
Ski and Snowboard Vacations



Skiing and Snowboard Vacations



Imagine: A crisp blue sky. Winter. A deep blanket of snow covering the mountains and trees. To hit the ski slopes, it takes a little planning, but if you're new to skiing or are just looking for a new ski experience - know you have the option of traveling independently or with a like-minded group, and with an experienced tour operator who can take care of all the arrangements... leaving you with little to worry about and poised to have an enjoyable, relaxing trip. The options are many, the destinations worldwide, and the adventure puts an entirely new perspective on cold weather. Just as surf-boarders created their own "endless summer" by trekking the globe year round searching for the perfect wave, so have skiers and snow-boarders taken to the slopes of the Northern and Southern hemisphere to find year-round ski adventures.

Using a good travel consultant, you can book all of the independent elements of a ski trip: air tickets, accommodations, transportation, rentals and lift-tickets. However, travel agents have access to suppliers that provide all of this and more in packaged programs that achieve sizable discounts over booking individual components. No fear: your time is still your own and you do not travel with a group of other skiers on a "tour". If you have a group, usually 10 or more, who want to travel with you, however, a travel agent can often achieve even greater savings.

Consider everything that comes with your trip package to be sure you budget and plan appropriately. Many packages include basics like airfare, lodging, ski tickets, ground transportation, meals and guide service. After a hard day of skiing, you may feel better if you have access to a sauna, hot tub, fireplace, stove, or other kitchen and laundry essentials - check the amenities carefully to be sure you'll be comfortable.



Some tour operators also offer packages that include many activities other than skiing. Consider adding a 4-wheel drive vehicle rental or snowshoeing excursion to your itinerary. Your travel consultant can make any additional arrangements privately or through the tour operator - just remember that many package deals include extra perks at a discount, so don't hesitate to ask.

Specialized or custom trips are available for travelers of all ages who can also participate in the many non-ski or highly supervised ski activities found at resorts - just ask your travel consultant how to get started with planning.

A common question is whether someone's skiing ability will fit in with the rest of a group. This is a good question to raise when you book your trip, but generally, "mixed abilities" are not a problem because groups can be subdivided so instruction and feedback are specific and relevant. However, it is important to match your level of skill to the terrain you will be skiing. Because of the inherent risks involved in the sport, be candid with your travel consultant and your tour operator about your level of ability, and those of your traveling companions.

Accommodations

Lodging for ski vacations vary from hostel-type dormitory arrangements to luxury condominiums, villas and resorts. Again, work with your travel consultant to choose a level of accommodation that meets both your comfort and budgetary requirements.

There are two main types of ski resort: traditional and purpose built.

A traditional resort is typically in a historic alpine village. They are invariably picturesque and offer the most options for travelers interested in the countryside and local culture.

"Purpose built" resorts are usually located higher on a mountain to make the most of more snow for a longer period. While they often lack the native charm of a traditional village, they are more likely to have extensive and modern facilities, particularly helpful for beginners.

Guided Skiing and Lessons

A major advantage of a guided ski trip is finding the best skiing with the least risk. With a group of skiers who have varied abilities, guides often offer more options to experienced skiers, while helping beginners find easy-to-ski lines. Guides manage risk by controlling where the group skis and how they ski a particular pitch. Where hazards are minimal, guides allow for more freedom to explore.



Most of the time a guide will ski first to scope out hazards and snow conditions. Participants ski a few turns behind one another. If you are following the guide, be prepared to stop suddenly, as the guide may need to examine unexpected obstacles, so be sure to give the guide at least 30 feet of space. On non-glaciated, snow packed terrain without crevasses, a guide may sometimes choose to go last, as the potential risk is inherently low.

Tour operators will acquaint you with general skiing conditions and procedures. Group tours involve tremendous cooperation because of their dependence on participants in emergency situations. Although uncommon, most operators take every safety precaution and will spend the necessary time to explain routes in detail and even practice a few procedures to use in case of emergencies.

Because of advances in equipment, safety standards, and terrain mapping, ski accidents are very infrequent and have declined steadily since the 1970s. Always be cautious, but know that if you work with a trusted travel consultant and tour operator, you can also relax and enjoy yourself.

If you are a novice, or if you are traveling with novices, it is usually easy to find a ski resort geared to beginning skiers. Lessons make a tremendous difference and are a worthwhile investment, so add lessons to your budget and schedule. If

traveling with your family, your travel agent will sometimes find packages allowing children to ski free with adults, and many packages for beginners include lessons.

Ski Skill Levels and Variations

Colors: Resorts categorize their ski runs into different colors that can vary from resort to resort, but the following colors and their meanings are most common.

