

BY TRAIN



Daniel Elkan relaxes on the TGV to Oulx station near Sauze, while Grant caught an early flight. Main photograph by Francesco Falcone

BY PLANE



The great race to the Alps

It's more eco-friendly to take the train than fly, but can it also be faster? **Daniel Elkan** challenges a friend to be first to the piste in Italy

On a long journey to the Alps several years ago, as my exhausted head rattled against the window of a transfer coach, it dawned on me that an alternative might exist. As the coach climbed the winding hill to the Italian resort of Sauze d'Oulx, I spotted something glinting in the sunshine, just down the hill: a railway track.

Might it be possible to cut out the crack-of-dawn flight, all the airport hassle, and get to Sauze from the UK by train? I'd heard of the overnight Snow Train, but that serves only a handful of French resorts clustered in one corner of the Alps. Would an Italian resort be too far? And could the train compete with plane on journey time?

Back in the UK, my inner trainpotter pored over timetables and maps. To reach Sauze from London would require only two trains, albeit with a change in Paris. A delayed flight or coach could easily make the rail journey the fastest mode of transport. Better still, the journey would produce less than 10% of the CO2 emissions of travelling by air.

So, I decided to put this journey to the test on the Sunday before Christmas. A friend of mine, Grant, would fly out to Sauze on a Crystal holiday package and I'd travel by train.

The timer for our respective journeys was set to zero when we each left home and we kept in touch to compare how long it took to reach every stage of our separate trips.

0.00 We start from the same house in West Hampstead, London. Grant's journey kicks off at 2.50am – to get him to Gatwick airport and through check-in and security in time for a 6.30am

flight. Meanwhile, I don't have to leave the house until 7.35am for the simple journey across town to St Pancras. The Eurostar requires you to arrive only 30 minutes before departure and check-in and security takes me just 10 minutes.

1.05 My Eurostar leaves on time. Sunday papers splayed across the table as we depart, I can't wipe the grin from my face. This is so civilised. After the first hour of his journey, Grant still hadn't made it to the airport, let alone joined the check-in queue.

3.40 After security and killing time in duty free, Grant takes off at 6.30am.

He's lucky – that's exactly on time. (Damn!) My journey is going equally smoothly – eight minutes later my Eurostar arrives at Paris Gare du Nord. I need to head across Paris to the Gare de Lyon from where my TGV departs. There is a taxi rank only metres from the Eurostar platform, but Gare de Lyon is only three stops by Metro so I give public transport a go.

4.12 Grant's cooped up in the air, I have made it to the Gare de Lyon. To be honest the trip between stations weighed down by bags and snowboard isn't a barrel of laughs. Thankfully, there's enough time

for a restorative steak-frites and glass of rouge at the L' Express Bleu cafe.

5.15 My TGV departs, full of people reading, studying, tapping at laptops or playing cards, while toddlers scrawl on colouring-in books. It is almost like a 1950s-style public service broadcast "Use your time wisely – take the train." Five hours into his trip, Grant's plane has touched down at Turin airport.

5.55 Grant's suitcase arrives, but the carousel gremlins have his snowboard.

6.30 The snowboard finally appears, but someone's husband has got lost in the airport. The Crystal transfer bus is

delayed 25 minutes while the reps gallantly search for him. It finally leaves seven hours after Grant set out. At this point my train is speeding towards mist-covered Lac du Bourget.

8.23 A traffic-free transfer means that Grant reaches Sauze.

10.20 My train arrives at Oulx station at 6.55pm. A handful of Italian and French skiers get off, but I seem to be the only Brit to have taken the train. Ten minutes in a taxi and I'm at the hotel.

So Grant won, but by a far smaller margin than expected. His door to door journey was 20% quicker than mine, but in terms of convenience and quality, we both agree: the train trounced the plane. The flight times, as with many ski charters, were grim, whereas the train trip started at a reasonable hour but still arrived in perfect time for supper.

This winter, because of the cost of the euro, package holidays have suddenly become the best value for ski holidays and almost all are based around flights. But the good news is that tour operators such as Crystal, Thomson, Neilson, First Choice and Inghams are now offering discounts from £50 – £200 if you don't use the flight and book your own train tickets. I'd recommend it every time.

■ Rail Europe (0844 848 4070; www.raileurope.co.uk) London to Oulx from £102 return. Taxi from station to resort €20 (00 39 333 318 6476; www.taxigarofalo.it). Crystal Ski (0871 231 2256; www.crystalski.co.uk) offers a week half-board in the four-star Hotel La Torre from £495, including flights and transfers. A £70 reduction is available if you book your own train ticket instead of using Crystal's flights.

MORE RESORTS WITHIN A DAY'S TRAIN RIDE

ENGELBERG, SWITZERLAND

Travel time from St Pancras: 9 hrs 52 minutes

Why? Small and friendly with plenty for powder hounds off-piste

How? Leave Saturday on the 07.20 Eurostar to Paris Nord. Catch the 12.24 from Paris Est, changing at Basel and Lucerne, to arrive at Engelberg at 18.12. Return the following Saturday on the 08.45 train from Engelberg, changing at Lucerne, Basel and Paris, to arrive at St Pancras at 17.54

Cost: Return fares from £153

CRANS MONTANA, SWITZERLAND

Travel time: 9 hrs 17 minutes

Why? Panoramic views and sunny slopes

How? Leave Saturday on the 08.40 Eurostar to Paris Nord. Then catch the 12.58 train



Megève is only 10 hours by train.

from Paris Est, changing at Lausanne and Sierre. Then take the funicular, arriving Montana at 18.57. Return the following Saturday on the 10.45 funicular from Montana, changing at Sierre and Paris – back in London 20.31

Cost: Return from £139

BARDONECCIA, ITALY

Travel time: 9 hrs 5 minutes

Why? A family-friendly resort town, just down the road from Sauze

How? Leave Sunday on the 08.40 Eurostar from St. Pancras to Paris Nord. Then catch the 13.50 train from Paris Lyon, arriving at Bardonecchia at 18.45. Return the following Sunday on the 10.40 train from Bardonecchia, changing in Paris, to arrive at St. Pancras at 17.34

Cost: Return fares from £102

MEGEVE, FRANCE

Travel time: 10hrs 3 minutes

Why? Quiet slopes and rustic chic

How? Leave Saturday on the 08.40 Eurostar from St. Pancras to Paris Nord. Then catch the 13.50 train from Paris Lyon, changing at Annecy, to arrive at Sallanches-Combloux-Megève at 19.33. Then take a taxi (10 minutes, €32-40) to the resort. Return the following Saturday on the 09.42 from Sallanches-Combloux-Megève, changing in Paris, to arrive back in London at 17.54

Cost: Return fares from £131

All journeys can be booked through Rail Europe (www.raileurope.co.uk; 0844 848 4070)

SkiByRail

Tracks in the snow

Why settle for one resort when you can take the train and enjoy a whole country? Daniel Elkan hops on board for a rail ski safari in Switzerland

32 Like many skiers and snowboarders, I'm instinctively drawn to big-name resorts that boast hundreds of kilometres of piste. But often, on getting there, I feel like I've been hoodwinked. Slow, shuffling lift queues, overcrowded runs . . . the sheer number of people renders piste-mileage figures meaningless.

