

On with the snow

The dollar may be caught in an avalanche but snow will still tempt Aussies to the slopes of the northern hemisphere.

Rachael Oakes-Ash is your guide for the ultimate ski trip

» cover story

Simply perfect

Holidays

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INCLUDES Return airfare, 5 nights accommodation at the 5-star Outrigger on the Lagoon in a Superior Resort View room, return airport transfers, a F\$200* Bebe Spa credit and a F\$300* food and beverage credit per room. **VALUE** Kids under 13 years eat **FREE**. **WE RECOMMEND** A Seaspray Sailing Adventure from \$149* and a South Sea Island Cruise from \$84*.

Gold Coast from **\$229***
INCLUDES 4 nights accommodation in a 2 Bedroom Apartment in Surfers Paradise. **WE RECOMMEND** A Warner Village Theme Parks Fun Pass from \$149* per adult and \$95* per child with entry to 3 parks (choose from SeaWorld, Warner Bros. Movie World or Wet 'n' Wild Water World) over 5 days.

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INCLUDES 3 nights accommodation at the 4-star Australis Noosa Lakes, Noosaville. **WE RECOMMEND** Upgrade to the 5-star Sheraton Noosa Resort & Spa from \$155* per night.

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INCLUDES 2 nights accommodation and an A Reserve ticket to the Broadway Musical *Guys and Dolls*.

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DISCOVER EUROPE TRAVEL SHOW



SNOW sports were born north of the equator, and for good reason — snow, and lots of it. The mountains are higher, snow is drier and resorts are bigger than any in Australia and New Zealand.

The bucketloads of super powder in Japan, super groomed champagne powder corduroy in Colorado, ski-in ski-out traditional villages in the European Alps and the mighty terrain of the Canadian Rocky Mountains provide plenty of reasons to head north.

Even with the dollar sliding downhill quicker than World Cup skiing champ Bode Miller there are still deals to be had.

Packages that include flights, accommodation, transfers and ski passes can be great value.

The big international ski resorts of Whistler, Aspen, Park City, Niseko, Verbier and St Anton know how to deliver a snow holiday for everyone in the family, making it an easy experience for first timers and a thrill ride for those who like the hard stuff.

» JAPAN

Why there? Japan is affected by Siberian weather patterns that dump an average 14m of snow in the northern island of Hokkaido each winter.

Then there are the Japan Alps, which extend 150km down the spine of the main island, Honshu.

Japan also has about 500 ski resorts and the time difference is only two hours, which means no jetlag.

What to expect: Planet Japan is so called for its cultural difference. Do not expect to understand much of what goes on, it simply won't make sense. Do expect big smiles and warm hearts.

Most resorts have ski-in ski-out accommodation options, but the local village will have better nightlife, so the 100m walk to the chairlift may be worth it.

Bigger hotel chains, such as the Hilton in Niseko, are opening up, thanks to a ski boom.

Runs will be longer than those in Australia, but not as long as those in Europe. Expect super grooming. Everything is done to perfection here and many resorts have strict ski patrols that prevent guests from skiing off piste. There is terrain for everyone but you will have to choose your mountain accordingly. Niseko has lots of powder but not the pitch of Honshu's Hakuba Valley.

Quirky custom: Sweet, milky, hot coffee in a can served from slopeside vending machines. Don't ask, just drink. Toilets that play music. Don't ask, just sit.

Why you'll love it: The snow in Japan is some of the driest you will find in the world. When you powder ski it's like floating on air, but you have to master it first. Then there's the sushi (that's a given) and the thermal hot spring onsens for post-ski bathing.

Why you'll hate it: The light. With this much snow it's going to be overcast more often than it's sunny. It's hard to ski in flat light when you can't see where you are going.



Other Australians, and there's a lot of them in the more developed resorts.

What you'll pay: The surge in the yen has had an impact. A one-day All Mountain pass at Niseko was \$80 yesterday, but things can improve as quickly as they deteriorate. But it's definitely an economical destination for a ski holiday, with package deals galore from ski wholesalers in Australia.

Why don't you try: Niseko for an easy Western transition into Japanese culture and a well-set-up ski hill for all levels of skiers. The NISS ski school has mainly Australian English-speaking instructors and the village of Hirafu has a thriving apres ski scene. www.harmonyresorts.com

Visit Nozawa Onsen for authentic Japanese culture in a feudal farming town with a super ski field. www.vill.nozawaonsen.nagano.jp

Shiga Kogen's 21 linked resorts make it the biggest resort in Japan but don't expect nightlife, there is none. The kids will love the snow monkeys soaking in private onsens. www.shigakogen.gr.jp

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» UNITED STATES

Why there? It's closer than Europe and the dollar is still more in our favour than the Euro.

What to expect: Americans like their skiing hi-tech. More developed resorts such as Aspen, Beaver Creek, Park City (above) and Jackson Hole serve up a luxury experience with a mountain-village feel. Ski valets are complimentary at Park City's Deer Valley and Colorado's Aspen, and hot cookies are free at 4pm at the bottom of the slopes at Beaver Creek.

Quirky custom: Tipping. It's not about service. The service can be the worst in the world but you are still expected to tip to subsidise low wages.

