Ski resorts are so much more enjoyable in summer – here are the best ones to visit

Rediscover your favourite resort in the warmer weather and find a world of crowd-free mountains at a fraction of the price

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During summer, cool mountains offer a welcome respite from the soaring temperatures of beach holiday destinations Credit: Christian Perret

There's a saying in ski resorts that often surprises visitors: "People come for winter, but stay for the summers."

It can be hard, when you've spent a lifetime regarding mountains as an exclusively winter holiday option, to reimagine the monochrome landscapes as playgrounds in summer too.

The reality is that, once the snow melts, they reveal a technicolour world of lush pastures littered with wildflowers and duck egg blue glacial lakes fed by burbling rivers. Warm but rarely hot, the mountains offer a welcome respite from the soaring temperatures of traditional beach holiday destinations. Instead, they inspire action-packed days spent hiking and biking, rather than lazing on a sunbed.

Leogang, in Austria, boasts one of Europe's biggest and most famous bike parks Credit: KLEMENS KOENIG

Where ski holidays often involve seeking out the maximum possible value of your (increasingly expensive) lift pass, summer trips to the mountains tend to be more diverse. Larger resorts sell guest cards at a fraction of the cost of a full lift pass, which provides access to public transport and the (restricted) lifts operating in peak summer months: plus free or discounted guided walking tours, outdoor yoga classes, e-bike rental, swimming pools and more. The lifts grant effortless access to trail running, high-altitude walking, and biking trails. The mountains are also littered with restaurants serving light Alpine fare laden with fresh vegetables from the fertile valleys below.

Summer travel to the mountains is far from new – curative Alpine holidays predate recreational skiing by centuries – yet the appeal is growing steadily in a world of healthy, adventurous travel. Furthermore, top European resorts are becoming increasingly crowded in winter, as limited periods of optimal ski conditions often coincide with peak holiday weeks and inflated prices. When one Christmas week in a catered chalet can cost the same as three summer weeks in the same property, it makes a lot of financial sense to swap pistes for pastures.

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Here's how some of Europe's top winter ski resorts transform in the warmer months – and how to visit them this summer.

1. Engelberg, Switzerland

Best for hiking

Around Engelberg, hikers can enjoy over 310 miles of trails Credit: Silvano Zeiter

Set in the heart of Switzerland at the foot of the mighty Titlis mountain (3,239m), Engelberg offers winter visitors challenging skiing on two distinct ski areas, with keen powder hounds scooping a total 9,999m of vertical descent in a day by skiing all of "Engelberg's Big 5" (Galtiberg, 1,960m; Steinberg, 1,275m; Laub, 1,194m; Steintäli, 576m; Sulz, 729m).

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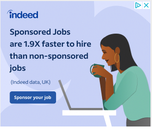

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Come summer, freeriders are replaced by hikers enjoying over 310 miles of trails, which range from child-friendly nature strolls to the 28.5-mile Buiräbähnli Safari. The latter is a multi-day adventure that combines a circular hike from Engelberg, with overnight accommodation in rustic farmsteads, and rides on eight Buiräbähnli – local dialect for farmer's cable cars. Traditionally used to transport farmers and their families from farms inaccessible by road, some of these cable cars date to the 1960s and are designated Swiss cultural assets.

A far cry from the winter bustle of Engelberg's modern rotating Titlis cablecar, these vintage cable cars offer a rare glimpse into the tranquil pastoral world of Switzerland's high-Alpine farms.

Summer secret

Treat tired post-hike feet to an invigorating barefoot "tickle path" (Kitzelpfad) as you plunge them into the natural Kneipp-style trail in the scenic Härzli lake, at the top of the Brunni chairlift.

What to book

Ski Lodge Engelberg has double rooms from £1627 per night, B&B. You can fly from London to Zürich with SWISS from £121 return, and travel to Engelberg by train in two hours.