I also find that spending a week in one resort can dull the senses as you hit the same trails again and again. So last season, I devised an alternative to the standard one-week-one-big-resort holiday – a rail ski safari to several small ones. The fact that it would be greener made it even more appealing.

Europe's rail network can speed a skier to hundreds of destinations all over the continent, but with its picturesque mountain railways and 243 ski resorts (many with stations), Switzerland was the obvious choice.

When I felt the weight of my friend Grant's snowboard bag, though, I wondered whether it would be as easy as it first seemed. In the coming fortnight, we'd be hauling our luggage

on and off 16 trains. I had visions of our adventure turning into a shoulder-torturing schlep, with Grant eventually crushed beneath the weight of his bag gasping: "You go ahead without me . . . I'll only slow you down. . ."

Our first destination, Engelberg in central Switzerland, was just under 11 hours from St Pancras – door to door the journey didn't take much longer than it would by plane. The French countryside slipped away and the ground became blanketed in snow, as if in the space of a few hours spring had turned to winter. On either side, mountains loomed in the dusk and the huge expanse of Lake Zurich came into view on our left.

Engelberg has a loyal following of experienced Swedish skiers and snowboarders who save up at home all summer so they can ski there all winter, without having to work. Looking out from the top of the 3,028m Mount Titlis on our first morning we could see why: in every direction, expansive off-piste is accessible without any hiking, though the crevasse-riddled terrain means it's wise to ski with a guide.

We avoided crevasses, but still ended up lodged in ice, at Iglu-Dorf, an igloo hotel halfway up Titlis. The cavernous, candlelit rooms had sheepskin rugs, Jacuzzis and a bar serving glühwein. We took a guided snow-shoe walk in the dark, gazing down from the edge of a cliff at the twinkling lights of the town, 1,800m beneath us. And we stayed warm and

comfortable all night, though, much as I like Grant, the romantic atmosphere would be better experienced with a lover, not a friend.

After another day on the slopes we headed to Meiringen, two hours west, in a carriage full of suited Swiss commuters. Meiringen's slopes aren't visible from the village and, with so few people heading up on the cable-car next morning, we assumed the skiing would be tame. But as we ascended, an impressive panorama of empty pistes covered in soft snow unfolded before us.

"People don't really come to smaller resorts like this except at weekends and holidays," explained Marcus, a Swiss skier from nearby Bern.

Halfway along a red run, we were stopped in our tracks, Road Runner-cartoon style, by the incredible sight of a body somersaulting above us, and dropping, upside down, out of sight below. We had chanced upon the practice session of a team of professional aerial ski jumpers. One of them was the 2006 Olympic champion, Evelyne Leu. By coincidence, we ended up in the same gondola as Leu on the way back to the village. "We practise these jumps into lakes during the summer, for safety," she said. Safety being a relative term.

Searching the town for après-ski, we found a bronze statue of Sherlock Holmes, who was fictionally pushed off a cliff (or not) by arch-rival Moriarty at the nearby Reichenbach waterfall, and has a small museum dedicated to him.



Nightlife in these small resorts is limited to cosy bars, especially midweek; so our solution was to go off-brief to party in Zermatt, Switzerland's stellar resort, for a couple of nights. By day we battled through blizzards to rustic mountain restaurants, including Chez Vroni, a snug cabin with homemade sausages dangling from the ceiling in the tiny hamlet of Findeln.

Leaving Zermatt the next morning, we realised it's a mistake to travel between resorts in the evening. Through the huge windows of the Glacier Express we were treated to the

spectacle of a snowy St Gotthard valley, which runs from Zermatt to Andermatt. For an hour, cross-country skiers glided along a path next to the track.

Within an hour of reaching Andermatt, we were ascending Gemsstock mountain in the only cable car to access a phenomenal off-piste area.

Next, Disentis, an hour down the line but a very different region of Switzerland, where people speak a Romanche dialect, not German. Disentis is presided over by a Benedictine monastery, its cream walls glowing pink in the late afternoon sun. It had been four days since the last



rain with a view . . . the Glacier Express



and hake in breadcrumbs surpassed the rest. The train clattered through the beautiful Rheinschlucht valley, known as the Grand Canyon of Switzerland, past hilltop villages, a turquoise river, and otherworldly grey rock formations.

Two glorious days' cruising Pontresina's long, sweeping runs ended with a blissful soak in Europe's highest outdoor Jacuzzi, in front of the excellent Berghaus restaurant at the 2,978m summit of Diavolezza – more proof that settling for less piste does not mean compromising on altitude.

The next morning, reluctantly boarding a homebound train, I thought back over our trip. While a normal ski holiday can fast-forward to the end, each day blending into the next, the varied nature of our ski safari had made it feel like an epic adventure. I took a last glimpse down the railway track where, further along the line, dozens of other small, deserted resorts were waiting to be discovered.

● **Getting there** London to Paris by Eurostar (from £59 rtn) then Paris to Basel (from £38 rtn) then an InterRail Switzerland pass (£168) giving eight days' travel within a one-month period. Book through Rail Europe (0844 848 4070, raileurope.co.uk).

● **Where to stay** Hotel Garni Hostatt in Engelberg (hostatt.ch), doubles from £37pp B&B. Iglu Dorf Engelberg (iglu-dorf.com) from £78pp. Sporthotel Sherlock Holmes in Meiringen (sherlock.ch), doubles from £87 half-board. Hotel Perren in Zermatt (hotel-perren.ch), doubles from £54pp B&B. Hotel Drei Koenige & Post in Andermatt (3koenige.ch), doubles from £136 B&B. Hotel Sax in Disentis (hotelsax.ch), doubles from £49 half-board. Hotel Allegra in Pontresina (allegrahotel.ch), doubles from £125 B&B.

● **More information** myswitzerland.com.

snowfall, but with too few people to track it out, powder remained in abundance, right next to the pistes.

All too soon we were heading east to our final destination, Pontresina, a pretty resort next to St Moritz. Any regrets about taking one of our last trains melted when we boarded a 75-year-old wood-panelled dining carriage, redolent of the Orient Express, with tables set with wine glasses, folded cloth napkins and candles. The dining cars on Swiss trains are typically excellent waiter-service restaurants, but here the baby-leaf salad, polenta, ratatouille

More resorts linked by rail

33 Les Arcs France

The most convenient Alpine train destination is the Tarentaise valley. A Friday night Eurostar runs all the way to Bourg-St-Maurice, arriving Saturday morning. (NB There are no couchettes – take earplugs, eyemask and pillow.) Taxis and the odd bus go to Val d'Isère and Tignes and a funicular links the station to Les Arcs. ● Erna Low (0845 863 0525, ernalow.co.uk) offers 7 nights in a two-bedroom Radisson SAS apartment in the newest village, Arc 1950, from £331pp inc train travel.