Why you'll love it: Americans' joy at being outdoors is infectious. You, too, will soon be whooping, hollering and high-fiving. And it seems the snow gods come out at night, leaving fresh powder and sunshine come dawn.

Why you'll hate it: Tipping. See above.

What you'll pay: Lift passes range from \$US60-\$US100 a day. Accommodation isn't cheap so self-contained apartments may be the way to go. As a budget destination, it's between Japan and Europe. And remember to factor in 15 per cent tipping.

Why don't you try: Jackson Hole, Wyoming. This super-swanky resort is pure luxury off the slopes and pure adrenalin on. Take on Corbett's Couloir, if you dare. www.jacksonhole.com

Aspen Snowmass, Colorado, provides the barometer by which all other US resorts are measured. Four mountains for family fun and a seriously impressive après scene. www.aspensnowmass.com

Park City, Utah, has three snowfields — Deer Valley, The Canyons and Park City Mountain Resort. It's more laidback than Aspen but just as much fun. www.parkcity.info

Beaver Creek, Vail, is a purpose-built resort for the cashed-up skier. If you have to ask the price, you can't afford it. www.beavercreek.com



» CANADA

Why there? The Rockies in British Columbia are among the world's most picturesque mountains.

What to expect: Fly to Vancouver and be at Whistler within three hours. The interior takes more effort. You have to hire a car in Calgary and drive for a few hours, but it's worth it.

Most resorts have ski-in, ski-out accommodation, including Whistler, Fernie, Big White and Red Mountain. Resorts near Banff and Lake Louise are in national parks, so you have to drive or get a shuttle. Whistler is the largest ski resort in North America, so expect long runs and lots of variety.

Quirky custom: Maple syrup and bacon.

Why you'll love it: The five bowls at Fernie (left) are truly majestic, There's tree-skiing and everyone's friendly.

Why you'll hate it: Sometimes they're too laidback, so take your time.

What you'll pay: About \$CA80 a lift pass. Cheaper than the US and Europe but not as cheap as Japan.

Why don't you try: Whistler Blackcomb and its new Peak2Peak gondola. Home to the 2010 Winter Olympics, Whistler is hot right now. It has a huge skiable terrain and purpose-built ski village. www.whistlerblackcomb.com

Big White and Silver Star are Australian-owned and perfect for families. Super-grooming, child care and ski school. www.bigwhite.com or www.skisilverstar.com

Revelstoke Mountain Resort boasts remote back country skiing with heli, cat and chairlift skiing. www.revelstokemountainresort.com



» EUROPE

Why there? The home of skiing, Europe, still rocks the snow world for apres-ski activity. You can't beat St Anton for a dance-in-your-ski-boots-on-tables-before-the-sun-goes-down kind of party. You also can't beat the swanky resorts of Switzerland for royal celebrity-spotting from Zermatt to Klosters to Verbier (above).

Add death-defying mountain terrain in Chamonix and La Grave in France, wine and dining in Val Gardena, Italy, family fun with all-inclusive Club Med across the Alps and you have most elements of a ski holiday covered.

What to expect: Crowds and hordes of Brits. Europe has a stack of charm but it also has a stack of people. Thankfully, the runs here can go for miles, literally. At some resorts it's possible to ski from one country to the next for lunch and back in time for drinks. Ski villages are traditional and most chalets and resorts take bookings from Saturday to Saturday.

The French instructors are more laissez-faire than the Austrians who are known to be the best. Ski schools are independent so choose wisely.

Quirky custom: Dancing in ski boots in St Anton. At 4pm it's a custom for all skiers to begin downing the schnapps, then navigate the last run down.

Why you'll love it: It's Europe, it's chic, it's historical and it's postcard perfect. Then there's the raclette, the fondue, the chartreuse, the schnapps.

Why you'll hate it: British tour groups have taken

over many resorts in France and Switzerland and at peak season you can feel like you're in London.

What you'll pay: \$80-\$100 for a day's lift pass.

Why don't you try: Verbier Switzerland. This mountain is hot right now. Richard Branson has opened a lodge for seriously cashed-up folk and James Blunt bought property here. www.thelodge.virgin.com

Lodging company My Verbier should have what the rest of us are looking for, but even then you will need a Black Amex. If you're a free skier, a big mountain skier or an intermediate and above, you will love this place. www.verbier.ch

Les Trois Vallees, France is the largest linked ski area in the world, the Three Valleys includes super-posh Courchevel, Meribel and Val Thorens. Stay in Courchevel 1850 (www.courchevel.com) with its picturesque chalets, private homes and upmarket bars or hang at Val Thorens (www.valthorens.com), the highest resort in Europe or reach the same terrain at the cheaper Brides les Bains resort. www.brides-les-bains.com

St Anton, Austria. What's European skiing without Austria? It's like surfing without Hawaii or tennis without Wimbledon. St Anton is the big boy of Austrian skiing, on and off piste. www.stantonamarlberg.com

Club Med ski resorts across Europe have kids' clubs and the price includes accommodation, lift passes, daily lessons, three meals a day, drinks and entertainment. Perfect for family ski holidays when you want to know where your euro is going. www.clubmed.com

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