

SNOW BASE
The Grand Chateau
sits below New
Zealand's still-
active Mt Ruapehu.



Cool runnings

Global warming may be playing havoc with snow levels around the globe, but these hot new projects will give ski buffs a great run for their money.

MT RUAPEHU, NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand is most famous for its popular South Island ski fields such as Queenstown and Mt Hutt. But the biggest commercial ski field with the longest season, the highest altitude and the most snow sits north of Cook Strait – and it's getting a \$53million makeover.

Mt Ruapehu is an active volcano found in the belly button of New Zealand's North Island, up to a two-hour drive from Lake Taupo or Palmerston North. Yes, the volcano still rumbles – it erupted as recently as 1996 – but that doesn't stop skiers and snowboarders from taking to its slopes.

Ski terrain is divided between the lava-laden Whakapapa with chutes and pinnacles on one side and the open glacial terrain of Turoa on the other.

A third field, the quirky club-operated field of Tukino, sits on the eastern slope but its 19 hectares doesn't compare with the combined 1050 hectares of Ruapehu Alpine Lifts'

commercial fields. Ruapehu has an average snow base of two to three metres, a season from mid-June to mid-October, more than 700 metres of vertical and, under the first phase of the five-year Mt Ruapehu ski development program, a new chairlift on the Turoa ski field will provide the biggest uphill capacity in Australasia. The 1.4km High Noon Express will transport more than 3200 people per hour and has a top speed of five metres per second. The swanky Grand Chateau at Whakapapa is perfect for old-school manor accommodation away from the crowds. And with Auckland and Wellington about four hours' drive away, these ski fields are a great weekend sidetrip. www.mtruapehu.com.

NOZAWA ONSEN, JAPAN

Niseko has been the hotspot for Aussie skiers in Japan for the past few seasons, so much so that the quaint, pretty village of Hirafu is now known as 'Little Australia'. →

Those searching for the new Niseko have headed south to Nozawa Onsen in Honshu, an undiscovered, authentic Japanese ski town which remains a favourite with mainly local skiers.

Nozawa originally attracted travellers with its volcanic hot springs – indoor and outdoor bathing pools of geothermal spring water said to cleanse the spirit and prolong life.

Today, its main attractions are the powdery slopes offering some of the best skiing in Japan. There are wide, open groomed runs for first-timers, moguls for the hardy and powder-pocketed forested areas for the adventure seekers, with a well-linked lift system. And it's just 10 hours' flight away, so no jet-lag.

At the base of the mountain, the small village of 5000 inhabitants retains its charm with cobbled laneways lined with foot onsens – public mini footbaths which provide welcome relief to feet trapped all day in ski boots.

Traditional ryokans offer tatami-matted accommodation where guests breakfast on rice and eggs which have been cooked in cane baskets in the village's cooking onsens or choose their own trout from a nearby pond to be served as sashimi.

It won't be too long before Nozawa becomes the next Little Australia; already Tokyo expats choose to drink at the basement Stay Bar, run by a Cairns export, on their ski weekends. So best get there before everybody else finds out about it. www.vill.nozawaonsen.nagano.jp.

MANALI, INDIA

Extreme skiers have been trekking to India for decades, drawn by the Himalayan terrain and back-country snow of Kashmir. And until now they've had to make do with an archaic lift system, if any, and basic accommodation.

But the entry of Alfred Ford on the scene is expected to see India morph into a high-tech, high-end ski destination. Great-grandson of Henry Ford and heir to the Ford fortune, Ford is pumping about \$370million into India's ski country in a bid to lure the world's elite away from the better known ski fields of Europe and North America.

