



ABOVE: Jackson Hole in Wyoming has some of the world's steepest runs. **BELOW:** The Three Valleys region of France, with eight resorts and 600 kilometres of slopes, is the world's largest linked ski area.

Piste perfect

Whatever type of skiing you prefer, there's something for everyone in the northern hemisphere this season.

WORDS BY Craig Tansley

BEST SKI RESORT FOR... BEGINNERS:
BUTTERMILK, ASPEN, COLORADO, US

BUTTERMILK is the ultimate beginners' ski resort, in one of the world's best ski areas. There are four separate ski resorts at Aspen to choose from, all no more than 15 minutes free bus travel away, with Buttermilk set aside for beginners and families (there are also some of the world's best terrain parks and half-pipes at Buttermilk, but they're separated from the beginners' area). Buttermilk never gets busy and beginners have 190 hectares of wide open, gently rolling trails (34 kilometres of them) all to themselves. There are also experienced instructors on hand and once you progress you can move up to Aspen's more advanced mountains: Snowmass, Highlands and Ajax. Of course, when beginners tire, Aspen also offers some of the most diverse off-ski action in the world. www.aspensnowmass.com/buttermilk

Other contenders: Courchevel, France; Breckenridge, Colorado; Alpe d'Huez, France;

Soldeu, Andorra.

BEST SKI RESORT FOR... GROOMING:
BEAVER CREEK, COLORADO, US

BEAVER CREEK'S slogan is: Not exactly roughing it. From the moment you arrive at this Colorado ski resort you're treated like royalty, from the escalators that take you from the base village to the slopes, to the white glove service that accompanies cookie time each afternoon. But it's the grooming at Beaver Creek that spoils you the most. The slopes are groomed 24 hours a day, seven days a week throughout the snow season (they groom more than 315 ha a day), which means you'll always find fresh corduroy. The Beaver Creek Grooming Report is online and posted throughout the resort each morning so you'll know where to find it. With 149 trails spread within 735 ha serviced by 17 lifts, there's plenty of great terrain with freshly groomed runs.

www.beavercreek.com

Other contenders: St Moritz, Switzerland; Sun Valley, Idaho; Whistler-Blackcomb, Canada; Park City, Utah.

BEST SKI RESORT FOR... SHEER SIZE:
WHISTLER-BLACKCOMB, CANADA
AND THREE VALLEYS, FRANCE

WHISTLER-BLACKCOMB is 50 per cent larger than its biggest competitor, it has the biggest uphill lift capacity of any ski resort and you can even ride from one peak to the next on the longest unsupported cable car in the world. Whistler has 1925 ha of ski terrain and Blackcomb has 1382 ha, with more than 200 runs serviced by 39 lifts, five gondolas and the Peak 2 Peak cable car. Whistler-Blackcomb can move 65,507 skiers an hour (or 10.22 million a year). Another place with endless possibilities is the Three Valleys region of France, with eight resorts, 600 km of slopes and 2500 ha of groomed runs – the world's largest linked ski area.

www.whistlerblackcomb.com
www.les3vallees.com/ski/three-valleys-ski-resort.html

Other contenders: Vail, Colorado; Hakuba, Japan; Paradiski, France.

BEST SKI RESORT FOR... ACCESS:
SNOWBIRD, ALTA, PARK CITY, THE CANYONS, DEER VALLEY, SOLITUDE, BRIGHTON – UTAH, US

THE BEAUTY of Utah's major ski resorts is just how close they are to Salt Lake City airport. Seven of the state's best resorts are within a 50-minute drive of the terminal, so you can be on the slopes not much more than an hour after touching down.

www.utah.com/ski/resorts
Other contenders: Snow Paradise Inawashiro, Japan; Grouse Mountain, Vancouver; Mt Seymour, Vancouver; Cypress Mountain, Vancouver.

BEST SKI RESORT FOR... BACK-COUNTRY THRILLS:
LA GRAVE-LA MEIJE, FRANCE

WITH A NAME like La Grave, it's no surprise this place is nicknamed Death Mountain. There's just one cable car and no groomed terrain or ski patrols, so when you ski La Grave you're on your own. Take a cable car up to 3200 metres, where there are only two marked pistes on the glacier; how you get down is entirely up to you – you can follow



as extreme a course as you dare. With 2000m of vertical drop and ski runs that tilt beyond 50 degrees, La Grave is the most extreme off-piste ski mountain in the world. Some of the chutes are less than 2m wide and people die here each season, unsurprisingly.

www.la-grave.com
Contenders: Jackson Hole, US; Red Mountain, Canada; Chamonix, France.

BEST SKI RESORT FOR... STEEP RUNS:
JACKSON HOLE, WYOMING

IF YOU DON'T like your ski runs steep, don't even consider Jackson Hole. A sign at the bottom warns: "Our mountain is like nothing you've ever skied before." When the snow gets hard around Jackson Hole, the runs become fearsome; single black diamond runs here are easily as difficult as double black diamonds (the most difficult on-piste run you can find) at any other ski resort. Jackson Hole has 1261m of vertical rise, but it's the severe chutes that cement its reputation, with runs more than 50 degrees in pitch. Jackson also offers some of the steepest back-country runs you can access without a guide anywhere in the world.

www.jacksonhole.com
Contenders: Sun Valley, Idaho; Happo One, Japan; Val d'Isere, France.

BEST SKI RESORT FOR... GUARANTEED POWDER SNOW:
NISEKO, JAPAN

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A skier hits the powder in Niseko, Japan; St Anton in Austria has some of the world's most pristine snow, as well as the best après-ski scene; a skier launches into the well-groomed Puma Bowl at Park City Mountain Resort in Utah.



bars and restaurants. At bars such as Senn Hutte or the legendary Mooserwirt, the owners encourage patrons to dance on tables. Best of all, you won't see a single lout or scuffle.

www.stantonamarlberg.com/eng
Contenders: Aspen, Colorado; Val d'Isere, France; Flachau, Austria.

BEST SKI RESORT FOR... CULTURE AND LUXURY:
ST MORITZ, SWITZERLAND

COULD THERE be anywhere else? Among St Moritz regulars are many of Europe's royal families and a stack of movie superstars. More than 10,000 private jets land each year at its airport, its main street – Via Serlas – is stocked with boutique stores like Chanel, Bulgari and Pucci, frequented by shoppers who arrive in horse-drawn carriages. There's also the Cartier Polo World Cup on Snow each January and, in February, the White Turf horse race series, which attracts Europe's wealthiest. But while St Moritz is the epitome of European luxury, it's also oddly accessible – at a price, of course. Perhaps more than at any other destination frequented by royals and superstars in Europe you can mingle, attend the same events and eat at the same restaurants.

www.stmoritz.ch
Contenders: Sun Valley, Idaho; Aspen, Colorado; Courchevel, France; Lech, Austria.

BEST SKI RESORT FOR... VALUE FOR MONEY:
VAIL, BEAVER CREEK, BRECKENRIDGE, KEYSTONE – COLORADO; HEAVENLY, NORTHSTAR-AT-TAHOE – CALIFORNIA

If you're planning a longer ski holiday as the Australian dollar outperforms the greenback, there's no better value than the Epic Pass. For \$US699 you can ski the whole season with no black-out dates at six different resorts, four within 45 minutes of each other in Colorado – Vail, Breckenridge, Beaver Creek and Keystone – and two in California – Heavenly and Northstar-at-Tahoe. The Epic 7-Day pass allows you to ski at any of the six resorts for \$US499.

www.snow.com/epicpass
Contenders: Soldeu, Andorra; Zao Onsen,