34 Méribel France

There are two other stations along the Tarentaise valley with access to ski areas; Aime, for La Plagne, and Moutiers, for the Trois Vallées. The shortest road transfer is Moutiers to Méribel – about 20 minutes. ● First Choice (firstchoice-ski.co.uk, 0871 664 0130) offers seven nights' half-board in the Chalet Renardeaux, from £679pp, inc train.

35 Kitzbühel Austria

Medieval Kitzbühel, spa town Bad Gastein, and lakeside Zell am See are served every week by the Bergland Express from Aachen, Germany (reached by Friday afternoon Eurostar to Brussels and a short connection). ● European Rail (erail.co.uk, 020-7619 1080) offers seven nights at the 3-star

Minotel Resch in Kitzbühel, inc Eurostar and 6-berth couchette on the Bergland, from £593pp.

36 La Molina Spain

The Pyrenees are harder to reach than the Alps by train – there's no railway in Andorra, for example – but it's not too tricky to reach the pretty town of Puigcerdà, in Catalonia, via Toulouse. The stylish spa hotel, Hospes Villa Paulita, in an art nouveau building, is an attractive base, 15km away at the linked areas of La Molina and Masella. ● Double rooms from £110 room-only (0034 972 884 662, hospes.es). Return rail tickets from £169pp (eurostar.com).

37 Grindelwald Switzerland

Leaving from London on Eurostar at 8am, travelling via Paris and Basel, you can be in Grindelwald at 6.40pm – and it's a beautiful journey, to the foot of the Eiger – there's even a tunnel through it! ● Inghams (020-8780 4433, ingham.co.uk) offers 7 nights' half-board in the 3-star Hotel Hirschen from £588pp, inc train.



36

38 Aviemore Scotland

In good conditions (don't book too far in advance), the Cairngorms can be fun for a weekend, and it's cheap, especially with an Adventure Pass (visitscotland.com/adventurepass). ● Aviemore's traditional Cairngorm Hotel (£44pp B&B, cairngorm.com) is opposite the station, from where a bus runs to the ski hill. Super off-peak return with National Express (nationalexpress.com) from London £117, from Newcastle £81.

39 St Anton Austria

The Bergland Express continues from Kitzbühel to St Anton, one of Europe's greatest ski areas with extreme skiing and unbeatable partying. Regular Post buses link to Lech and Zürs as well. ● European Rail (020-7619 1080, erail.co.uk) offers London-St Anton for £213pp in a 6-berth couchette. The cool Hotel Banyan (banyan-hotel.com) costs from €75pp pn B&B.

40 Bardonecchia Italy

The Dolomites are a schlep by rail, but there is a good Paris-Turin connection, stopping in Oulx (for Sauze d'Oulx and the 400km Milky Way ski area) and the market town/ski resort Bardonecchia, which hosted snowboarding at the 2006 Olympics. It has 110km of mainly intermediate skiing. ● London-Bardonecchia, from £109pp with European Rail. Seven nights' half-board at the Villa Myosotis, from £350pp, with Alpine Answers (020-7801 1080, alpineanswers.co.uk). Chris Madigan

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Avoid the hassle of flying and cut your carbon footprint by travelling to your ski resort by train.



Making tracks to the Alps

Flying is not the only way to get to the slopes. Daniel Elkan has the lowdown on reaching some of Europe's top ski resorts by train

Early-morning airport queues, security checks, baggage delays, tedious transfers, high CO₂ emissions... Who would choose to fly to a ski resort if there were a better option?

Most skiers know of the famous Snow Train, which runs through the night to serve such British favourite resorts as Val d'Isere, Meribel and Tignes. In fact, many top resorts in Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Andorra and other parts of France are now within convenient reach. Depending on your destination, you can either travel by day or by overnight couchette, with time for a bite in Paris or Brussels on the way.

Going overnight enables you to sleep on the train and gives you an extra two days on the slopes because you arrive in the morning in time to ski and leave in the evening on your final day. The advantages of daytime journeys are a later departure time, a more relaxing, scenic journey and the satisfaction of knowing your trip produces only one tenth of the greenhouse gas emissions of the same journey by air. If you travel by train there are no charges for carriage of skis or snowboards and no luggage weight restrictions.

Some tour operators, such as Crystal Ski, offer 'accommodation only' or 'self-drive' deals, with around £130 off the price of the holiday – allowing you to choose your mode of travel.

ISCHGL, AUSTRIA

Though this lively, virtually traffic-free resort is consistently rated as Austria's second-best ski destination, few Brits have heard of it because Ischgl's hotels prefer to cater for independent travellers rather than tour operator groups. Serviced by an efficient network of fast, covered chairlifts, 90 per cent of Ischgl's 230km ski area sits above 2,000m, guaranteeing generous amounts of snow. From the top of Palinkopf you can cruise the long red run into the Swiss duty-free village of Samnaun. On the way back watch out for plain-clothes customs officers, who patrol the border on skis, pursuing those suspected of exceeding the duty-free quota.

■ Leave Friday on the 16.05 Eurostar from St Pancras to Brussels. Then catch the 20.25 Bergland Express, changing at Innsbruck, to Landeck, arriving 09.24 on Saturday, then taxi (30 minutes, £36). Return the following Saturday on the 18.35 train from Landeck, changing at Innsbruck and Brussels to arrive St Pancras 11.01 on Sunday. Return fares from £219, available though European Rail only.

KITZBUHEL, AUSTRIA

Stunning scenery, vibrant apres-ski and a fairytale village setting combine to make Kitzbuhel an attractive resort. The rail journey from the UK could not be simpler, while on-slope highlights include the 6.8km red run from Pengelstein to Jochberg, with a great rosti stop at Kasereckhutte en route. With its highest point at 2,000m however, Kitzbuhel is somewhat vertically challenged, so in terms of snow-fall late season is best avoided.

■ Leave Friday on the 16.05 Eurostar from St Pancras to Brussels, and then the 20.25 Bergland Express, arriving Kitzbuhel at 09.24 on Saturday. Return the following Saturday on the 19.47 train from Kitzbuhel, changing at Brussels to arrive St Pancras 11.01 on Sunday. Return fares from £192, available through European Rail only.

CHAMONIX, FRANCE

If you've only got a couple of days to play with, the mecca of steep terrain is an excellent choice. The size of Chamonix's charming town means weekend accommodation is relatively easy to find (contact the tourist office: 00 33 450 530024 www.chamonix.com). If it is off-piste adventure you're after, Grands Montets is a great starting point, with a 2,000m vertical drop. Chamonix's bars and clubs – lively any night – really kick off at weekends. Straight from the slopes head for Chambre Neuf by the station. Later, MBC is good for microbrewed beer and Le Choucas or La Terrasse for dancing.

