

Ski ESCAPES

As the ski season begins, we travel the globe to look for the best ski destinations, where you can enjoy the adrenaline-rushing winter sports and get recharged at world-class ski resorts

Writer Catharine Nicol

SKIER WITH SUN AND MOUNTAINS/THINKSTOCK



THIS PAGE: Changbaishan is China's up-and-coming ski destination. OPPOSITE PAGE: Lake Louise is renowned for cross-country skiing with over 150 km of trails

There's something absolutely magical about skiing. It takes you to some of the most beautiful places in the world, lifting you physically but also spiritually to where an abundance of space and earth's highest peaks meet the blue skies and universe beyond. It surrounds you with purity; the perfect, white snow glistening diamonds and light, while the light, fresh air crackles with energy and that energy permeates every molecule of your being. And it challenges you; it pushes your fitness, your mental acuity, your emotional boundaries and appreciation of the world's otherworldly dimensions. It forces you to live wholly in the now or it kicks your ass. And it is impossible not to be affected; it is breathtakingly fun; it is a heartfelt delight; it is, at times, astonishingly soulful. If life gets too serious, go skiing...

THREDBO, NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA

One of Australia's favourite ski destinations, Thredbo is renowned for its backcountry skiing, boarding and terrain parks, and super long pistes. Experts will love the off-piste areas, intermediates can cruise Playground and Ballroom runs or push their skills on Supertrail, and beginners on skis and boards get easy snow runners to take them up and perfectly pitched runs to slide back down. Interrupt your runs with snacks at the highest restaurant in Australia, Eagles Nest, or take a breather at the foot of Avalanche Café at the foot of the Kosciuszko Express Chairlift. Once your skis are packed away, explore the Thredbo Stroll where après-ski heats up whatever the temperature, or for

après-ski with a difference, jump into the Rekorderlig Hot Pool with a warm mug of cider in your hand.

Season: June to October

STAY: THE DENMAN HOTEL

Renowned for their fine dining at The Terrace Restaurant, what sets The Denman apart is their buzzing European style Après Bar, where live music sets the atmosphere and guests, regular Thredbo skiers and locals dance the night away. Central to town and just five minutes' walk from the nearest chairlift, The Denman's 36 rooms make it an intimate boutique hotel, with Balcony Rooms the ones to book. At the bijou two-treatment-room Denman Day Spa, their Thalgo treatments are intensely hydrating and therapeutic, bringing the faraway goodness of the marine world to

FAIRMONT CHATEAU LAKE LOUISE THE WESTIN CHANGBAISHAN RESORT

before everyone else, or if the après-ski is more important to you, book the Torchlight Dinner & Ski where you kick back at the Whitehorn Lodge before skiing pre-first tracks to Sitzmark Lounge for more food and drink. During the day for some free guiding, meet up with the Lake Louise Ski Friends who take skiers and boarders to their favourite pistes, and there are various clubs for kids, teaching skiing and boarding skills as well as mountain safety. There are also snowshoe trails, ice skating, and for a more romantic evening, sleigh rides or dog sledding.

Season: Mid-November to mid-April

STAY: FAIRMONT CHATEAU LAKE LOUISE

A grand dame of a resort, the Fairmont dates back over 100 years. Back then it was a humble hiking base, now it's a spectacular resort of 550 rooms within Banff National Park and looks out over incredible views of the Rocky Mountains. Go for a suite, which overlooks Bow Valley or Lake Louise and the Victoria Glacier and comes with the services of a dedicated Suite Concierge. Contrast the speed and adrenalin of the day with an eminently civilised afternoon tea and then ramp up the après-ski with a group fondue at The Walliser Stube or a pint or two of their in-house Stubborn Buffalo Alberta Pale

Ale. There's also the Lake Louise Spa with treatments like the Mountain Hot Stone Massage, Refining Antioxidant Vitamin C Facial and Restorative Mineral bath.

www.fairmont.com

CHANGBAISHAN, JILIN PROVINCE, CHINA

China is opening up to skiing in a big way, with Yabuli near Harbin, Alshan and spots close to the Great Wall by Beijing already getting a reputation. A relative newcomer is Changbaishan, close to the North Korean border and set within a nature reserve. A secondary training ground for national ski teams, strap on your skis or your snowboard and take to the two five-km-long downhill trails leading from a high point of 1,850 metres and two Nordic cross-country trails. Four pistes and just one lift doesn't make it the most sophisticated ski area in the world, however the area promises jumps and slalom too. Experienced skiers can venture off-piste for stunning views of Lake Tienchi from the rim of Mount Changbai, a (dormant) volcano, or rent a snowmobile and motor there. Après-ski includes hot spring pools, courtesy of Mount Changbai, perfect for rejuvenating tired muscles.

