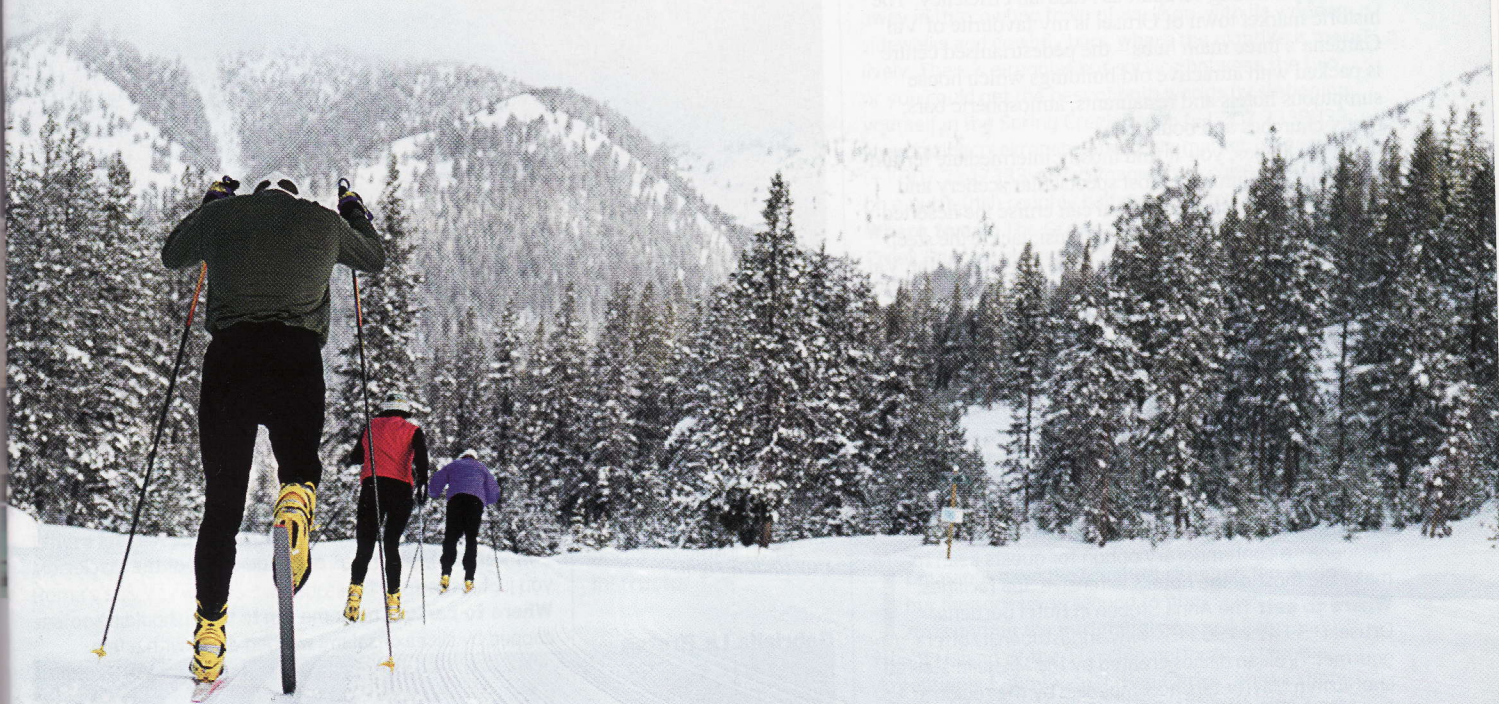


From peak to peak

Three seasoned ski writers select their top resorts, from gentle Val Gardena in South Tirol to the dramatic peaks of Argentina's Bariloche



GABRIELLA LE BRETON

REVELSTOKE, BRITISH COLUMBIA

When two ski lifts opened at Revelstoke Mountain Resort (RMR) in December 2007, the ski industry had to rewrite the history books. The world's youngest ski resort became the first to provide lift, snowcat and heli-served skiing from one base and, when a third lift opened the following winter, it laid claim to the world's greatest lift-accessed vertical descent (a thigh-burning 1,700 metres).

