a three-star or better property. As for in-country travel, you'll find Rail Europe (raileurope.com) allows you to quickly buy airport-to-resort rail tickets for transfers or a train pass if you decide to do more exploring.

Yes, if you had gone two years ago, when the dollar was king, it would have been cheaper still. But the prices, the quality and the experience of skiing in Garmisch, Verbier or Mégeve are as enticing as ever. Try it once, and you may end up like Mimi Hunt, a convert who gives the Euro ski experience the ultimate endorsement. "I plan to go to Europe to ski every year for the rest of my life." ♦