■ Leave Friday on the 17.35 Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris Nord. Then catch the 22.25 overnight train from Paris Austerlitz, changing at St-Gervais-les-Bains, to arrive at Chamonix at 09.25. Return on Sunday on the 19.12 from Chamonix, changing in St-Gervais-les-Bains and Paris to arrive St Pancras at 09.33 on Monday. Return fares from £125.

SOLDEU, ANDORRA

The Andorran resorts of Soldeu, Pas de la Casa, El Tarter and Canillo have finally linked up to form a 200km area marketed as 'GrandValira'. Apart from a few bottleneck lift queues, the area is uncrowded, with ideal terrain for beginners and intermediates. Nights out on cheap booze are a thing of the past in Soldeu, but the duty-free shops in El Tarter and Pas de la Casa remain. The resort is aiming increasingly at the family market: there are plenty of large hotels with pools, spas and impressive buffets. On the mountain – disappointingly – fast food has taken over, but gastronomic respite can be found at the delightful, log-fired Husky restaurant, which looks onto a

ESSENTIALS

- Unless stated, all journeys can be booked through Rail Europe (08708 304862; www.raileurope.co.uk) or European Rail (020 7387 0444; www.europeanrail.com).
- All overnight fares include a couchette place in a six-berth compartment.
- Apart from in Paris, all changes of train require only a change of platform.
- Paris Nord to Paris Est is a 10-minute walk (use one of the station's luggage trolleys) or a five-minute taxi ride; Paris Nord to Paris Lyon or Austerlitz needs a metro or taxi (book a G7 taxi in advance: 00 33 1 4739 4739; www.taxis-G7.com).

frozen lake, tucked away off a run at Grau Roig. The 200km drive from the nearest airports is notorious for horrendous delays in bad weather, making the train to Andorra a more reliable alternative.

■ Leave Friday on the 17.35 Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris Nord. Then catch the 21.56 overnight train from Paris Austerlitz, arriving at L'Hospitalet 07.20 on Saturday. A bus to Soldeu (60 mins, €5.50 single) connects with the train, getting you into Soldeu at 08.40. Return the following Saturday on the 17.35 bus from Soldeu to L'Hospitalet. Catch the 20.49 overnight train, changing in Paris, to arrive at St Pancras at 10.35. Return fares from £111.

ZERMATT, SWITZERLAND

No resort can boast a more spectacular backdrop than Zermatt, sitting under the 4,478m Matterhorn. Not only can you reach Europe's most famous resort by train; once you are ready to ski, the Gornergrat railway drops you off on the slopes at 3,000m, with memorabilia views over the village. But it isn't just the scenery that makes Zermatt so popular; it's the exhilarating pistes, dotted with excellent mountain restaurants. One of the best-loved is Zum See, between Zermatt and the hamlet of Furi.

■ Leave Saturday on the 08.32 Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris Nord. Then catch the 13.04 train from Paris Gare de Lyon, changing at Lausanne and Visp, to arrive at Zermatt at 20.42. Return the following Saturday on the 09.30 train from Zermatt, changing at Visp, Lausanne and Paris, to arrive at St Pancras at 20.40. Return fares from £163.

ST MORITZ, SWITZERLAND

OK, St Moritz is awash with fur-clad clientele and pampered pooches. Even so, don't let its posh reputation overshadow the fact that, for intermediates particularly, it has 350km of five-star, well-groomed reds and blues to cruise. There are also some great off-piste areas, particularly by Piz Nair and Piz Corvatsch. In January, the resort hosts the impressive Polo on Snow tournament followed in early February by the Cricket on Ice competition.

■ Leave Saturday on the 07.30 Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris Nord. Then catch the 12.24 train from Paris Est, changing at Basel and Chur, to arrive at St Moritz at 20.58. Return the following Saturday on the 10.02 train from St Moritz, changing at Chur, Basel and Paris, to arrive at St Pancras at 20.40. Return fares from £185.

SERRE CHEVALIER, FRANCE

Serre Chevalier is well-loved by the French, and for good reason: the 250km ski area is simply superb. The resort comprises four separate towns and villages: Briancon, Chantemerle, Villeneuve and Monetier. Villeneuve is the main hub, which combines a charming, olde-worlde village centre with some horrendous purpose-built architecture. At night the resort will be too quiet for some, but La Grotte du Yeti, Loco Loco and Le Frog are all decent watering holes.

SNOW REPORT

FRANCE

With more than a metre of snow falling across the country, it's a great start to the season with good powder conditions. Alpe d'Huez has 120cm of snow on its top slopes, with 24 pistes open, Courchevel has 103cm and Tignes and Meribel have 165cm. Over 20 resorts are due to open this weekend including Les Arcs and La Plagne and slight snowfall is forecast.

AUSTRIA

Heavy snowfall means most resorts have more than a metre of snow on their upper slopes. There's fantastic skiing at St Anton with almost three metres of snow at the top and 53 lifts open. Mayrhofen has 130cm and 24 lifts open, while Loferer Alm opens this weekend.

SWITZERLAND

Switzerland has had heavy snow, especially in Verbier down to Le Chable. Leysin

■ Leave Friday on the 17.35 Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris Nord. Then catch the 22.05 overnight train from Paris Austerlitz to Briancon, arriving 08.38 on Saturday. A regular bus from Briancon (20 mins, €3.80 single) drops you in Villeneuve at 09.20. Return the following Saturday on the 19.10 bus from Villeneuve to Briancon. Catch the 20.28 overnight train, changing in Paris, to arrive at St Pancras at 10.35. Return fares from £111.

SAUZE D'OULX, ITALY

Part of the 400km Milky Way ski area, Sauze d'Oulx's has been unlucky with snowfall in recent years. What is guaranteed, however, is good partying. You can take your pick: brash Brit bars in the modern end of town; or more cosmopolitan venues a few blocks away in the 15th-century, cobbled *centro storico*, host to some lovely Italian bars and eateries. The atmosphere in Sauze is unpretentious and so are the prices. You can eat, drink and party without haemorrhaging euros, and the rail journey from the UK is the quickest and cheapest of any resort in Europe.

■ Leave Saturday on the 09.25 Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris Nord. Then catch the 14.14 train from Paris Lyon to arrive in Oulx at 18.55. A taxi up to the resort takes 15 minutes and costs €18. Return the following Saturday on the 11.31 train from Oulx, changing at Paris, to arrive at St Pancras at 19.33. Return fares from £96.

opens this weekend. Conditions in Davos and Klosters are good, with 152cm on top runs. Sunny skies expected.

ITALY

A mix of sun and light snow flurries is forecast for most Italian resorts. Conditions in Cervinia are good with 100cm of snow on top slopes, while La Thuile has 130cm and 20km of skiing on nine pistes.

BULGARIA

Bansko is the only resort open for skiing, though Borovets and Pamporovo have good bases for 22 December openings.