Season: November to April

this mountain landscape. From maintenance treatments to full packages of massage, the Serenity Now package is their most popular and includes a facial, body scrub and relaxing massage.

www.thedenman.com.au

LAKE LOUISE, CANADA

One of Canada's most charming ski destinations, Lake Louise lies within Banff National Park and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In addition to the sophisticated network of stunning pistes, the area is renowned for cross-country skiing, with over 150 km of trails from pretty tree-lined trails with fun twists and turns to backcountry tracks. Early birds should sign up for a First Tracks private lesson, which gets you out on the slopes half an hour





LAKE LOUISE AT WINTER IN MOUNTAIN, INDIA, KASHMIR, GULMARG, THREE PERSONS SKIING DOWN HILL IN MOUNTAIN

**STAY: THE WESTIN
CHANGBAISHAN RESORT**

The Westin brings a welcome touch of luxury, especially if you're staying in a suite with its slope views for that instant early morning excitement when there's been a new dump overnight. With all the exercise you're doing you'll need to eat well and the resort's SuperFoodsRx menu makes sure you're getting the maximum well-being and energy per calorie. In the evening, share stories of speed in the Lobby Lounge then go for warming clay pot or BBQ Korean dish at Maru.

If the kids need a break from the chilly slopes, the Westin Kids Club can take the strain with cosy comforts like movies, crafts and games, and for adults there's the Heavenly Spa by Westin. Arrive with plenty of time for a soothing sip of herbal tea and a gloriously indulgent steam and soak, giving your muscles a well-deserved relaxation. Ease them further with a therapeutic massage, soothe weather-ravaged complexions with a rejuvenating facial or dive into the local culture with Traditional Chinese Medicine influenced therapy. www.starwoodhotels.com

**GULMARG,
KASHMIR, INDIA**

India is renowned for spiritual holidays at its many ashrams, but a different way to commune with the gods is to head for the peaks in Gulmarg, fast becoming the country's go-to ski destination. The Gulmarg Gondola hauls you up Kongdoori Mountain to 4,200 metres making it the highest ski lift in the world, where you'll be mesmerised by the view from the top. Avoid the lifts (the queuing and ticket system reminds you you're in India) and go heli-skiing to get the most out of this destination. But wherever you go, what you'll really love is the off-piste powdery fabulousness, the challenging pistes (the longest is over six km) and the seemingly incongruous marriage of India with the cold and skiing.

Season: December to March

THIS PAGE: Gulmarg's incredible off-piste powder has made it a popular ski destination. OPPOSITE PAGE: Lake Louise is located within the Banff National Park and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site



**STAY: THE KHYBER HIMALAYAN
RESORT & SPA**

A short walk from the gondola and surrounded by forest, The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa is a charmingly colonial throwback – you'll be wondering if you should be hiring skis made of wood. Stay at one of the 85 rooms or hideaway cottages and wash breakfast down with traditional *kahwa* (green tea prepared with saffron, cinnamon, cardamom and crushed nuts). Ski hard from first tracks then take it easy in the afternoon at the Tea Lounge and Terrace, where several levels of seating tumble down the snowy slope, an open fire pit keeps you warm and the sun sets over the forested mountains. (The hotel is BYO, so arrive with your particular poison to lubricate the après-ski). Fuel up at Cloves restaurant where you can gastronomically live a Kashmiri wedding feast called *wazwan*. To give your legs a rest, book a Deep Tissue Intense Relief massage, the Khyber Spa by L'OCCITANE's most popular treatment – there's also a muscle-easing steam room, exotic Balinese or lomi lomi treatments and delightful facials. Pay a visit to the Activities Concierge to book sledding and horse-drawn sleigh rides for romance east-meets-west style. www.khyberhotels.com