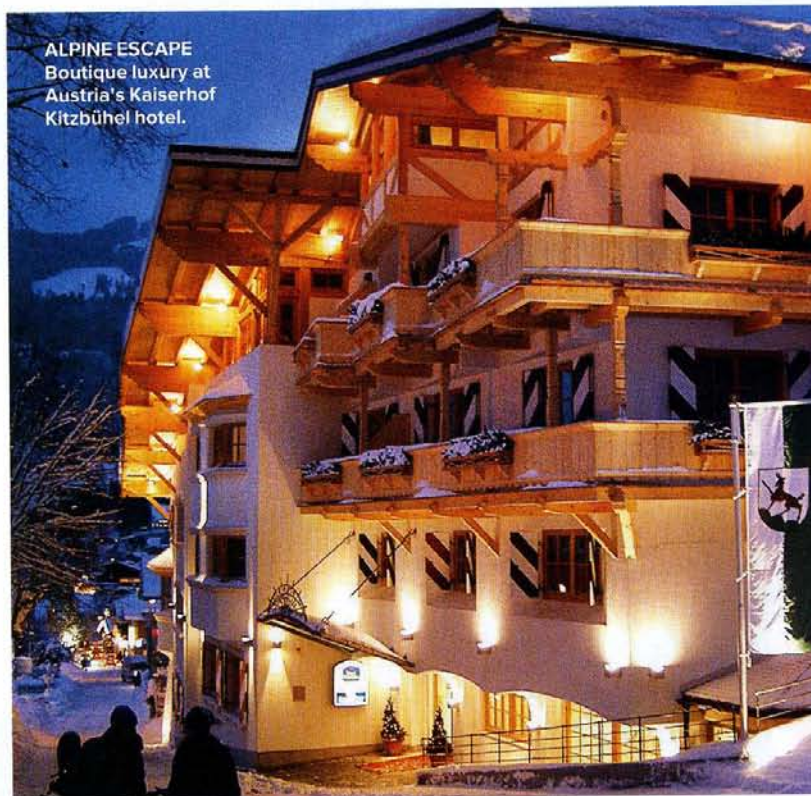
He has set his sights on Manali in Himachal Pradesh in India's north as the location for his proposed Himalayan Ski Village featuring 700 five-star hotel rooms, 300 chalets (all for sale), high-end European retail outlets, conference facilities, day spa and food courts.

The massive new development is scheduled to open in 2009 and famed Vail resorts designer Mike Larson will take charge of the ski runs (which start at 2000 metres and rise to 4200 metres) and the high-tech gondola.

Big-gun hoteliers, such as Hyatt, are said to be vying to be involved and there's already talk of this new kid on the block hosting a Winter Olympics. www.himalayanskiivillage.com.

TYROL, AUSTRIA

Tradition in Tyrol is being turned on its head. With a series of hot new hangouts, this Austrian ski region has gone from quaint and rustic to cool and modern. The new benchmark for snow resort luxury is Ski-Lounge restaurant, a striking glass



ALPINE ESCAPE
Boutique luxury at
Austria's Kaiserhof
Kitzbühel hotel.

lodge with a spacious lounge surrounding a glass-cased fireplace and mesmerising views of the Alps.

Here, 2000 metres above the Serfaus ski area, ski boots are exchanged for jewel-encrusted patschen (slippers). Diners sip Gaja Barbaresco (the wine list is extraordinary) over a lunch of red snapper on a ragoût of pink lentils with dill potatoes and marinated zucchini, or smoke cigars from the humidor in the comfort of deep leather sofas.

Other mountaintop proprietors have followed suit in modernising Tyrolean hospitality. Above Jochberg, the Hochfilzer family has built a new mountain hut to serve lunch and après ski offerings, blending traditional architecture with modern services. Bärenbadalm, which opened in December 2006, features rugged 80-year-old timbers (sourced from barns demolished in adjoining districts) in contrast to a sleek stainless steel bar and automatic sliding frosted glass doors leading to a spacious, hi-tech kitchen. The menu has a distinct regional touch; the venison is raised by the Hochfilzers, while other wild game meats are caught locally on the hunt.

Meanwhile, at nearby Kaiserhof Kitzbühel hotel, chef Ernst Köestenbauer – recently arrived from Schloss Aigen, a two GaultMillau-hatted restaurant, in Salzburg – applies a lighter touch to traditional mountain food, and the resort offers stylised boutique accommodation, including a wellness area with metal-lined indoor pool and private sauna grottos. Who said Austria was boring? *Ski-Lounge*, www.serfaus-fiss-ladis.at/winter/restaurants/312; *Bärenbadalm*, www.baerenbadalm.at; *Kaiserhof Kitzbühel*, www.hotel-kaiserhof.at. *