2. Chamonix, France

Best for mountaineering

Chamonix tops the list for aspiring mountaineers come summer Credit: alamy

Set at the foot of Mont Blanc (4,809m), Chamonix has been steeped in mountaineering history since the first ascent of the peak in 1786.

A winter bucket list destination for keen skiers, Chamonix tops the list for aspiring mountaineers in summer. Join the Shackleton Challenges expedition and training programme in a bid to summit Mont Blanc – the week-long course includes a comprehensive preparation programme as well as glacier skills training and guiding to the summit (from £7,495 per person, including six nights' full board and airport transfers).

For something gentler, La Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix (the world's oldest guiding outfit at over 200 years old) offers a range of climbing courses ranging from one-day mountaineering skills courses to multi-day botanical hikes. Skiers who have tackled the infamous Vallée Blanche in winter can retrace their steps with guided walks across the glacier, pausing for lunch and panoramic views at the skiers' favourite refuge, Le Requin.

Summer secret

Follow in the footsteps of some of the world's greatest mountaineers and adventurers and spend a night at the foot of the Vallée Blanche in the historic Refuge du Montenvers.

What to book

Peak Retreats offers seven nights in a self-catered two-bedroom apartment in Le Cristal de Jade from £409 per person, based on four sharing, including a return DFDS ferry crossing.

3. Whistler, Jasper and Banff, Canada

Best for raw nature

Explore plunging fjords and dense forest at Jasper National Park Credit: alamy

Canada is one of the planet's great natural realms, a geological mosaic of mountain peaks, glaciers, simmering volcanos, plunging fjords and dense forest. It's also a place of big-mountain ski legend: home to North America's largest lift-served ski area (Whistler Blackcomb, BC); the birthplace of heliskiing, and home to some of the world's most scenic pistes in the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks (a Unesco World Heritage Site).

Each summer, the winter landscape transforms into a world of wildflowers, waterfalls, vivid blue lakes, roaming moose, elk, black and grizzly bears. Explore this raw beauty with Audley Travel's 16-day self-drive western Canada tour, which includes visits to Whistler, Jasper and Banff as well as guided wildlife tours and a scenic helicopter flight.

Summer secret

Martha McCallum, an experienced mountain guide, biologist and yoga instructor, leads Heli-Hikes in the peaks above Banff. A scenic helicopter ride over the Rockies deposits you in the pristine Mt Charles Stewart alpine basin to enjoy a guided nature hike in untouched nature.

What to book

Audley Travel offers a 16-day Jewels of Western Canada tour from £5,355 per person, based on two adults, including return flights, hire car, accommodation and excursions.

4. Cervinia, Italy

Best for summer skiing

The cross-border Matterhorn Alpine Crossing cable car links Zermatt with Cervinia Credit: Zermatt Bergbahnen

Thanks to the cross-border Matterhorn Alpine Crossing cable car linking Zermatt and Cervinia, the Matterhorn ski season blends seamlessly from winter to summer.

Europe's largest and highest summer ski area, the Cervino Ski Paradise encompasses some 15 miles of pistes on the Plateau Rosà glacier (3,500m) above Zermatt, which remains open until early September. The quiet, sunny slopes are ideal for focusing on piste skills with the expert instructors of the Warren Smith Ski Academy, which offers five-day summer courses that blend on and off-snow technique, biomechanics and physiology tuition. Available in July and August, the courses include full mornings of on-snow instruction, leaving afternoons free to enjoy Cervinia's extensive non-ski summer activities, including mountain biking, via ferrata, horse riding and Nordic walking.

Summer secret

Heliskiers love dropping into the blissfully remote Restaurant Alpage for lunch after untracked descents from the Swiss-Italian border. Happily, it opens in summer as well, serving its signature Aostan dishes and wines on a sun-drenched terrace overlooking the Matterhorn.

What to book

The Warren Smith Ski Academy offers five-day ski courses from CHF600 (£538) per person, excluding lift passes. Book accommodation at Hotel Mon Reve, which offers doubles from €120 (£101) per night, B&B. Fly to Milan Malpensa with easyJet from £48 return.

