

Ski touring: Where to hit the slopes, even when the lifts are shut



Skiing might be off the festive menu but ski touring is still possible in the Alps CREDIT: BORIS MOLINIER/SAINT GERVAIS

It's not all downhill on the slopes, this could be the year to free the heel and go ski touring

By Felicity Byrnes, 1 December 2020

Frigid breath sears my lungs and blood pounds in my ears, adding a pulsing beat as snow crackles under my skis. The hypnotic rhythm of ski touring sets in – heel lift, push, pole, repeat; until I burst through to a summit in Saint Gervais-Mont Blanc. Below is the pretty snow globe of a village, above is Mont Blanc, and ahead (hopefully) a plate of cheesy tartiflette. After all, this is France and I've certainly worked up an appetite.

Wait, France? Aren't the ski resorts closed? *Au contraire* – only ski lifts are closed, otherwise even Prime Minister Jean Castex urges visitors to head to resorts, “to enjoy the pure air of our beautiful mountains.” That's almost an official invitation to go ski touring, which is (for the moment) permitted, meaning memories such as my last jaunt in the shadow of Mont Blanc can soon be re-lived.

But what is ski touring? In a nutshell, “Special gear allows you to walk uphill with skis on, including skins on the bottom which grip the snow. Then you peel the skins off, lock your bindings down and ski down off piste”, says German IFMGA certified (International Federation of Mountain Guides) guide Till Kramann.

And there are benefits apart from fresh tracks. “Being away from noise, being healthy and learning new skills makes it the type of sport which lifts you up physically and

mentally”, says Kramann. And after the year many have had, this is exactly what the doctor ordered.

Here’s where to try it for yourself. Please note, travel advice, rules and regulations in resorts can change at the last minute due to the coronavirus pandemic. Check Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office advice specific resort advice before travelling.

France

Why go? For beginner-friendly terrain

Maybe don’t cancel Christmas just yet. As Saint Gervais-Mount Blanc’s Business Development Manager Oriane Tian says, “All else is open and it’s gorgeous here in winter. This is also an excuse to explore the wilder side of the mountains and ski touring is a real snow adventure.”

The resort regularly partners with local brand Zag for Ski Touring demo weekends and has developed three signed ski touring paths taking a standard skier 2 – 3 hours to complete. For anything more challenging, contact the Compagnie des Guides.



Ski touring allows the chance to hit the slopes when they're empty CREDIT: BORIS MOLINIER

Also try: Misha Baude of Snocool in Val d’Isere is literally bubbling with enthusiasm. “Ski touring will be tremendous for Christmas and New Year. The snow up there will be untouched.” Beginners have endless terrain in the Vanoise National Park with athletic challenges including Aiguille Rousse or Mean Martin.

Austria

Why go? For easy access

“This year some people will want to avoid gatherings, so ski touring is the thing to do this winter,” says Geli Häusl of Geliskiing in St Anton.

Häusl not only guides the Arlberg but is a professional freerider, has featured in ski movies, undertaken expeditions and knows the world’s fifth largest interlinked ski area backwards.

“The Arlberg is great as you can start your ski touring day without having to take a lift, or if you don’t want to hike for that long you might only have to take one or two lifts. That way you’re away from all the people right away,” she says – lifts in Austria are currently due to open after the end of the national lockdown on December 7.

With only short walks you can ski down into different valleys and take a lift back into the ski area, experiencing untouched mountain terrain, summits, virgin valleys, maybe even sight an Ibex. “You might only get one or two ski runs a day, but you’ll have a lifetime experience,” encourages Häusl.

Also try: The Girls Silvretta Touring Camp is a three-day women-only ski touring camp covering avalanche awareness, navigation and how to perfect kick turns (7 – 10 January 2021, or 14 – 17 January 2021).

Italy

Why go? For scenery

While Italy sits shivering on the fence about when to open this season, say ciao to the dramatic Dolomites, formed by a giant prehistoric coral reef and streaked in a myriad of hues. “The Dolomites are very special for ski touring,” says guide Reinhard Senoner of Gardegna Guides in Val Gardena. “First there’s the landscape, built under the sea 200 million years ago, plus the steep peaks and walls making incredible valleys and couloirs.”

Intermediate ski tourers could head to Forcella della Roa or the Rasciesa di Dentro in the Puez-Odle Nature Park. “They’re an easy to medium level tour, around 800m vertical, but with great scenery and sunshine in January,” says Senoner.



Ski touring in the Dolomites is stunning CREDIT: LUKAS RUNGGALDIER

Also try: The Eagles Ski Club (ESC, the UK's largest ski touring club), runs about 60 ski touring trips each winter, and the Dolomites book out quickly. Richard Davison says excellent huts, food and scenery are a winning combination, plus the Rifugio Lavarella hut, "has the highest microbrewery in the Alps, which is a very good selling point."

Switzerland

Why go? For advanced adventures

It's hard to schuss past Switzerland, beckoning with her pointy-finger mountain tops. Seventy per cent of the country is mountainous, sporting 4,000m peaks, and it's already open for snow business.

But if choosing one place to plant your ski pole, it's the Bernese Oberland. This is Disneyland for ski touring, as Tina Gertsch, Head of Grindelwald Sports Mountaineering School says, "We have everything; we have high mountains, low mountains, we ski tour in winter, we ski tour in spring." The high alpine glaciers means ski touring is possible from November to May.

But there's a stand-out bucket list tour, the tongue-twisting Lötschenlücke through a UNESCO World Heritage area. Most alpine ski tours (alpine meaning glaciated terrain) are multi-day but this is a day event, an epic 20km with 2,350m descent. And the scenery is, according to Gertsch: "Real high alpine, surrounded by 4000m peaks, there's no other day route like this. It's amazing, even for the Swiss"



Faction's new release documents ski touring between Zermatt and Verbier in Switzerland CREDIT: RUEDI FLUECK/FACTION COLLECTIVE

But glacier terrain is a whole new snowball, so consider the two-day Lötschenlücke Special. The first day is an introduction to ski touring and high alpine safety. The

second day is the Lötschenlücke itself. Given they had a blizzard of summer mountaineering enquiries, it's a safe bet this will be a winter winner.

Also try: Zermatt, another ski touring playground. Beat Wälti, the Geschäftsführer (CEO) of local mountain guide company Zermatters, rates a fairly easy ski tour accessing a hidden valley beyond Grunsee, ending up on the Findel Glacier with point-blank Matterhorn views. But Wälti also recommends tasting the other winter wonders, stating: "There's cross country skiing, snowshoeing, hiking, curling, paragliding, we even have husky adventures at 2,900m."