

HOLIDAY ROUND-UP

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Brochures In the age of Brexit

In-out wrangling and climate change have made their presence felt...but there are lots of new resorts and more flights on offer this season. **PATRICK THORNE** reports

Another winter is approaching fast so it's time to do the annual Skier & Snowboarder leaf through the brochures – more often a digital rather than a paper exercise these days.

Many tour operators have said that the Brexit situation has meant fewer holidays and higher prices – but many also report bookings have been better than ever, so it's difficult to know the true picture.

Based on 33 years' experience of compiling this annual overview the overall impression is of cautious growth overall, as has been the case each season for more than a decade now since 'the crash'. The big operators seem to be just about back to where they were in terms of the number of resorts and countries offered, most of the small operators are still in business and we're seeing the occasional new entrant still.

Danny Nugent, the new owner of Erna Low Travel,

one of the oldest in the business, perhaps sums up the mood best with his comment: "With exchange rates fluctuating and the outcomes of Brexit still unclear, we stand in a great position to offer what we have always done, ski holidays booked with experience and knowledge."

But the aspects of your ski holiday being talked about most are short breaks, flexibility and also 'luxury' – with the many different interpretations of what that word actually means. Not many are talking about price.

SkiWeekends have gone for all three at once by offering a new chauffeur pick up service that can collect you from work and deliver you to the airport for your flight to the slopes, then when you return drive you home, getting around the need for airport parking or two one-way transfers at the UK end of your holiday.

NEW DESTINATIONS

The winner for the most unusual destination year is Georgia, with Mountain Heaven (fame its Alpine accommodation but previously have led tours to Iran too) offering a 10-day trip to country's capital city and leading ski areas next March. We believe it's the first package ski holiday to Georgia for at least 30 years when The Skier Snowboarder ran a feature on the destination.

Inghams have added the wonderful Japanese resort of Nozawa Onsen, one of the country's original ski resorts, reputed to have embraced the sport after a visit from Austrian ski pioneer Hannes Schneider from the Arlberg in the 1930s. Snow monkeys live in the hot springs nearby. Inghams are also offering another of country's major ski areas Hakuba, but have stayed away from Niseko.

Closer to home Peak Retreats, who specialise in small French villages, mostly linked to big French regions, have added Villard de Lans, Les Sept Lacs and St Nicolas de Véroce, the latter well-connected to nearby Saint Gervais and Megève in the huge Evasion Mont Blanc area with 445km of slopes

less than I've been writing this round-up!) with more than 50 chalets on their books including seven new in Val Thorens, La Tania, and La Plagne. They have vegan, vegetarian and gluten-free menus available in all their chalets.

BIG BUILDS

As usual, there are lots of ever bigger and grander hotel and apartment developments in the Alps as well as many new chalets and hotels.

Some of the biggest projects include a reputed €100m make-over of the Club Med in Alpe d'Huez where you can board with British Olympic medal winners Jenny Jones and Billy Morgan in a special holiday package next March. Meanwhile, Pierre & Vacances will open their new five-star Premium residence L'Hévana in Méribel. The company says more than half its bookings from Brits are now for its premium properties, which it launched in 2010.

NEW FLIGHT ROUTES (AND A NEW AIRPORT)

With ever more of us confident enough to arrange our own travel to the Alps, the apparent growth in the number of flight routes is good for increased choice. We say "apparent" because airlines are less excited to point out which routes they've quietly dropped as they are about new routes.

This year a new airport opens up on the Norway/Sweden border with a direct early morning SAS flight from Heathrow. Scandinavian Mountains Airport is just 10 minutes from Sweden's Sälen resort and 40 from Norway's Trysil and you can even book a dog sled transfer.

A more indirect connection is a new route to Japan's northerly island of Hokkaido with Finnair, via Helsinki, which the airline says will shave a few hours off the usual route via Tokyo, making resorts such as Niseko that bit closer.

In the Alps, Innsbruck appears to be getting

Ryanair and with Jet2 again from East Midlands.

For skiers heading to Italy, there's a new service to Turin from Bristol with Ryanair and Verona gets a new service from Manchester with Jet2 and from Edinburgh with EasyJet. BA, meanwhile, have started a service to Milan Bergamo from Gatwick.

It might be noted though that there's perhaps some irony in the creation of more flight routes and more short breaks at the same time as the ski industry is supposed to be concerned about the impact of flying in the climate emergency.

Anyone struck by this apparent contradiction can visit a new website SkiFlightFree.org set up by ski marketing man Iain Martin for more info or SnowCarbon.org for expert advice on rail travel options to the Alps, also seemingly growing.

THE 19-20 SEASON DATES

A final note on how the season looks like it will play out...

The good news is that Christmas and New Year fall midweek so if you aim to ski then, you shouldn't have to transfer on or near the big days. Easter is earlier in 2020 (April 12 rather than this year's April 21). Less good news is that most of Western Europe have the same half term week as the UK, starting February 17. So prices veer towards the stratospheric then.

Tour ops tell us that after a few good early-seasons Christmas is popular (equals more expensive) after it dipped in popularity (equals cheaper) following three poor early-seasons previously. Set against that, every time a politician mentions the 'B' word the phones go quiet.

*** For more holiday news turn to *The Skier & Snowboarder Guide* which starts on page 26 - and don't forget, there will be regular updates and special holiday offers on our website at: skierandsnowboarder.com**

Arctic Circle.

Arctic Circle. The biggest operator Crystal has several new destinations, including Drei Zinnen in the Dolomites, and have also launched a short breaks programme. Skiworld has turned its attention to Italy, offering self-catered apartments as well as hotels in Arzobispo, Corvara and Colfosco, Madonna di Campiglio and Selva Val Gardena. Ski Safari's new itineraries include Riksgransen and Narvik up in the Arctic Circle.

CHALETs - LESS IS MORE

Chalet holidays have been on a bit of a roller coaster in recent years. After the economic crash of 2008, they had a renaissance with the selling point that they ensured you were well fed and catered without being exposed to resort bar and restaurant prices. More recently though tougher employment legislation in Alpine nations made it harder for gap year Brits to work all hours in chalets, and that, coupled with potential further Brexit-related complications for British workers has led to a reported overall drop in the number of chalets available to book over the past few winters. Some operators don't seem to have got that memo though.

Neilson is adding two new chalet hotels and 12 chalets bringing its total to 44. Located in France, Andorra, Austria and Italy they offer the company's 'Mountain Experts' professional ski guiding and coaching service to guests. Also expanding are French specialists Le Ski with three new chalets Courchevel at Moriond (1650) and VIP Ski have launched out on a new flagship chalet in Val d'Isère. Meanwhile Brighton-based Ski Beat has launched its 32nd ski chalet programme (that's just a year