5. Alpbach, Austria

Best for families

Alpach is home to the Lauser-Sauser summer toboggan

Widely recognised as one of the most family-friendly ski resorts in the Alps, Alpbach is equally popular in summer, when its traditional timber chalets and surrounding pastures are bestrewn with flowers. Skiers familiar with Alpbach's gently undulating slopes will vouch for the area's pastoral beauty, although few are likely to have witnessed the summer spectacle of those pistes transformed into blankets of pink blossoming mountain azaleas.

Dedicated children's attractions include the extensive mountain-top Lauserland adventure playground and Lauser-Sauser summer toboggan; Juppi's Enchanted Forest, which is accessed from the Reitherkogelbahn gondola and offers buggy-friendly forest strolls, a petting zoo and enchanted village; and a weekly programme of family events, including herb foraging, raft building and visits to local beekeepers. All these attractions are free with the complementary Alpbachtal Card, which offers other activities like e-bike tours, lakeside yoga and torchlit village tours at reduced prices.

Summer secret

Alpbach has hosted the European Forum Alpbach (EFA), a global interdisciplinary platform for young people to debate science, politics, business and culture, since 1945. The fortnight-long forum, which typically takes place in August, is open to all and features seminars and talks from Nobel Prize winners, European presidents, EU commissioners, and foreign ministers.

What to book

Inghams offers seven nights' half board at the Böglerhof from £1,769 per person, based on a family of four sharing, including return flights from London and shared transfers.

6. Verbier, Switzerland

Best for culture

Verbier's summer activities include road and mountain biking, climbing and sky diving Credit: SeeVerbier.com

A winter resort that has it all – big mountain skiing across four connected valleys, pumping nightlife, gourmet restaurants and ultra-luxe chalets – Verbier has just as much, if not more, to offer in summer.

The town's headline summer event is the Verbier Festival, a classical music festival that's been running for over 30 years. The event brings together global superstars such as Evgeny Kissin, Mischa Maisky, and Sir Simon Rattle to perform in large-scale and intimate venues over a performance-filled fortnight each late July to early August. While not enjoying world-class concerts, Verbier offers equally superlative activities from road and mountain biking, climbing and sky diving to cheese-making, artistic workshops and beekeeping. And yes, Chez Dany is open, with guests biking and walking to the legendary chalet for traditional Valais feasts. Rather than sledging down afterwards, they enjoy balmy sunset evenings by roaring firepits before taking a moonlit forest stroll back into Verbier.

Summer secret

The Valais is home to a network of historic irrigation channels known as "bisses". The Bisse du Levron diverts water from the Chaux glacier and Raye des Verbierins river below the Mont Fort hut to the pastures, vineyards and orchards around Verbier, with a scenic walking trail following it from Les Ruinettes into town.

What to book

Verbier Exclusive offers seven nights' self-catered accommodation in the two-bedroom apartment Hickory from CHF6,000 (£5,382), including daily cleaning, 24-hour in-resort driving service, a welcome hamper and pre-arrival planning and in-resort concierge service.

7. Alta Badia, Italy

Best for a long weekend

Panicia: a barley soup that is a speciality of Alta Badia Credit: Alex Moling

Skiing on the snow-dusted flanks of the Dolomites is a visual feast. While snow blankets the pastures, foothills and picturesque villages at the feet of the dramatic limestone peaks, their sheer needles pierce the sky and blush pink, lilac and apricot at dawn and dusk. Summer brings an even more vibrant colour palette, adding wildflower-dotted pastures and lush forests.

The beauty of the Dolomites is arguably best soaked up from a sunny terrace while indulging in delicious local cuisine, something Alta Badia excels at. The cluster of sophisticated villages boasts a constellation of Michelin-star restaurants yet the quality of cooking and produce is stellar across its cosy mountain huts and family-run restaurants. Spectacular scenery, exceptional cuisine and diverse activities, from via ferrata tours, whitewater rafting, wine tours and zip lining, now combine with direct flights Gatwick to Bolzano, placing the Dolomites within three hours' travel time of London.