The Selkirk Mountains surrounding Revelstoke receive between 12 and 18 metres of snow annually, in comparison with Europe's seven-metre average, and the colossal Mount Mackenzie, which forms the bulk of RMR's lift-accessed ski terrain, provides steep pitches, wooded glades and open powder bowls in which to enjoy this snowy bounty.

Arguably the best day's skiing of my life was in 'Revy' last winter: having woken to dense cloud and steel myself for a day of bad visibility, the chairlift burst into clear skies to reveal breathtaking views of the peaks of the Selkirks above a swirling bowl of cloud. I shared 3,013 acres of pristine terrain, doused in fresh powder, with just 76 other people. It's still early days for RMR, with 13 years' further expansion work planned, but for advanced skiers on a powder day, it already knocks the ski socks off most resorts.

Where to sleep: The Regent Inn (+1 250 837 2107; www.regentinn.com), in the heart of downtown Revelstoke (a ten-minute drive from the RMR base station), has large, comfortable rooms. It's also home to Revelstoke's finest restaurant, The One Twelve, and the popular River City Pub.

Where to eat: Kawakubo Sushi, Sake & Steak (+1 250 837 2467) serves excellent Japanese food, perfect after some après snacks at The Village Idiot.

Where to party: Join the locals at The Village Idiot for home brews and towering portions of nachos.

CONNOISSEUR SPECIAL

VAL GARDENA, SOUTH TIROL

The narrow valley of Val Gardena, flanked by the Dolomites, encompasses several villages with access to the extensive Sella Ronda ski area. Located in the South Tirol, the valley's rich Austro-Italian heritage means visitors enjoy the warm, exuberant welcome and rich, flavoursome food of Italy while appreciating scrupulous Austrian efficiency. The historic market town of Ortisei is my favourite of Val Gardena's three main hubs – the pedestrianised centre is packed with attractive old buildings which house sumptuous hotels and restaurants, atmospheric bars, pretty churches and boutiques.

On the slopes, you'll find mostly intermediate terrain with some of Europe's most spectacular scenery and best mountain restaurants. You can cruise the deserted high-alpine meadows of Alpi di Siusi, tackle the steep reds on the Marmolada glacier, head off-piste in the Val Mezdi or spend a day circumnavigating the dramatic Sella Ronda. But there's one thing every visitor to Val Gardena must do: make like a local and simply soak up the views, sunshine and relaxed atmosphere from a terrace on the slopes, Bombardino or Grappa in hand.

Where to sleep: The Hotel Adler (+39 471 775000; www.adler-resorts.com) is a traditional, family-owned hotel in the heart of Ortisei. Linked by underground walkway to the original building is the new Adler Vital Residenz – a contemporary option for guests keen to make the most of the hotel's extensive Spa facilities.

Where to eat: The Anna Stuben in Hotel Gardena, Ortisei (+39 471 796315; www.annastuben.it) offers gourmet Tirolean dishes created by the Michelin-starred chef Armin Mayrhofer, accompanied by the region's finest wines. The charming Tubladi (+39 471 796879) serves more simple local classics.

Where to party: Enjoy authentic Austrian après-ski at the base of the Ortisei's lifts at Seceda before heading for Hotel Adler's Siglu Bar and Mauriz.