**NISEKO, HOKKAIDO,
JAPAN**

Niseko is still Japan's best-known ski destination. The powder is legendary; the 61 runs, 38 gondolas and lifts can all be accessed with one ski pass; and Hirafu's après-ski is unmissable. The four main interconnected ski areas include central Hirafu, overlooking the perfect cone of Mount Yotei, Hanazono with its boarding terrain on one side, An'nupuri and Niseko Village the other. Get out for first tracks, go off-piste through the trees or head for the gates leading to backcountry areas, and as you cut through the surface of the snow, talc-light spray will float up, catching the light mid-air like diamonds. Refuel on crab ramen at The Lookout Café, spicy Japanese curry around the wood burning stove at Boyo-so or with a cheeky sake or hot chocolate mid-afternoon at 1000m Hut. Hirafu is a mass of après-ski destinations from fine French-inspired dining at The Barn to Abucha Second (don't miss the scallops) and Raku Izakaya for Japanese bites, and from famous hidden Bar Gyu+ to the Ice Bar, recreated in a different location each year. **Season: End of November to late April**

STAY: LOFT NISEKO

While there are a number of ski-in, ski-out hotels, rustic chalets and sexy condos to choose from, for the ultimate in luxury, the timber and stone penthouse apartments Loft Niseko, by Philippe Starck's yoo designs no less, opened earlier this year. For their first season it's by invitation only, so start networking in the right circles for access to the designer three-bedroom spaces and dedicated concierge who takes on the heavy lifting of lift pass organising, equipment hire, lesson booking, non-ski activities and transfers. Bask in the sun in the morning on your terrace as you gaze at Mount Yotei, congregate around the oversized pine table as you share the day's triumphs as the evening draws near, then head out to a restaurant pre-booked by the concierge. www.loft-niseko.com

QUEENSTOWN, NEW ZEALAND

Coronet Peak, The Remarkables, Treble Cone and Cardrona – the ski fields near Queenstown add an extra dimension of adventure in this adrenalin-stoked destination. Coronet Peak is one of the

closest to town, perfect for families, while The Remarkables covers all levels with the Shadow chair lift taking skiers up to advanced and expert trails. Treble Cone's steep pistes drop through the longest vertical altitude in the area, which makes them ideal training grounds for various professional ski teams. Boarders and cross-country skiers should head to Snow Farm, where there is also dog sledding.

Season: June to end of September

STAY: MATAKAURI LODGE

Cosy and friendly, Matakauri Lodge has stunning views of native forest across Lake Wakatipu to the mountain ranges you're impatient to conquer. You'll stay in one of their 16 suites with open fireplaces, eight cottages and newly launched Owner's Cottage. Recover post-skiing at the two-treatment-room spa, first in the heated pool, steam and sauna then to a room for a massage or facial, or to the outside decking for a pedicure (weather allowing).

The charming Kiwi ritual of sociable pre-dinner drinks gets the après-ski off to a convivial start, bringing guests together to discuss the day's adventures over canapés and drinks. But don't miss dinner, this being

a Relais & Chateaux property where Head Chef Jonathan Rogers gives TLC to local seasonal ingredients.

And for the ultimate day's skiing, Matakauri's Four Peaks by Heli trip zips you across all four mountain areas, chasing deserted peaks, incredible views and virgin snow, with your own guide and queue priority. www.matakaurilodge.com

PYEONGCHANG, SOUTH KOREA

It's only four years until the 2018 Winter Olympics shines a spotlight on Korea's snow and slopes. In the meantime head to Pyeongchang, set within the Taebaek Mountains about three hours from Seoul, to see how Korea does snow. Although the relatively low altitude of Alpensia's mountains means that artificial snow features heavily on its seven slopes, combining the excitement of skiing with Korean food and the local culture makes it a great holiday. Pyeongchang is best for beginners and intermediates, with Alpha, Charlie and Delta being the most popular runs (try to go between weekends). For those looking for black or diamond runs, head



THIS PAGE: Mesmerising views of the snow-capped mountains in Gulmarg. OPPOSITE PAGE: Loft Niseko offers the most luxurious loft-style apartments in the region

THE KHRYBER HIMALAYAN RESORT & SPA





to nearby Yongpyong for the day, where Rainbow Paradise leads you downhill for over five km, and boarders will find their skills tested at Dragon Park. The Ocean 700 water park and Retail Street provide entertainment on days off.