Summer secret

Winter visitors to Alta Badia will be familiar with the Sella Ronda, a skiing circumnavigation of the Sella Massif. Come summer, it's possible to cycle around the scenic massif, with the local roads closed to motorised traffic on two dedicated Sellaronda Bike Days.

What to book

Powder Byrne offers four nights' half board at Hotel Gran Paradiso, San Cassiano, from £1,285 per person, including transfers to/from Bolzano. You can fly twice weekly from London Gatwick to Bolzano with SkyAlps from £165 each way.

8. Leogang, Austria

Best for mountain biking

Epic Bike Park is home to the Speedster World Cup track, sprawling Riders Playground, a pro-jump line and a wealth of single trails for all abilities Credit: KLEMENS KOENIG

Together with neighbouring Saalbach Hinterglemm and Fieberbrunn, Leogang makes up the expansive Skicircus area, encompassing 168 miles of pistes. While Saalbach steals the winter limelight for après-ski and Fieberbrunn for off-piste, Leogang takes centre stage once the snow melts.

A regular stop on the UCI Mountain Bike World Cup circuit since 2012, Leogang boasts one of Europe's biggest and most famous bike parks. The Epic Bike Park is home to the Speedster World Cup track, sprawling Riders Playground, a pro-jump line and a wealth of single trails for all abilities. Further to the bike park, there are jump lines, an airbag, drops and a vast pump track at the base of the Asitz gondola as well as over 55 miles of trails spread across the shared

Summer secret

Two farming families in Leogang have revived the ancient tradition of cultivating organic saffron in the valley. The "red gold" can be bought at the local Zieferhof farm shop and sampled in some of the town's restaurants.

What to book

Forsthofgut offers three to seven-night Health Escape packages from €990 (£833) per person, including half board, one cryotherapy session, one hypoxia session and a TechnoGym check-up. You can fly three times weekly from London to Salzburg with British Airways from £215 return.

9. Lech, Austria

Best for trail running

Lech is a popular hub for trail running, with over 30 miles of dedicated trails Credit: danielzangerl

Long recognised as one of the world's most exclusive winter resorts, Lech attracts well-heeled yet committed skiers seeking discrete luxury accommodation and access to Austria's largest and best-known resort, Ski Arlberg. Come summer, the focus shifts from skiing to a holistic approach to health and wellness, with e-biking, hiking and outdoor yoga amongst the wildflowers.

The genteel, geranium-festooned town is also a popular hub for trail running, with over 30 miles of dedicated trails. Whether you race up and down rocky mountain trails or jog through meadows and mossy forest paths, running on natural surfaces builds fitness and strength, with the added health benefits of running at altitude. Add a spot of natural Kneipp therapy by dipping your feet in the mineral-rich waters of the Lech River or take the plunge in the riverside Forest Swimming Pool. It's possible to reach neighbouring St Anton from Lech on foot (approx 6.5 hours walking time), with assistance from three lifts that many skiers will be familiar with – the Rüfikopf, Vallugabahn I and Galzigbahn cable cars.

Summer secret

Experienced herbalist Veronika Walch hails from one of the oldest families in Lech and is intimately familiar with the flowers and herbs of her local mountains. Take a guided foraging hike with Walch to share in her wisdom and passion for natural healing and cooking.

What to book

Bramble Ski offers a week in the self-catered three-bedroom Brunnenhof 12 apartment from £4,860 for six adults, including concierge service, bathrobes, slippers and toiletries. You can fly from London to Innsbruck with easyJet from £230 return.

10. Baqueira Beret, Spain

Best for water sports

This summer two chairlifts will open access to new biking and hiking trails around Baqueira Beret Credit: alamy