

Chic peaks

Upward Curve slaloms its way around four of the world's premier ski destinations to reveal where to find the best on-piste action and après ski ambience

Whether you're looking for pristine powdered snow, extreme off-piste adventures, glitzy slopeside bars, luxury lodges or gourmet restaurants, the world's leading ski resorts have something for everyone. Here, we give you the lowdown on four destinations that tick all the right boxes – Courchevel, Queenstown, Vail and Whistler.

COURCHEVEL

With 19 five-star hotels, seven Michelin-starred restaurants and a bevy of royals, A-listers and billionaires among its regular visitors, it's easy to see why the French ski resort of Courchevel is widely regarded as the most glamorous in the world.

Located in Les Trois Vallées – the largest interlinked ski area in the world – Courchevel's superb combination of high altitude, north-facing pistes and a large fleet of snow machines help ensure perfectly groomed trails in a stunning setting from the start

of December until the end of April. Featuring 19 green runs, 35 blue, 34 red and eight black, Courchevel is a veritable winter wonderland for skiers of all abilities, with Europe's highest number of ski instructors also on-hand to guide any novices down the nursery slopes.

There are numerous activities outside of skiing as well, including scenic plane, helicopter or hot air balloon rides, an ice rink and a popular 2.3km (1.4-mile) toboggan run, where visitors can sled from La Croisette to Courchevel Village.

Courchevel also provides holidaymakers with a wide variety of quality accommodation, from luxury chalets with bespoke services to five-star 'palaces' such as Le Cheval Blanc, Le K2 and Les Airelles.

Gastronomes, meanwhile, will be in heaven thanks to the Michelin-starred dining on offer at restaurants such as Le 1947, Le Chabichou and La Table du Kilimandjaro.

www.courchevel.com

QUEENSTOWN

Surrounded by stunning snow-capped mountains and the crystal clear waters of Lake Wakatipu, Queenstown is a picture-perfect ski destination, whether you have an appetite for adventure, mountains and fresh air or are more at home tracking down a delicious meal, fine wine and a roaring log fire.

Every year from early June onwards, the region transforms into a winter wonderland, attracting snow sports enthusiasts from around the world with its incredible lake and alpine scenery, crisp blue-sky days, easy access to some of New Zealand's finest ski

and snowboard terrain, and vibrant après ski scene.

The region's four ski fields, all within a handy 25 to 90-minute drive of Queenstown, open from early June and offer a range of terrain for all levels whether you're keen to conquer the basics, have a go at tubing, enjoy groomed runs, tackle off-piste, throw down some freestyle tricks or experience the thrill of night skiing.

Queenstown also has a range of accommodation options to suit every taste, whether you're looking for a self-contained getaway with privacy and peace, a boutique hotel experience or an exclusive luxury lodge with all the trimmings. Queenstown has a range of accommodation options to suit.

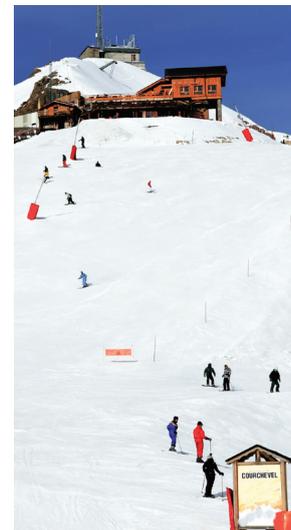
Among the finest are The Dairy, a private and exclusive boutique hotel in the centre of Queenstown, and Matakauri Lodge, which offers 11 luxurious suites and villas spectacularly situated on Lake Wakatipu, ▶

Left: Courchevel boasts a wide range of luxury ski lodges



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each with private terraces looking out to a dramatic lakeside with mountain views.

The Queenstown region has also firmly established itself as a world-class food and wine destination, with more than 150 innovative and award-winning eateries to choose from, including Rata, which is owned by top New Zealand chef and Michelin star holder Josh Emmett, and the legendary Fergburger – serving arguably the best burgers in the world. And don't forget to sample some of the local wine – Central Otago produces some of the best Pinot Noir in the world thanks to the region's combination of shaly soil and sharply defined seasons, and there are around 200 vineyards within 1½ hours' drive of Queenstown.

www.queenstownnz.co.nz

VAIL

With more than 5,200 acres of skiable terrain, seven legendary 'Back Bowls' spanning 11km (6.8 miles), and the most groomed terrain on the planet, Vail has been a popular winter destination for passionate skiers and snowboarders for more than 50 years. The world-class slopes

are home to Olympic gold medallist Lindsey Vonn, while the US national ski team's early-season training sessions take place on Golden Peak. Vail also hosted the 2015 World Alpine Ski Championships, as well as this year's US Open Snowboarding Championships (29 Feb – 5 Mar).

With a full calendar events and festivals to entertain, numerous shops and spas in which to indulge, plus abundant culinary experiences and luxurious accommodations, Vail provides an exceptional mountainside experience for both skiers and non-skiers alike.

For high-end mountain comfort, base yourself at The Sebastian – a boutique property set in the heart of Vail Village that offers a chic yet cosy atmosphere with spectacular views of the Rocky Mountains and the entire valley. The hotel also boasts a mountain-view pool, steaming hot tubs and ski-in/ski-out access.

After working up an appetite on the slopes, be sure to check out Vail's newest ski-in/ski-out fine dining restaurant, the 10th. Situated at the heart of Vail Mountain, the restaurant overlooks the majestic Gore Range and offers world-class cuisine with a focus on Modern Alpine classics. Back in Vail Village, La Tour is an intimate

French bistro that offers expertly prepared classics like escargots, lobster bisque and Rocky Mountain Trout meunière.

www.vail.com

WHISTLER

Visitors flock to the neighbouring Whistler and Blackcomb mountains each year to experience the world-famous skiing and boarding on offer on the slopes that hosted the 2010 Winter Olympics. With 37 lifts and all types of terrain – including steeps, alpine bowls, easy cruisers and terrain parks – the two mountains have developed a reputation as a premier skiing and snowboarding destination.

The combined Whistler Blackcomb resort boasts 8,171 acres (3,307 hectares) of skiable terrain and an immense backcountry, giving skiers and riders access to powder-filled bowls along with expertly-groomed corduroy. Varied terrain, spectacular snow conditions and pristine scenery have all contributed to the area's outstanding reputation.

The action is just as hot off the slopes as well, with more than 200 shops, a dozen spas, 100 restaurants, and an array of lively nightspots.

Whistler's finest restaurants take pride in featuring fresh, local, organic produce and Canadian specialties, including British Columbian wild salmon, halibut and shellfish, British Columbia-raised venison and locally-produced wines. Araxi Restaurant – a culinary cornerstone in the heart of Whistler Village – is undoubtedly one of the epicurean highlights, having been named 'Best Restaurant in Whistler' by Vancouver magazine for an unprecedented nine consecutive years.

Whistler's wide range of accommodation, meanwhile, is headed by the Four Seasons Resort Whistler – one of only four five-diamond properties in Canada – which offers elegant surroundings and 273 modern-rustic rooms and suites. And if the thought of lugging skis, poles, boots and other bulky equipment through airports makes a trip to Whistler seem daunting, the resort's Ski Concierge will take care of everything for you, ensuring guests are suited up from head to toe with high-performance gear, as well as providing expert advice on the best runs of the day and transport to and from the slopes.

www.whistler.com ■