NEIL ENGLISH

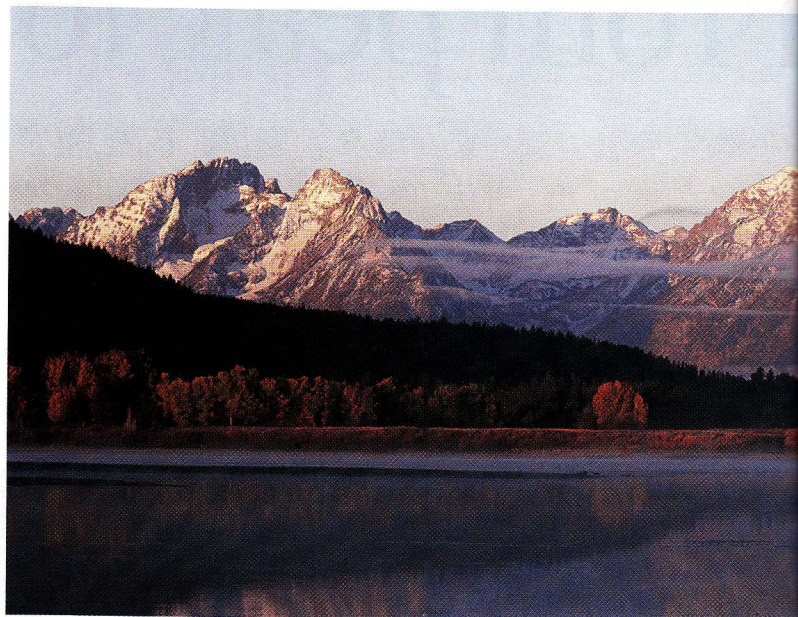
VILLARS, SWITZERLAND

Everything about this Swiss town in the 'Riviera Alps', which rise up rather serenely behind the north shore of Lake Geneva, is easy on the eye. Attractive chalet-style buildings dominate. Most face the dramatic alpine ranges of the Grand Muverans and Dents du Midi that sandwich the glaciers skirting Mont Blanc's massif. Even the Edwardian cog railway, winding up from the resort through snowy pastures to the ski area's hub of Bretaye at 1,800 metres, has a certain charm. Alternatively, a modern gondola rises to Roc d'Orsay at 2,000 metres.

The 100 kilometres of pistes above Villars include the pine forest-lined descent to Les Diablerets. On a blue bird day, take the short shuttle bus to the cable cars which climb to Les Diablerets' 3,000-metre glacier, for the views alone if nothing else. But the skiing on the diverse trails to the valley floor provide a wealth of fabulous downhill.

Where to stay: Centrally located and family run, the residences at Alpe Fleurie (+41 244 963070; www.alpe-fleurie.com) offer a range of three to four star accommodation, in the main hotel or a range of chalets.

Where to eat: First, be sure to brave a coffee or



WORTH THE WAIT

Wyoming's Teton mountains are remote and beautiful (above); Amangani is the place to stay (below right)

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schnapps at the shack perched on the edge of the cliff at the top of Les Diablerets, ignoring the 1,000-metre drop. En route back to Villars, take the fast quad to Meilleret for lunch on the sundeck of Restaurant Le Mazot (+41 244 921023), which has rear side views of the glacier you just visited.

Where to party: The home run to town should be capped by slices of salami washed down with a few decilitres of local Ollon vin blanc at the après ski Refuge L'Arrivee. Gourmets should dine at least once in Restaurant Le Soleil (+41 244 954530).