USA AND CANADA

Huge snowfall has transformed conditions, with Mammoth and Squaw Valley receiving 50 and 40cm respectively. Deer Valley and Taos have opened with excellent conditions. In Canada all three areas are open at Banff, while Kicking Horse has opened early with great conditions. More snow is forecast, with Whistler expecting over 70cm. Data Courtesy of the Ski Club of Great Britain (www.skiclub.co.uk)



An extraordinary offer for a week in Italy's most popular region

TUSCANY

Montecatini Terme is an elegant and historical spa town set amidst green Tuscan hills rich with olive groves. Famed for its 'Liberty' style buildings, the Italian equivalent of 'Art Nouveau', this flamboyant architecture defined the town's heyday when visitors included Puccini, Rossini, Mascagni, Strauss and even the great Caruso. The cultural life and musical activities ensured an air of exclusivity prevailed. From 1898 Giuseppe Verdi spent 19 consecutive summers drawing inspiration from the beautiful formal gardens, wide avenues and thermal spas, still open today for those wishing to take the waters.

MONTECATINI AND ENVIRONS: Montecatini has a wide selection of bars, restaurants, quality shops and a weekly market on Thursdays. There are eleven spas offering a full range of thermal treatments and in the summer months there is a programme of open air concerts. Local trains and buses operate regularly to Florence, Pisa, Pistoia, Lucca and Viareggio are all well served by local transportation.

HOTEL METROPOLE: This 'Liberty' style villa has been converted into a charming 3-star hotel. Located close to the public gardens it has a restaurant, bar and small garden. All 40 guest rooms have private facilities with shower, hairdryer, air-conditioning and satellite TV. Guests can also enjoy the wonderful views and outdoor swimming pool on the roof of the nearby 4-star Hotel Ambasciatori.

7 nights from £380

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Let the train take the strain

MAKING

WHETHER you are fed up with the early morning dash to the airport, tired of the winding queues at check-in or concerned about the environmental cost of flying, there is an alternative if you don't fancy jetting to the slopes this year — take the train. You can get to some of the best ski resorts in Austria, Italy and Switzerland without going anywhere near a plane.

Instead, take a late afternoon Eurostar to Paris or Brussels on Friday, have dinner there, and then travel by overnight train into the mountains while you sleep. Most trains have six, four or two-berth sleeping compartments, and by travelling overnight you gain extra time on the pistes. What's more, with hundreds of ski resorts threatened by global warming, going by train is a great way to go green, too.

So here's our pick of the best train-friendly resorts — and how to get to them.

by Daniel Elkan

KLOSTERS AND DAVOS, SWITZERLAND

DON'T be put off by Klosters's reputation as a playground for royalty. It is a mostly unpretentious, laid-back resort and is great for families, offering excellent childcare facilities on and off the slopes.

The village is made up of a mix of traditional wooden chalets and smart hotels, and the town centre is virtually traffic free.

The 320km ski area runs across six mountains and is shared with neighbouring Davos, which is linked to Klosters by train.

The sunny slopes of Madrisa, with its new bubble lift, are a good place to start your adventure. Heid, Bolgen and Bunda are ideal for beginners, while intermediates should try the 12km run from Weissfluhjoch into Kublis. Off-piste, Klosters excels. There are numerous north-facing slopes and countless tree-runs where the powder snow remains untouched for weeks.

Prince Charles's favourite restaurant, Kulm, is a good, reasonably-priced lunch stop.

The Hotel Alpina (00 41 81 410 2424; alpina-klosters.ch) is famous for its imaginative cuisine, and has some very comfortable orthopaedic beds. Doubles from £86pp half-board.

GETTING THERE BY TRAIN: Leave Friday on the 17.40 Eurostar from Waterloo to Paris Nord. Take a taxi (five minutes, £7) to Paris Est, and catch the 22.29 overnight train, changing at Chur, to reach Arosa at 09.09 on Saturday. Return the following Saturday on the 19.48 train from Arosa, changing at Chur and Paris, to arrive Waterloo at 09.59 on Sunday. Return fares start from £164 in a six-berth couchette. Book through European Rail (020 7387 0444; europeanrail.com) or Rail Europe (08705 848 848; raileurope.co.uk).

AROSA, SWITZERLAND

BUILT around two picture-postcard lakes, Arosa is a charming resort. The 100km of pistes are great for beginners and intermediates, and Arosa's altitude — the village is at 1,800m — means that it is fairly snowsure, too.

Every Tuesday you can try night skiing on the Tschuggen run, or get up early to catch the sunrise from the 2,653m summit of Weisshorn, with its staggering views.

No trip would be complete without a visit to the sumptuous, newly-built, Tschuggen Bergoase spa, with indoor and outdoor whirlpools and 12 treatment rooms offering anything from algae soaks to milk, honey and salt beauty baths.

The Waldhotel National (00 41 81 378 5555; waldhotel.ch) has a new spa, and you can ski right up to the door. Doubles from £80pp, half-board.

GETTING THERE BY TRAIN: Leave Friday on the 17.40 Eurostar from Waterloo to Paris Nord. Take a taxi (five minutes, £7) to Paris Est, and catch the 22.29 overnight train, changing at Chur, to reach Arosa at 09.09 on Saturday. Return the following Saturday on the 19.48 train from Arosa, changing at Chur and Paris, to arrive Waterloo at 09.59 on Sunday. Return fares start from £164 in a six-berth couchette. Book through European Rail (020 7387 0444; europeanrail.com) or Rail Europe (08705 848 848; raileurope.co.uk).

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TRACKS TO THE SNOW



(every Friday until March 9) to Dobbiaco, arriving at 11.04 on Saturday — the resort is a taxi-ride away (30 minutes, £37). Return the following Saturday on the 17.22 Bergland Express (every Saturday until March 17) from Dobbiaco, changing at Brussels to arrive Waterloo at 12.27 on Sunday. Return fares start from £302 in a six-berth couchette. Book through European Rail (020 7387 0444; europeanrail.com).

Picture: WORLD PICTURES

MAYRHOFEN, AUSTRIA

FOR some of the liveliest apres-ski in Austria, Mayrhofen is the place. From 4pm onwards, local drinking dens Nikki's Schirmbar and the Icebar are heaving and the party goes on into the night.

Before you get round to the drinking, though, Mayrhofen has plenty of inviting red runs and experts can test their nerve on Austria's steepest run, the Harikiri. Snowboarders will love Burton Park, one of the best in Europe. The spectacular views of the 3,200m Hintertux glacier are a 30-minute bus-ride away.

Mayrhofen's slopes can feel overcrowded during peak season, but if you don't mind slightly older chairlifts, take a taxi ten minutes down the road to Ramsau, a quiet, charming area frequented by locals with a 7km toboggan run which is open until midnight.

Mayrhofen's kindergarten can supervise children aged three months to seven years, and there is a swimming pool with a 100m waterslide and an ice skating rink next door.

The family-run Hotel Pramstraller (00 43 5285 62119; pramstraller.at) is famous for its restaurant, La Vita, and has a sauna and steam room. Doubles from £88 half-board.

