



winter wonderland

If you think winter sport just means flying down a mountain with two planks strapped to your feet, think again. Get your goggles on, because there's more fun to be had in the powder than you'd imagine at Europe's hottest cold-spots this season. **WORDS BY GAIL TAYLOR**

If you fancy yourself as an adrenalin junkie, you'll be looking for steep bowls, half-pipes and snow parks. If escaping reality is your aim, you're searching for unspoilt cross-country terrain. Of course there's always tobogganing and ice skating for the less energetic, while bobsleighting takes care of those with a death wish.

Whatever greases your skis, you'll find all this and more in southern and central Europe this winter. What's more, the destinations featured here not only offer a gateway to the best of winter activities, they're more than worth exploring in their own right en route.

Geneva, Switzerland

Famous for: Cosmopolitan population, being home to the Red Cross and the World Health Authority, its elegant Old Town, watches, jewellery, Lac Lemman, tolerance, wealth.

For varied alpine adventures, transfer from Geneva airport to the Three Valleys or Chamonix-Mont Blanc ski regions. The Three Valleys region is the largest ski area in the world with 600km of ski slopes, 200 ski lifts, numerous snow parks for boarders and eight distinctive resorts including the well-known Meribel. You can also go snowshoeing, cross-country skiing,

take a dog-sled tour or hire a snow mobile. Alternatively, get a bird's eye view by going paragliding.

The charming resort of Chamonix-Mont Blanc also offers plenty to do in addition to terrain for skiers and boarders of all abilities. Try ice-climbing, mountaineering, glacier walking on the Mer de Glace, or for the brave veteran, get dropped off-piste by helicopter and ski down.



Innsbruck, Austria

Famous for: The Winter Olympics 1964 and 1976, its quaint medieval and baroque architecture, pavement cafés, mountain

scenery, starry alpine skies that inspired *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Innsbruck is one of the few cities in the world that is also a resort itself. It offers ice skating and ski-jumping within the city limits and is surrounded by cross-country, alpine ski, luge and bobsleigh tracks. The Olympia SkiWorld Innsbruck skiing region is ranked among the top resorts in the Alps. It caters for all levels of ability and offers 285km of piste and guaranteed snow. If you like the idea of injecting a little romance into your winter holiday,

the resort also offers moonlight tobogganing and night skiing. Just imagine those beautiful mountains by night.

Turin, Italy

Famous for: The Winter Olympics 2006, the Turin Shroud, the Mole Antonelliana – a 530ft tower with a star on top and a glass lift offering spectacular views.

As the most recent host of the Winter Olympics, you'd be right to expect this part of Italy to offer enviable sports facilities. Its most famous ski region is the Milky Way which featured heavily in the Games and comprises six appealing resorts. At the heart of these is Sestriere with its guaranteed snow and steep, challenging runs. The resort also has plenty to offer when you're not busy hurtling downhill with its numerous shops and restaurants, bowling, ice skating and paragliding.

Verona, Italy

Famous for: Romeo and Juliet (this is where the Capulets and Montagues actually existed), some of the finest Roman, Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance architecture to be found in Italy.

The Val di Fassa region in the stunning Dolomite Mountains is a boarder's paradise. Within easy reach of Verona, you'll soon be enjoying four different snow parks. There are easy jumps for beginners to perfect their 'ollies' before they move on to kickers and boxes, as well as half-pipes, cross tracks and rails to challenge more experienced riders. Of course, there's also great skiing (the Italian ski team train here), including night skiing and cross-country.

Grenoble, France

Famous for: The Winter Olympics 1968, mountain peaks towering above the city in all directions – making it a photographer's dream, being the capital of French ski country.


Grenoble really is the grand portal to alpine skiing and snowboarding. You'll find around 58 resorts within 1-2 hours of the