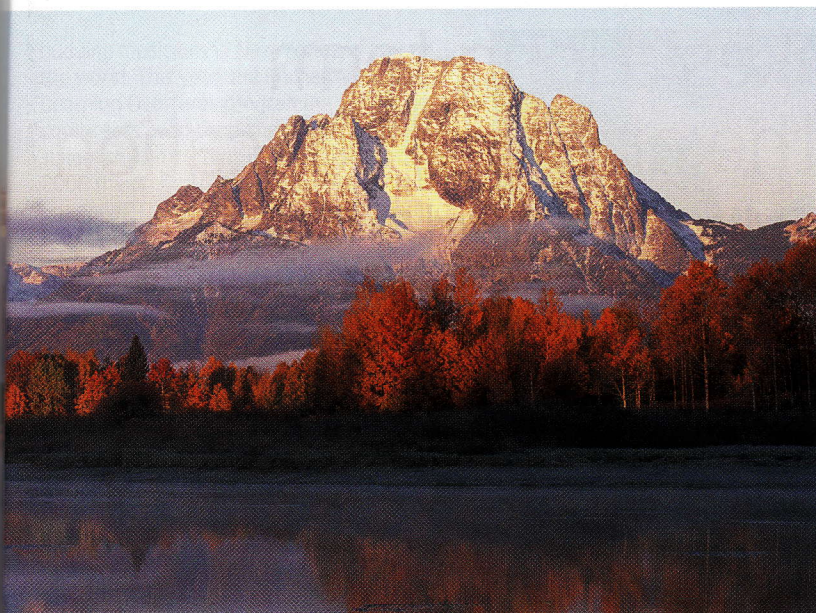
COURMAYEUR, ITALY

If there was a ski resort trophy for multiculturalism, Courmayeur, in the Aosta region of Italy, would win it hands down. This is where chic Milanese ladies in full-length fur rub Prada handbags against the Dakine rucksacks of hard-core skiers in many of the bars dotted along the pedestrianised resort centre, known as via Roma.

OK, the ladies might be sipping prosecco after a tough day's boutique shopping and manicures while the gnarly freeriders chug lager, having attacked the backcountry steepes flanking Mont Blanc. But once the shops and lifts close, they both indulge in the free antipasti delights spread out for all customers, especially in Bar Roma. Those who fall somewhere between off-piste aficionados and ladies of leisure will enjoy the 100 kilometres of groomed trails above Plan Checrouit, only accessible via cable car from the resort. Both Villars and Courmayeur can be reached by car within 90 minutes of Geneva Airport.

Where to stay: The Hotel Bouton d'Or (+39 165 846729; www.hotelboutondor.com) delivers three-star accommodation plus family-run charm on a bed and breakfast basis.

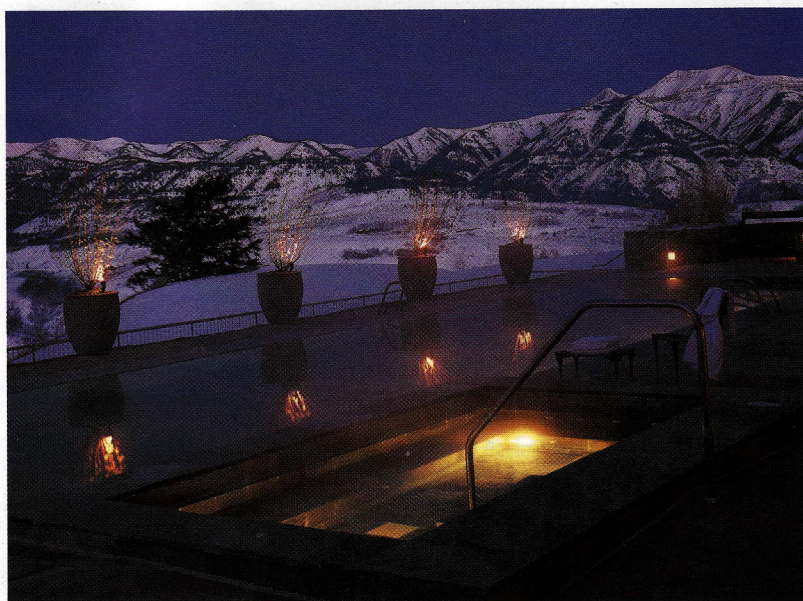
Where to eat: For calorie-loading 'elevenses', try the decadent hot chocolate and Italian Mama-style homemade cakes at Chez Croux (+39 348 5175861; www.chezcroux.com) and back in the resort, Aria (+39 165 848069) and La Terrazza (+39 165 843330) restaurants can take a bow. Up the mountain, some 27 restaurants adorn the slopes, most with sundecks facing



Mont Blanc, western Europe's highest peak. Heston Blumenthal told me Maison Vieille (+39 337 230979) serves his favourite rustic alpine fare. Not to be missed.