GETTING THERE BY TRAIN: Leave Friday on the 15.40 Eurostar from Waterloo to Brussels, then take the 20.25 Bergland Express (every Friday until 9 March), changing at Jenbach, to reach Mayrhofen at 09.18 on Saturday. Return the following Saturday (every Saturday until March 17) on the 18.35 train from Mayrhofen, changing at Jenbach and Brussels to arrive Waterloo at 12.27 on Sunday. Return fares start from £260 in a six-berth couchette. Book through European Rail (020 7387 0444; europeanrail.com).

Saturday. Return the following Saturday on the 20.29 train from Klosters, changing at Landquart and Paris, to arrive Waterloo at 09.59 on Sunday. Return fares start from £164 in a six-berth couchette. Book through European Rail (020 7387 0444; europeanrail.com) or Rail Europe (08705 848 848; raileurope.co.uk).

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, ITALY

IT'S EASY to see why Cortina was chosen as the location for films including *The Pink Panther*, *Cliffhanger* and *For Your Eyes Only*: the tree-lined mountains,

limestone rock formations and 14th-century town centre make it one of Europe's most scenic and romantic resorts.

Take the Hidden Valley run, for example: ski past dramatic frozen waterfalls before taking one of the traditional horse-drawn carriages that pull skiers along the flat sections.

For beginners, the Socrepes area also provides a vast network of green and blue runs where there is no chance of straying on to a steep gradient.

Another remarkable thing about Cortina is how empty the pistes are. Perhaps everyone's in the excellent, reasonably-priced

mountain restaurants that dot the slopes.

Try Rifugio Scottoni on the Hidden Valley run or Rifugio Averau at the top of the spectacular Cinque Torri. Round off your meal with a *bombardini*, a local speciality consisting of coffee, cream and Vov liquor.

Stay in the beautiful, family-run Hotel Ancora (00 39 0436 3261; hotelancoracortina.com) which is renowned for its cuisine and its grand, candlelit dining room. Doubles from £89 per person.

GETTING THERE BY TRAIN: Leave Friday on the 15.40 Eurostar from Waterloo to Brussels, and then catch the 20.25 Bergland Express

ISCHGL, AUSTRIA

THERE'S little doubt that Ischgl is a contender for the best Austrian resort going. With 90 per cent of the resort's 230km ski area lying above 2,000m, it gets a generous helping of snow and chairlifts are fast and modern. It is surprising, therefore, that relatively few Brits have heard of it.

From the top of Palinkopf, you can ski down the long red run into Samnaun, a duty-free village in Switzerland.

The shops start on the piste, but make sure that you don't get caught with your rucksack full on your way back — plain-clothes customs officers patrol the border on skis. For £145, you can hire an Ischgl mountain guide who will show you how to get to Switzerland via some of the fantastic off-piste areas by Stieralpe and Zanders.

Pick a sunny day for a lunch stop at the swish, glass-walled Panorama restaurant at the top of Pardatsch-grat, which has incredible views over the whole valley.

At night, Ischgl's compact village has a vibrant buzz and legendary party options. The apres ski starts at the Schatzi and the Kuhstall. Later on, head for the Posthoerndl bar or Pacha nightclub.

Make sure you catch the fortnightly night ski show (free), with synchronised skiing, boarding, and daring jumps, set to music and fireworks.

Three times a season the resort hosts free concerts on the mountain. The Scissor Sisters are scheduled to play on April 9.

The small, charming and family-run Hotel Arnika (00 43 5444 5244; hotelarnika.at) has fantastic cuisine and a sauna, steam room and in-house masseuse. Doubles from £65 half-board.

GETTING THERE BY TRAIN: Leave Friday on the 15.40 Eurostar from Waterloo to Brussels, then take the 20.25 Bergland Express (every Friday until March 9), changing at Innsbruck, to Landeck, arriving 09.24 — you'll then need to take a taxi the rest of the way (30 minutes, £36). Return the following Saturday (every Saturday until March 17) on the 18.35 train from Landeck, changing at Innsbruck and Brussels to arrive Waterloo at 12.27 on Sunday. Return fares start from £273 in a six-berth couchette. Book through European Rail (020 7387 0444; europeanrail.com).



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John Norris

Hit the rails to reach the trails



John Haddon

Travelling by rail to your ski resort can mean extra days on the slopes, breathtaking scenery, and a relaxing journey. It helps the environment too. And it's not only the French Alps that are accessible by rail. Resorts in Italy,

Switzerland, Austria and Andorra are all within reach too. Daniel Elkan focuses on resorts with Ski Club reps



Just the ticket: More turns

John Norris

OUR SKIING HOLIDAY hadn't even begun, but already we felt shattered. The journey to the resort was proving to be the kind many skiers and boarders will be all too familiar with: up at 4am to make it to the airport for a 6.30am departure; an hour-and-a-half waiting for our delayed flight; a scramble for our luggage at Milan airport; and finally being cooped up on a tedious two-hour coach transfer to our destination at Sauze d'Oulx in Italy. Did journeys to resort always have to be like this?

A few minutes from Sauze, as our coach swung round another bend, I spotted it. There below us, glinting in the March sun, was a railway track and a station. I was

stunned. It had never occurred to me that trains ventured this far into the mountains. Could coming here by rail be a relaxing alternative to the stop-start marathon that we had just endured? And if so, how long would it take, and at what cost?

If we could go by train next time, I knew that we would be doing the environment a favour. The thousands of flights taking skiers and boarders on holiday contribute significantly to climate change. The same journeys, if made by train, are estimated to have ten times less impact on the planet's climate. With a recent study by the University of Zurich suggesting that within 30 years, rising temperatures could force

230 resorts in Switzerland alone to close permanently, it seemed sensible to try a greener method of getting to resort.

Back home, the only rail journeys that I saw advertised were the 'Snow Trains' to the French Alps. These get you to ski areas in the Tarentaise region, such as the Espace Killy, Three Valleys and Paradiski, but not much further. However, after more investigation, I discovered quite a few resorts in Italy, Switzerland, Austria and Andorra, and other parts of France that are convenient by rail from the UK, simply by taking a Eurostar from London Waterloo to Paris and then changing onto ordinary European trains. Some of these resorts are accessible by daytime trains and some by overnight journeys, with services running every day.

For those who find that a week's ski holiday leaves them wishing for a few more days in the snow, overnight train travel has the advantage of adding two days' extra skiing to your holiday, without the need to pay for additional accommodation. For example, if you are going to Davos in Switzerland you can leave Waterloo on Friday on the 17.09 Eurostar to Paris, where you catch the 22.42 overnight train to arrive in Davos at 08.55 on Saturday morning. After leaving your luggage at your hotel or chalet reception, you are free to enjoy the slopes on what is the quietest day of the week. Those needing to hire skis or boards can do so before the usual mid-Saturday afternoon scramble. At the end of the week, instead of leaving early Saturday morning to catch a flight, you can ski all day, have an early dinner, and then take the 20.15 train from Davos, arriving back in London Waterloo at 10.19 am on Sunday.