Season: November to March

STAY: INTERCONTINENTAL ALPENSIA PYEONGCHANG RESORT

For Western-standard luxury and facilities, the InterContinental is the go-to ski resort in Korea. The 128 rooms offer views of

the hills or the lake, and dining options cover Korean and Mediterranean cuisines, keeping adventurous tourists and locals happy at Flavours Restaurant, while there's a more snacky food market area. Brave the elements beside the fire pit on OXY Lounge's terrace or cosy up by the open fireplace inside, a tempting place for afternoon tea or winding down the evening. You might not need the gym if you're skiing all day, but there's the on-site OCELAS Spa, with steam, sauna, Jacuzzi and six spa suites for indulgent recharging. www.ihg.com

ANDERMATT, SWITZERLAND

Renowned for its chocolate box mountain peaks and valleys, Switzerland is one of Europe's classic ski destinations, with Andermatt-Sedrun, in the heart of the Swiss Alps, home to 120 km of slopes, made up of 85 runs and (currently but soon to be more) 17 lifts. Of the two ski areas, Näschen-Oberalp-Sedrun has slopes for all levels, with Näschen said to be the sunniest area ideal for families, while Sedrun has a snow park for freestylers. The second, Gemsstock,

is an off-piste wonderland, where the view of 600 mountains from the summit is extraordinary, as is its famous glacier run. There's also cross-country skiing, or between ski days, ice skating, snowshoeing, tobogganing and, for the keen, winter hiking. The après-ski takes in slope-side and Andermatt village venues.

Season: November to April

STAY: THE CHEDI ANDERMATT

One of the area's top resorts, The Chedi's claim to fame is their Ski Butlers, who can take the tiresome chores of organising

gear and lift passes, warming boots and waxing skis, storing gear and assisting with transportation (it's a three-minute drive to the nearest gondolas). To check out the condition of the snow in the morning, draw the curtains of your Gemsstock-facing room, and when you return to the hotel in the evening stop for a drink at The Bar and Living Room while you warm up your toes by the open fireplaces and huddle into a fur blanket. In The Spa, most popular is the Alpienne Mountain Massage that specifically targets aches and pains – choose the Arnica Massage Milk to help repair sore muscles – or go for the three-hour Alpienne Mountain Ritual of foot scrub, massage, body polish, facial and whirl or steam bath. And if you just can't face putting your boots back on in the morning, there's yoga, meditation and Pilates, plenty of classes like Ski Fit and some challenging Nordic Walking. www.chedianderstatt.com

WONSAN, NORTH KOREA

Yes, you are reading this right. North Korea has a ski resort that's open to international visitors. Join an already surprisingly large number of local tourists (mostly ski training, company or work unit groups), most of whom won't have experienced skiing ever before. The approximately nine pistes,

which include some powder, a mix of real and artificial snow and occasional ice, weave through forest and rock, one running over five km. Categorized beginner, intermediate and advanced, there's no colour-coding just yet. The ski lifts are functional but slow, so wrap up super-warm, or dive into the mountain summit's restaurant to defrost when you get to the top. There's also a small eatery at the foot of one of the intermediate runs.

Equipment for skiers and boarders is all new and as you'll be part of a group, there won't be any problem with translating or understanding requests or sizes. Importantly, there is a medical and mountain rescue facility, although you probably don't want to test it. And for ski-free days, there's a small ice skating rink and tubing area.

Season: November to March

STAY: MASIK PASS SKI RESORT

Masik Pass Ski Resort is well heated (first things first!), there's Internet access and the restaurant serves up local, Chinese and international food. Post-ski head to the pool, or heat up in the sauna where you'll find massage facilities too.

www.koryotours.com

THIS PAGE: Soothe your body and mind post-ski at The Spa at The Chedi Andermatt. OPPOSITE PAGE: The charming Andermatt Village in Switzerland