

Free to ski

Don't let a disability put your clients off a ski and snow holiday, writes Mary Novakovich

Anyone who watched the Winter Paralympics in PyeongChang this year would have been awestruck by what disabled skiers and snowboarders are capable of doing on the slopes. But it's not just Olympians who fall under the spell of the mountains - their magic can be enjoyed by all visitors, regardless of physical condition.

Over the past 20 years, winter holidays in the mountains have become more accessible and inclusive, thanks to advances in technology as well as a shift in attitudes. And it's not just holidaymakers in wheelchairs who have been feeling the benefits of specialist help: clients who have other mobility issues, are blind or deaf, or have conditions such as multiple

sclerosis, autism, cerebral palsy and Down's syndrome have become better catered for in ski resorts, with specialised training and equipment available for them as well.

France is one of the world leaders in adaptive skiing and has 150 ski schools that offer specialist equipment and instruction for disabled skiers - what the French call 'handiski'. Clients can book the equipment through ski schools, usually the local branch of the Ecole du Ski Français, but it is also included with lessons.

Resorts that have the adapté label offer handiski as well as adapted accommodation and restaurants, so are a good place to start, although there are other resorts with similar standards of services.




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Holidaymakers looking for an overview of what's available can check out resort reports on the website ski2freedom.com, run by charitable foundation Ski 2 Freedom. This was set up in 2008 by Catherine Cosby, who was inspired by her severely disabled daughter. The charity links holidaymakers and tour operators with ski schools and tourist offices.

WHERE TO SKI

La Plagne, which is part of the Paradiski ski area, is one of France's best resorts for adaptive skiing. Its ski school features the usual equipment, such as sit-skis, in which skiers are strapped into seats while they manoeuvre themselves with outrigger-type poles, and tandem-skis, in which an instructor steers a sit-ski from behind. La Plagne is unique in France for having the Vertiski, which gives paraplegics the ability to ski upright, and the Go To Ski, which enables people with partial disabilities to stand upright with a guide.

Nine villages make up La Plagne and because they're purpose-built, they can be easier to get around than many older villages with hilly cobbled lanes. Aime 2000, in particular, has 



Inghams has seven nights' half-board in an accessible room at the Araucaria Hotel in La Plagne from £1,159 per person. The price includes flights and transfers. inghams.co.uk

Disabled Holidays offers bespoke packages for skiers with disabilities and limited mobility. A week in Val Thorens in France's Trois Vallées starts at £4,300 for two people travelling together. The price includes flights to Geneva, transfers and half-board at the Le Hameau du Kashmir hotel, plus private ski tuition, equipment rental and lift passes. disabledholidays.com

PICTURE: PHILIPPE ROYER; SHUTTERSTOCK; PIERRE AUGIER; ANTENNE HANDICAP



LEFT: Tandem skiing

ABOVE: La Plagne's Go To Ski

BELOW: The purpose-built Avoriaz resort

→ everything under one roof – shops, bars, restaurants and entertainment. It's a typical brutalist product of the 1960s, but very practical nonetheless.

La Plagne Centre is easier on the eye and is one of the resorts ski specialist Inghams recommends. The four-star Araucaria Hotel is by the ski school meeting point and the chairlifts, and has an accessible spa.

Joanna Willis-Thomson, general manager for Inghams France, says: "Most of our properties have accessible apartments or rooms for guests with limited mobility. The Araucaria is great in that it has three rooms that fit into this category, as well as modern facilities and accessible public areas. This hotel was new to our programme last winter and we have customers with limited mobility who stayed here last year looking to book with us again for the winter season."

▶ EXTRA CONSIDERATION

It's not just the equipment that can make holidaymakers favour certain resorts. Some resorts, including



Some resorts, including Megève and Courchevel, have heated pavements so the snow disappears more swiftly

Megève and Courchevel, have heated pavements so the snow disappears more swiftly, which makes moving about that much easier.

Clients who have less able skiers in their groups need to take their needs into account when choosing accommodation. They should look out for hazards that aren't immediately noticeable, such as steep slopes to the entrance that can be tough enough for able-bodied people to tackle, let alone someone with limited mobility.

While many skiers prefer ski-in-ski-out accommodation, this can be less than ideal for disabled skiers who find

themselves stuck halfway up a slope. To give clients a rounder experience, it can be more practical for them to stay in a village that has a lively life of its own outside skiing, but still has easy access to the lifts. Val d'Isère, Morzine, Megève and Samoëns in France and Kitzbühel and Ischgl in Austria all have plenty to do off the slopes.

A good compromise between ski-in-ski-out and a village atmosphere is Avoriaz. This purpose-built resort in the Portes du Soleil has direct access to the pistes, as well as a buzzing ambience, a water park and a huge indoor accessible spa.

Hannah Eldridge, Inghams' agency sales executive, says: "We advise agents to spend time speaking to skiers with limited mobility to identify their individual needs, as well as their aspirations for their holidays, so we can find the most suitable hotel, travel and ski arrangements for them. It's particularly important to understand their existing level of ski experience and how independent they want to be on their mountain holiday."