One of the enjoyable things about the overnight trains is the atmosphere, especially on Friday evenings when there are more people on their way to ski resorts. Lining the corridors, they share bottles of wine and enjoy the view out of the windows, and an air of anticipation fills the train.

There are three types of sleeping compartment available. The cheapest are the six-berth couchettes, containing six simple bunks, with a sheet sleeping bag, blanket, and pillow for each occupant, and shared washing facilities at the end of the corridor. The next step up in terms of cost are the four-berth couchettes, which give a little more space per person. Finally, the luxury option is the two-berth cabin, which includes a private washbasin, wider, fully sprung mattresses and a duvet instead of a blanket. It is difficult to predict how well you will sleep on an overnight train. When

we chose the six-berth couchettes, the beds were not the comfiest in the world, but the movement of the train soon helped get us off to sleep.

In the morning, the scenery is often superb. Last year, a trip to Cortina in Italy took us past the beautiful Lake Santa Croce, and then through the twisted limestone spires of the south-eastern Dolomites. The train ticket allowed a break in the journey, and we visited friends in Milan on the way back. On a journey by rail to St Anton, in Austria, we sped alongside the vast Lake Zurich and Lake Walen. Later, when the train stopped on the way at Bludenz, the smell from the famous chocolate factory there wafted through the carriages.

Journeys by day are faster than overnight ones, and in some cases don't take much longer than the trip by air. Flying to Sauze d'Oulx, for example, typically means being at the airport at 6am and - if there are no delays - arriving in Sauze around 3pm. By comparison, leaving Waterloo at 9am on the Eurostar gets you to Sauze at 7.45pm. Though rail journeys still take more time overall, the travel is less disjointed. Whereas much of the air journey is spent queuing and waiting, most of the rail journey is spent sitting on trains, with more space to work, sleep, or relax, especially if you request a table seat.

Fares on both day and night services vary considerably, depending on the route and whether the cheaper tickets are still available at the time of booking. For example, overnight return fares from London to Soldeu in Andorra start from £111 for a place in a six-berth couchette, but the equivalent overnight trip to Davos costs £167. Both these fares are made up of the cheapest Eurostar fare to Paris (£59 return) plus the onward journey to the resort, which is what makes the difference in the overall fare, despite the journey durations being similar. Happily, on all rail journeys, there is no maximum luggage allowance and no charges for skis or snowboards. Cheaper tickets do sell out quickly though, so advance booking is necessary. The Eurostar can be booked up to 90 days before travel, and the onward journey to the resort 60-90 days in advance, depending on the route.

If you are booking a holiday through a tour operator, you can still choose to travel independently by train and not necessarily lose money. Crystal, Thomson, Inghams and Neilson all offer accommodation-only holidays, giving a discount of between £120 and £150 off the package price to spend on rail travel.



Some of the more distant resorts in Austria, such as Mayrhofen, Kitzbühel and Zell-am-See can't be reached the next morning on ordinary overnight trains. However, a specially chartered train for skiers, the Bergland Express (booked through the agent European Rail), can get you to these resorts and others in time to ski on the day of your arrival. It leaves from Brussels at 20.30 on Fridays, so to catch it you take the 14.42 Eurostar from Waterloo, giving you a couple of hours spare in the Belgian capital.

When you're going via Paris, you need to get from the Eurostar terminal at Paris Nord to whichever station your onward train departs from - Paris Est, Paris Austerlitz, Paris Bercy or Paris Lyon. The Paris Metro is a simple and inexpensive way to connect between these stations, but there are long walks between platforms, and stairs rather than escalators. If you are heavily laden, it may be better to book a cab. G7 Taxis in Paris (tel +33 1 47 39 47 39) have English-speaking staff booking taxis up to 15 days in advance. A Monospace (a large taxi big enough to carry skis or snowboards) costs 20 euros or less, depending on which station you are transferring to.

If time is not a factor, book an earlier Eurostar and have a leisurely meal in a Paris restaurant before you begin the onward part of the journey. Be careful though - it is easy to get carried away with the food, suddenly remember the time, and have to rush full pelt to the station on a full stomach to try to make your train. It seems every method of getting to resort has its potential pitfalls. **STB**

Journeys to resorts where there are Ski Club reps

Sauze d'Oulx, Italy

(nearest station: Oulx, 15mins)

Leave London Waterloo Sat 09.09; change Paris, Lyon, bus from Oulx; arrive Sauze d'Oulx at 19.45; £97 for a second-class seat.

Soldeu, Andorra

(L'Hospitalet, 60 mins)

Leave London Waterloo, Fri 17.09; change Paris Austerlitz, bus from L'Hospitalet; arrive in resort at 08.45; £111 in six-berth couchette.

Davos, Switzerland

(Davos, in resort)

Leave London Waterloo Fri 17.42, change Paris Est, Landquart, arrive in resort at 08.55; £167 (in six-berth couchette) £222 (in 2-person cabin)

St Moritz, Switzerland

(St Moritz, in resort)

Leave London Waterloo Fri 17.42, change Paris Est, Chur, arrive in resort at 09.58; £167 (in six-berth couchette) £222 (in 2-person cabin)

Zermatt, Switzerland

(Zermatt, in resort)

Leave London Waterloo Fri 18.11, change Paris Est, Zurich, Brig, Brig MGB, arrive in resort at 11.24; £167 (in six-berth couchette) £222 (in 2-person cabin)

Söll, Austria

(Kufstein, 30 mins)

Leave London Waterloo Fri 18.11, change Paris Est, Munich, bus from Kufstein, arrive in resort at 11.30; £183 (in six-berth couchette)

Journeys exclude cost of transfer from station to resort (where necessary). This costs 3-5 euros per person by bus one way or 15-40 euros per taxi one way.

Prices and times are based on current information available, but check before booking. Most travel agents do not book European rail tickets, so book through:

Rail Europe 08705 848848; raileurope.co.uk

European Rail 0207 387 0444; europeanrail.com

Rail Canterbury 01227 450088; rail-canterbury.co.uk

Daniel Elkan is a Ski Club rep

Skiing on rails

It may take longer to get there, but going by train gives you an extra two days on the slopes – and you'll be doing your bit for the planet

Overnight, the view from our compartment window had been transformed from grey Parisian suburbs to an Alpine landscape covered in thick snow. By breakfast time, our train had arrived in Davos, long before the hordes of air travellers. And when we stepped on to our first chairlift, most of them were still waiting for their coach transfer to the resort.

Many skiers and boarders will be familiar with the overnight Snow Trains and the Eurostar service which run direct to the French Alps. These enable you to ski both on the day of arrival and your day of departure, so you get eight days' skiing instead of the usual six, but without the need for any extra accommodation. Unfortunately, they only run as far as the Espace Killy, Three Valleys and Paridiski areas.

But what few people realise is that resorts in Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Andorra, and other parts of France, are all accessible from the UK simply by taking a Eurostar to Paris

and then switching to ordinary national trains.

