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Skispecial

Peter Hardy reveals what's new on the slopes this winter, from free lift passes to a magnetic chairlift

YOUR FOUR-PAGE HOLIDAY GUIDE

An array of value-added deals, as well as new accommodation options, are on offer this winter as resorts and travel companies aim to secure their share of the ever-shrinking ski market.

Since the start of the recession, the number of British skiers has dropped by 27 per cent, and 330,000 fewer of us took to the slopes last winter than in 2008, according to an annual industry report.

But in 2011-12 the decrease had slowed to just minus 1.8 per cent and the startling rate of new investment in the mountains suggests a widespread optimism on both sides of the Atlantic.

First to put its pounds on the pistes is **Monarch Airlines** (monarch.co.uk), which has introduced its first scheduled ski programme. It has up to four flights a week to Friedrichshafen, Munich, Innsbruck and Grenoble from Luton, Gatwick, Leeds Bradford, Birmingham and Manchester, from £34pp one-way. For those that prefer the train, a new weekly rail service to **Switzerland** (via Lille) will take skiers from London St Pancras to

Geneva in just over eight hours, continuing on to stations such as Aigle, Martigny and Visp, for access to resorts of the Valais and Vaud cantons. The service starts in December.

For short breaks, **Club Med** (clubmed.co.uk) has introduced three- or four-night stays, with lessons and lift passes included, in resorts in France, Italy and Switzerland, from £575pp, without travel. **PowderWhite** (powderwhite.co.uk) offers flexible catered breaks in Verbier and Courchevel Moriond from £299pp, without travel.

Inghams (ingham.co.uk) has seven new resorts, including little-known Auffach in Austria. It is part of the new Ski Juwel area (skijuwel.com), which has 90 miles of pistes across the Alpbach and Wildschönau areas, which have been linked by a new lift. Inghams is also opening a newly built complex of four chalets in St Anton. Among its other offers are two-for-one lift passes for bookings in chalets or chalet-hotels in Verbier and Zermatt, and free lift passes for all bookings to St Moritz.

Crystal (crystalski.co.uk) has introduced a range of value-added

packages. These include learn-to-ski weeks for adults in 16 resorts – tuition, equipment and lift pass are included. Its Ski Plus holidays include a local lift pass and ski rental or carriage. Prices start at £449pp for an apartment for six in Chamrousse on January 12. Lift passes for children up to 15 years are free with Crystal in Söll and the other resorts of the SkiWelt.

Ski Total (skitotal.com) has a new chalet hotel in Lech, the Montfort, on the nursery slopes, which costs from £459 per week. Ski Total also has a wave of offers, including two-for-one lift passes in chalets in Saas Fee, Zermatt and Verbier. Its sister operator, the family specialist **Esprit Ski** (espritski.com), which goes to France, Switzerland, Austria and Italy, is offering free children's ski hire and helmets and £200 discounts for early bookings.

In **St Anton**, the chalet specialist **VIP** (vip-chalets.com) has opened Montjola, its own four-star hotel.

For an extra challenge, head to Mayrhofen with **Neilson** (neilson.co.uk), which has introduced six-day freestyle courses in what has been voted Europe's best snowpark. It has



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three departures for adults and two for children aged nine to 16.

The biggest story in Canada belongs to Daniel Gauthier, the founder of Cirque du Soleil. He has largely completed his £190 million redevelopment of Le Massif (lemassif.com), with the long-awaited opening of a scenic rail link from Québec City. Book through Frontier Ski (frontier-ski.co.uk).

In a winter when the northern lights are meant to be at their best for 50 years, "Breck via Reyk" is the way to reach Breckenridge in Colorado. The new route, to Denver via Reykjavik on Icelandair with Ski Safari (skisafari.com), is actually cheaper than the direct flight.

Heli-skiing in Africa? You can't be serious. The French ski school Evolution 2 (heliskimarakech.com) has opened a base in Marrakesh with the celebrated Chamonix guides Hervé Favre and Régis Martinez. A helicopter picks you up from a poolside village and drops you on a mountaintop 20 minutes later for a mighty 4,000m descent.

Kirkwood, home to some of Lake Tahoe's toughest skiing, has been bought by Vail Resorts (vailresorts.com). It already owns Heavenly and Northstar on the lake – watch out for a multimillion-pound revamp.

Vail has also negotiated the first (I suspect of many) transatlantic lift pass alliance. If you buy Vail's eight-resort Epic season pass for £419 (the price is valid until October 14; after that it may rise), it entitles you to three days' skiing in Verbier. Reciprocally, if you purchase Verbier's £1,050 pass you get three-days in a Vail resort. I wonder who gets the better deal?

Avoriaz, futuristic when it was built in the Sixties and still so in 2012, has reached the final stage of its redevelopment. Aquariaz is a giant new water park, the highest and most exotic in Europe. A new jumbo gondola access lift is scheduled to open in February.

Courchevel has renamed its various resorts. Courchevel 1850 becomes plain Courchevel, 1650 is now Courchevel Moriond, 1550 is Courchevel Village, and 1300 Courchevel Le Praz. And if you're worried about your small children

riding chairlifts, this is the place to get them lessons with the French ski school (ESF). The resort has fitted all 18 of its chairlifts with the Magnestick safety system (magnestick.net). Your child wears an ESF waistcoat with a magnet attached that clamps on to the back of the seat during transit and releases automatically on arrival.

Spain's Sierra Nevada above the Moorish city of Granada has great intermediate skiing, but has always failed to attract an international clientele, not least because of a lack of premium accommodation. That changes this season with the opening of El Lodge, a five-star Finnish log cabin with 20 rooms, by the piste at a heady 2,100m. It has a spa and a clone of the trendy Marbella nightclub Suite Lounge. Rooms cost from £240 per night (ellodge.com).

The mountain restaurant and après-ski bar La Folie Douce, along with the adjoining gourmet restaurant La Fruitière, began life in Val d'Isère before opening a branch above Val Thorens. This winter the brand migrates to Méribel.

Change is afoot in Verbier with the opening in December of the Cordée des Alpes hotel (hotelcordee.com) – rooms from £250 – and a WHotel in 2013 (verbierresidences.com). Le Farinet, its busiest après-ski spot, will be home this season to a pop-up restaurant, the Pot Luck Club, and its nightclub, the Casbah, will move to the old Coco Club. Verbier has two new mountain restaurants, too – a wooden "igloo" at the Col de Gentianes and La Vache, at Attelas.

Finally, if you're planning on driving to the Alps this winter don't forget to pack a breathalyser kit, regardless of whether or not you are planning to indulge in a bit of après-ski. The new law is to be enforced from November. The fine for not having one on board when stopped is €11 (£8.80) – little more than the cost of the kit. But spot checks for foreign cars in particular are expected, and you can be sure that the gendarmes will also want to see your warning triangle and high-visibility safety vest.