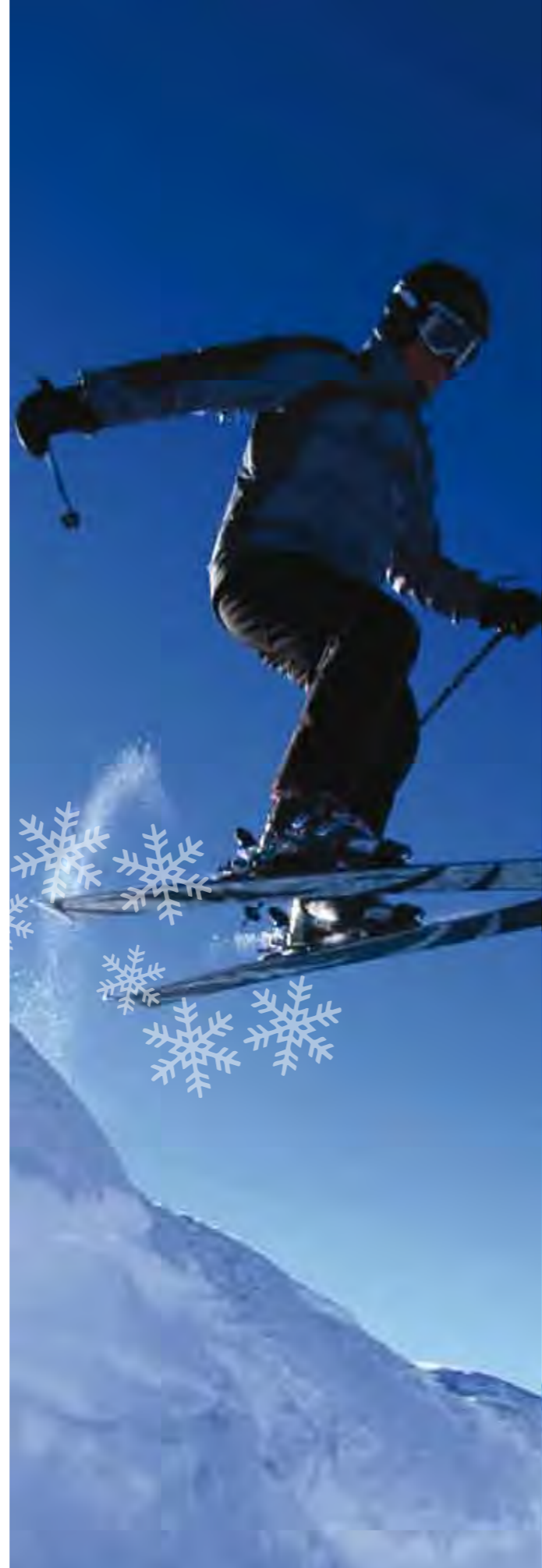
city and a further 31 or so within 2-3 hours. However, a visit to the La Plagne Olympic bobsleigh and luge piste is a must for all speed-freaks. Bob-rafts take up to four passengers and reach speeds of up to 80km per hour, or go it alone in a mono-bob for maximum exhilaration. For the ultimate experience, try the taxi-bob – a competition machine with a professional driver who'll hurl you round the track at up to 120km per hour!

Sofia, Bulgaria

Famous for: 19th Century Russian and Viennese architecture, its vibrant street life, al fresco cafés, vast bazaars, flower sellers, folk musicians and trams.


Transfer from Sofia Airport to Bansko, Bulgaria's newest and most rapidly developing ski resort. Some 100 million Euros have been invested here to provide state-of-the-art facilities. The ski school has English speaking instructors for beginners and there are exciting runs for intermediate and advanced skiers, including slalom, giant slalom, off-piste and heli-skiing. Snowboarders can test their skills along long tree-lined runs and a brand new area with a 90 by 16 metre half-pipe, due to open this season.


 Monarch offers flight-only and package holidays to various ski destinations throughout Europe. For further info on flight availability and details of our associated tour operators please visit monarch.co.uk





THE MAIN DIS(SKI)PLINES

Here's the lowdown on four of the most popular snow and ice sports.

 **Snowboarding** was developed in 60s America as people explored new possibilities for winter activities. Surfers and skateboarders became involved and by 1980, it had become a global phenomenon. Its first Olympic event came in 1998 at Nagano on the giant slalom and half-pipe.

 **Cross-country Skiing** is believed to have originated in Norway as far back as 5000 years ago. By the 10th century, Vikings were using skis to get around and by the 19th century it had become a competitive sport. It's a particularly tough discipline that not only requires balance, but also makes heavy demands on legs, arms, shoulders and abdomen. You'll use muscles you didn't know you had.

 **Alpine Skiing** evolved from cross-country skiing. The first downhill competition was held in Oslo in the 1850s. Later, the sport spread far and wide to Europe and the USA, where miners held skiing contests to pass the time in the dead of winter. It made its Olympic debut in the form of a slalom event in 1924.

 **Ice Skating** began as a speedy form of transportation across the frozen lakes, rivers and canals of Europe – in particular favoured by the Dutch. Several kings of England, Marie Antoinette, Napoleon I, Napoleon III and the German poet Goethe all loved to ice skate. Now it is regarded not only as a highly skilled sport, but also as an art form.