Like many Swiss and Austrian resorts, Davos has a railway station in the resort itself. To get there, you catch the 17.42 Eurostar on Friday from London Waterloo to Paris, and change on to an overnight train. After one more change the next morning at Landquart in Switzerland, you arrive in the resort at 08.55. You can then leave your luggage at your hotel or chalet, have breakfast, and hit the slopes on the quietest day of the week – ideal for warming up nervous ski legs. Or, if you need to hire or buy ski or snowboard gear first, it's a good time to do it because you get an unhurried service and more choice of gear. On your final day, you enjoy another day's skiing before taking the 20.02 train out of Davos on Saturday evening, changing in Landquart and Paris to arrive back in London at 09.51 on Sunday morning.

I was keen to travel by train not just because of the extra two days' skiing, but for ecological reasons. Flying to a European ski resort is estimated to have 10 times greater impact on global warming than travelling by train.

Our plan was to cram as much skiing, snowboarding and partying as possible into the week's holiday, so a decent night's sleep on either end of the holiday would help. We had chosen the cheapest option, a six-berth couchette, containing simple padded bunk beds, with shared washing facilities in the toilet at the end of the corridor. The bunks, covered in black plastic faux-leather with a pillow, sheet sleeping bag and a blanket provided, looked functional rather than inviting.

But sleep was not a priority just yet. The train corridors were lined with people chatting. We soon found ourselves sharing a bottle of red with a group of French skiers from the next compartment.

Sometime after midnight we retired to our couchettes, where the movement of the train was helpfully soporific. In fact, the only thing keeping us awake was the banter flying between the bunks.

Not all destinations have convenient overnight train services, but many can still be reached during the day. And overnight services to more distant Austrian destinations don't get you

there early enough to make the most of the day's skiing. However, you can catch the specially chartered overnight train for skiers, the Bergland Express, which goes directly from Brussels and reaches many of the faraway Austrian resorts, such as Kitzbühel, Soll, and Mayrhofen by mid-morning.

If you are booking a package holiday through a tour operator, you can still go by train. Crystal, Thomson, Inghams and Neilson all offer accommodation-only packages, leaving you around £130 to spend on the train fare. The earlier you book, the cheaper the fares: the Eurostar portion of the journey can be booked up to 90 days in advance, and the onward part up to 60 days in advance. Ordinary trains have daily services, and the tickets allow a break in the journey of 24 hours, so you can visit a European city or town en route.

Unlike the Snow Trains, taking ordinary trains from Paris requires a change of station. Though the Paris metro is simple and quick, there are fair distances to be walked, with stairs rather than escalators the norm. If you have heavy luggage, book a cab to meet you at Paris Nord. G7 Taxis in Paris



The right kind of snow . . . many Alpine resorts are easily accessible by train

(0033 1 4739 4739) has English-speaking staff and can book up to 15 days in advance. A larger vehicle, called a "monospace", can carry skis or snowboards at the driver's discretion. The journey costs €20 or less, depending on the station.

Alternatively, book an earlier Eurostar, and dine in Paris before you board the overnight train. But if, like me, you sleep soundly after a good bottle of rouge and a four-course meal, remember to set your alarm clock or you may miss the scenery.

St Moritz, Switzerland

The sun shines 322 days a year on the impressive pistes and expensive shops of St Moritz. Take the 17.42 Eurostar to Paris Nord (any day of the week), then change to Paris Est for the 22.42 overnight train. In the morning, change at Chur for the train to St Moritz, which arrives in the resort at 09.58. Journey time: 14 hours, 16 minutes. Returning, take the 19.02 train on Saturday, change at Chur and Paris, and arrive in Waterloo at 10.58 on Sunday. The return fare with a six-berth couchette starts at £167pp, a two-person cabin from £222pp. Stay at the Misani Hotel (0041 81 836 9696, hotelmisani.ch), with double rooms from SFr75pp per night.

Sauze d'Oulx, Italy

A good resort for those who want to party hard, best reached by day. Depart Waterloo on Saturday on the 09.09 Eurostar to Paris Nord. Take the 14.24 train from Paris Lyon to Oulx, from

where a 15-minute local bus ride (€3 each way) reaches Sauze d'Oulx at 19.45. Journey time: 10 hours, 36 minutes. For the return journey, take a bus at 11.00 from Sauze d'Oulx on Saturday morning and catch the 11.30 train. Change in Paris and arrive in Waterloo at 19.58 the same day. A second-class seat costs from £97 return. Try the friendly, two-star Hotel Stella Alpina (+39 0122 858731) 50m from the Clotes chairlift, with double rooms from €40-€75pp per night.

Pas de la Casa, Andorra

With Pas now linked up to Soldeu, there is 192km of piste in this plain but snowsure resort. Take the 17.09 Eurostar to Paris Nord, and then the 21.56 overnight train from Paris Austerlitz to L'Hospitalet. From there, a local bus (€5 each way) gets you to the resort at 08.15. Journey time: 15 hours, 6 minutes. Returning, take the 18.15 bus to L'Hospitalet, where you can have dinner before boarding the 20.49 overnight train to Paris, arriving back in London at 10.58 on Sunday morning. A place in a six-berth couchette starts from £111 return. Hotel Himalaia Pas (00376 735515, hotansa.com) is near the slopes, with a spa, pool and sauna, and double rooms for €63-€127pp per night.

Chamonix, France

An adrenaline challenge for expert skiers and snowboarders. Leave Waterloo on Friday on the 17.09 Eurostar to Paris Nord. Then from Paris Austerlitz take the 22.25 overnight

service, changing at St Gervais to arrive at Chamonix station at 09.25 on Saturday morning. Journey time: 16 hours, 16 minutes. Return on Saturday evening on the 20.17 train, changing at St Gervais and Paris to reach Waterloo at 10.01 on Sunday. A place in a six-berth couchette costs from £124 return. The Hotel Pointe Isabelle (0033 4 5053 1287, pointe-isabelle.com) charges €75-€92 for a double room per night.

● All the above journeys can be booked through Rail Europe (08705 848848, raileurope.co.uk), European Rail (020-7387 0444, europeanrail.com) or Rail Canterbury (01227 450088, rail-canterbury.co.uk).

Kitzbühel, Austria

One of Austria's most charming resorts with good nightlife too. Take the 14.42 Eurostar to Brussels on Friday, and catch the 20.32 Bergland Express directly to Kitzbühel station, arriving in the resort at 10.37 on Saturday morning. Journey time: 19 hours, 55 minutes. For the return journey, depart Saturday evening at 19.02, changing in Brussels the next morning to arrive in Waterloo at 12.27 on Sunday. A place in a six-berth couchette costs £171-£240 return. The three-star Pension Rainhof (+43 5356 62312) has doubles from €30pp per night.

● Book through European Rail or Rail Canterbury. Daniel Elkan Prices and times correct at time of going to press, but check for any changes before booking. Cheaper fares quoted often sell out quickly for high-season dates.