- Green runs are the easiest and best for beginners, allowing new skiers to practice without steep slopes or narrow paths.
- Blue runs are somewhat trickier with more turns. They are steeper. They are often ideal for anyone who has had some experience or perhaps as a warm-up for those who only ski a few times a year.
- Red is where you start to get serious. These are classified as difficult and steep slopes. They have challenging turns that make them out of reach for beginners.
- Black represents the most difficult runs that should only be attempted by would-be James Bonds.

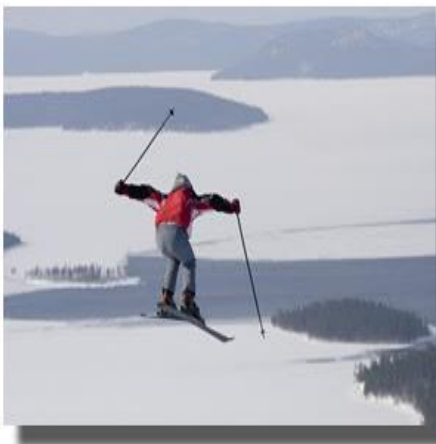
Snow: Not all snow is created equal. Snow can be wet or dry and have various grades. You're likely to find dry snow higher on a mountain where it's colder, since it is formed when temperatures are sub-zero. Dry snow is also likely to be blown around into drifts and has a characteristic crunch when you walk on it. Wet snow is formed when snow's tiny ice crystals start to melt. This type of snow is found on lower slopes where temperatures increase.

So what's the difference to a skier? Dry snow takes less effort to ski across, and melting snow is problematic, particularly for beginning skiers.

Glacier skiing involves skiing on natural glaciers, often providing year-round skiing. Most European glaciers have a variety of terrains for different skill levels and are most commonly found in Austria, France, Italy and Switzerland. In North America, British Columbia's Whistler Blackcomb ski area offers the continent's only glacier skiing.

Heli-skiing, for advanced skiers only, offers an opportunity to go far into the back-country via helicopter to off-trail regions difficult to reach by any other means. To avoid endangering yourself and others, you should be in good shape and proficient in a variety of steep slope and snow conditions.

Before you go



To make the most of your skiing tour, you should be as fit as possible. Injuries are not uncommon, particularly for those who are out of shape.

So what can you do before taking your tour? Engage in physical activities that build your strength, particularly in your thighs and legs - many gyms have machines that simulate skiing. You could also try lessons at a dry ski lodge or an indoor facility, if you have one in your area. This will accustom you to skiing and familiarize you with the necessary equipment, saving lesson time while you are on vacation.

What do you pack?

If this is your first trip, or if you don't own many outdoor or ski-specific clothes, visit a local sporting goods or outdoor shop for helpful advice. The list below offers some ideas to get you started:

- It's always safe to layer clothing - warm interior layers combined with waterproof outerwear is ideal
- It used to be that wool was the best fiber for an outer layer, but it has since been replaced by several synthetic fibers, since wool is not very breathable and snow will stick to it
- Cotton should be avoided - it gets very cold when wet and takes a long time to dry
- Thermal underwear made of an appropriate material is helpful because it can easily be worn underneath other layers and doesn't take up much room in a suitcase
- Pack socks specifically for skiing and wear only one pair at a time
- Don't rely on jeans or track suits! They become wet, cold, heavy and uncomfortable
- Operators say you should spend extra to purchase or rent high-quality ski pants; if you plan to rent, just be sure to check availability while you are on your trip (this can also save you space when packing)
- Gloves and hats are essential - check temperature and wind conditions before making a purchase to be sure your face and ears are fully protected
- Sunglasses, sunscreen, and an SPF lip balm are also mandatory

Some operators provide equipment such as bindings, daypacks, or sunscreen, in addition to snacks and lunch; others do not. If you check before you pack, you may be able to preserve precious luggage space.

You will have to decide if you are going to rent equipment or take your own. This is a personal decision, often made in context of the complicated logistics of traveling with expensive equipment. A ski bag to hold poles, boots and skis is a must. Attach tags containing your address, telephone and cell phone numbers to your equipment and bags.

Finally, make sure you pack any travel documentation you need (ask your travel consultant) and any pre-purchased vouchers or lift tickets.

Reminders

Find your own skill and comfort level. Resist the temptation to overdo it on the first day or so of your vacation. Give yourself time to adjust to the altitude. Frequently apply sunscreen and sun-protective lip balm, even on cloudy days. Carry a water bottle and drink frequently to prevent the dehydration that results from high altitude and outdoor activities.

Finally, tip your guides and instructors 15-20% if you are happy with the service - they count on tips as a major part of their wages.

Ready? It's time to hit the ski-trails and enjoy an entirely new take on winter!