

Price freeze

Dazzling white mountains, the feeling of crisp air cooling your face, and the reward of a hefty dinner after a day of sport – there's plenty of appeal in a ski holiday.

Hitting the slopes doesn't have to break the bank either, with ever more operators offering deals that have opened up skiing to a wider market.

While a trip to the world's top resorts in France or Switzerland is always going to come at a premium, picking a lesser-known resort can stop costs soaring and allow clients to avoid the crowds.

It's also important to choose

your dates wisely – December and January are the cheapest times to ski, while February half-term should be avoided due to soaring prices.

KNOW YOUR RESORT

Top-end destinations such as Zermatt and Whistler are never going to offer cheap skiing, but clients needn't shun destinations like Italy, Austria or even France, as long as they pick their resort wisely. The rule of thumb is generally the higher the altitude, the higher the price, but that's not always the case – Les Deux Alpes in France boasts slopes

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as high as 3,570m and a host of affordable hotels, while Avoriaz in France and Sestriere in Italy also afford relatively cheap high-altitude skiing.

Crystal Ski recommends Pas de la Casa, the highest resort in Andorra, which benefits from an excellent snow record and a great ski school that's well suited to both beginners and intermediates. The resort is renowned for its nightlife, making it popular with a younger audience, and there's a great selection of reasonably priced restaurants, with a typical three-course meal costing around €18.

Bigger resorts don't necessarily have to be counted out as they often have a greater variety of lower-star hotels, pensions and public facilities. Clients visiting ➔

Avoid snowballing costs with a budget-friendly ski break, says Aby Dunsby

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TOP TIP
Tell clients to book their ski equipment before they travel as it's cheaper than hiring in resort



ABOVE: Andorra

RIGHT: Soll, Austria

FAR RIGHT: St Anton, Austria



PICTURES: BALKAN HOLIDAYS; CRYSTAL SKI; INGHAMS; NEILSON



Inghams offers seven nights' chalet catering at Chalet Rocher de L'Aigle, Montgenèvre, France, from £455 in December including flights and transfers. ingham.co.uk

Balkan Holidays has seven nights' half-board at four-star hotel Riverside, Bansko for £389, including flights from Gatwick, departing January 7, 2017. balkanholidays.co.uk

➔ Chamonix in March can stay at the new Hotel Rockypop, for example, which Inghams offers from £699 for seven nights.

If the big resorts are still too steep to stay in, recommend clients lodge in a satellite town, where they'll get to ski in a major ski area while benefiting from cheaper accommodation and drinks. Though not as convenient for doorstep skiing, many resorts offer a free bus transfer to the nearest lifts.

A satellite town is also a viable option for beginners, or fervent après skiers, who will be less inclined to spend the entire day on the slopes and eager to benefit from cheaper tuition and drinks. Examples include La Tania in the Trois Vallées, whose cable cars stop at lively Courchevel and Meribel; and the pretty, quiet village of St Christoph, which links to the excellent Austrian resort of St Anton.

GO EAST

Families looking for no-frills skiing fun should consider Bansko in Bulgaria which, according to the Post Office Family Ski Resort report, regularly tops the list for budget skiing. It's a particularly good choice for beginners, as lessons are more affordable than at



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other major resorts, while the slopes tend to be less crowded.

A lift pass in France costs the equivalent of an entire ski pack in some Bulgarian resorts, with packs including skis, boots, poles, a lift pass and tuition, all for around £117. Other popular resorts in Bulgaria include Pampovoro and Borovets, the latter boasting slopes as high as 2,600m.

"When it comes to value-for-money skiing, Kranjska Gora in Slovenia runs a close second to Bansko," says Chris Rand, sales and marketing manager at Balkan Holidays. "As well as providing breathtaking scenery framed by the Julian Alps, Slovenia's ski centres have an excellent reputation and it's easy to learn to ski in a few days."

Lake Bled and Lake Bohinj also have 'two for the price of one' ski deals on selected dates, plus clients can try a whole range of other snow sports including cross-country skiing, dog-sled racing, sledding, snowmobiling and ice skating.

Equipment might not always be as modern here, and there are fewer hire shops to choose from, so clients who have their own equipment should consider taking it with them when skiing in Bulgaria or Slovenia.

AVOID ADD-ONS

You might have scoured the operators for a cheap deal for clients, but make sure you've taken into account any hidden extras such as airline fees for carrying ski equipment, plus ski lift passes and food prices in resort.

"Resorts like Soll or Mayrhofen in Austria, and various resorts in Italy offer excellent ski areas, while the cost of a glass of wine or beer can be considerably lower than in a big-name resort," says Inghams' group head of sales, Simon McIntyre. "Customers will also see the difference in lift pass prices and ski hire in these resorts."

Again, it's worth considering a resort in Slovenia or Bulgaria, where the price

BELOW:
Club Med
Avoriaz



of lunch will cost around a fiver and a beer less than £2, allowing clients to make a big saving on food and drink.

Contrary to what some might think, a self-catering package is unlikely to represent the best value for money. "The cost of food at supermarkets in ski resorts tends to be very expensive, while chalets offer breakfast, afternoon tea and cake and six nights of evening meals with wine included in the price," says McIntyre.



Activity specialist operator Mark Warner also offers chalet board for its ski holidays, which means breakfast, afternoon tea and dinner with wine are all included. The flight price also includes luggage, so clients avoid additional charges, and chalets are located on or next to the slopes for ease of access, making them an appealing choice for clients with young children.

Estelle Giraudeau, Club Med's managing director for the UK and Scandinavia, says: "By choosing all-inclusive, families don't need to worry about hidden extras. Our all-inclusive offering also includes altitude restaurants, so families who want to

ski all day can benefit from their meals being provided."

TRAVEL SMART

"Most clients want to hit the slopes in February and March as they think the snow will be better, so the prices tend to be cheaper in December and January," says Gabriella Burden, marketing executive at Mark Warner.

Suggest clients go in January, when there's the likelihood of good snow, and fewer people clogging up the slopes.

Plenty of operators also offer great discounts for families depending on the season too. Inghams offers free places or discounts of up to 40% for children aged two to 11 at some resorts, while Neilson is offering half-price lift passes and a child discount for under-14s on its new Mountain Collection.

For beginners, tuition and lift passes will be cheaper if they avoid the big international resorts. Ski Total recommends Sölden in Austria, which guarantees snow at impressive heights of 1,383 metres. It's also worth bearing in mind that ski schools drop their prices in the afternoons, as most skiers are more inclined to take to the slopes in the morning. [TW](http://tw)