Where to party: This season, the newly refurbished Mont Frety (+39 165 841786) aims to share in Bar Roma's success with its own après ski hour offering seafood specialities.

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ARNIE WILSON

JACKSON HOLE, WYOMING, USA

Even if the skiing weren't so exciting, Jackson Hole is worth every one of the 4,692 miles it takes to travel there. It's wild – as in truly Wild West – remote and beautiful, with the jagged Teton mountains, America's most photographed peaks, providing a dramatic backdrop. The main mountain, Rendezvous Peak, tends to be revered as a gung-ho ski area, helped by its chutes and steepes, including its

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infamously tough in-bounds 'run' Corbet's Couloir – a leap into the abyss for experts only. But Jackson has enough benign skiing to attract beginners and families too, mainly on the lesser mountain, *Après Vous*.

Where to sleep: The only dilemma presented by visiting Jackson Hole is whether to stay in Teton Village, where the Four Seasons (+1 307 7325000; www.fourseasons.com/jacksonhole) leads a list of good hotels, or 12 miles away in the cowboy town of Jackson, with its wooden sidewalks and cowboy bars, where the nightlife is more lively. There's a regular bus service between the two, or you could get the best of both worlds by stationing yourself in the Spring Creek Ranch (+1 307 7338833; www.springcreek ranch.com) or up-market Amangani (+1 307 7347333; www.amanresorts.com), both perched on a butte (hill) roughly halfway between the two.

Where to eat: The Granary Restaurant at the Spring Creek Ranch has some of the most impressive views of the Tetons (which you can't actually see from the ski slopes) and makes a superb breakfast or dinner location.

Where to party: It's well worth a preprandial cocktail upstairs at The Granary bar before the sun goes down on the view and no one should explore the town of Jackson without at least one visit to the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar (+1 307 7332207; www.milliondollarcowboybar.com), with live music and saddles for bar stools.

GRAN CATEDRAL, SAN CARLOS DE BARILOCHE, ARGENTINA

It may not have the toughest skiing in the Andes but the scenery is second to none – towering peaks surrounding the intriguingly named Lake Nahuel Huapi (Island of the Tiger) in northern Patagonia, Argentine's Lake District. San Carlos, on the shores of the lake, is a small, attractive city with significant German and Swiss influence. The ski area, five miles away at Cerro (Mount) Catedral (so called because the jagged peaks are said to resemble the spires of a cathedral) is usually referred to simply as Bariloche. It's the largest and most Europeanised of any major resort in Argentina, with a big après-ski culture which often includes spontaneous dancing on the flat snow-covered sections of the base area. The base village is a bustling mini-metropolis with all manner of tearooms and bars. The skiing is extensive, with exhilarating but fairly easy long runs from above the tree level right down through the lower mountain's thinly forested areas, which are intermingled with bamboo copses. Sometimes, from the highest slopes, you might spy a pair of condors soaring lazily on a gentle breeze.

Where to stay: One of the most attractive hotel locations is the Villa Llao Llao (+54 2944 448107; www.villallaollao.com), perched on a promontory jutting into the lake which makes it feel almost as though you're staying on an island. The restaurant has stunning lake views, and the hotel puts on tango displays.

Where to eat: One of the best restaurants in San Carlos de Bariloche is the Kandahar (+54 2944 424702; www.kandahar.com.ar), run by Marta Barber, a former Argentine ski champion – great for venison, trout and wild boar.

Where to party: San Carlos de Bariloche has numerous bars and discos. One of the most popular is Grisu (+54 2944 422269; www.grisu.com/exeweb.htm) on Juan Manuel de Rosas Street, close to the waterfront. Great views of the lake if you get there before dusk – or dance until dawn! ●