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Piste of mind

After the challenges of Covid regulations and travel restrictions, mountain resorts are gearing up for a bumper season. GABRIELLA LE BRETON, author of *The Ultimate Ski Book*, highlights the latest launches in hotels, chalets and one-of-a-kind trips

Hot on the heels of the summer heat-wave, European skiers are more keen than ever to head off to the Alps, dreaming of deliciously cool, sparkling mountain air and bubbling vats of molten cheese. After two seasons of relative hiatus, European winter resorts are now full of exciting new developments – from snazzy chalets and plush hotels to hold-onto-your-saloppes bucket-list ski experiences. There has never been a better winter to hit the slopes.

The pandemic changed the face of international travel, with a desire for privacy reshaping many travellers' attitudes. From flying in private jets to demanding chalets with hotel-worthy facilities, people's desire to travel in a bubble has resulted in innovations from many operators. After decades of prescriptive chalet catering – with a traditional regimen of breakfast and afternoon teas, and five-course dinners on six nights – chalet specialists are getting imaginative. Book a [Ski France Premium chalet](#) this winter ([skifrance-premium.co.uk](#)) and you can have contactless service. You will arrive to find a fully stocked fridge and wine cellar, with ski hire and lift passes already sorted, and the option to have three meals delivered each day, or to select as much – or as little – catering as you like.

Val d'Isère specialist Hip Hideouts ([hiphideouts.com](#)) is also shaking up the chalet scene. Since launching with one chalet 12 years ago, it has developed something of a cult following for its personalised service, intimate Val knowledge and distinctive chalets and apartments (16 and counting). Founders Richard Thompson and Graham Folmer have cherry-picked outstanding chefs for their properties, yet, in appreciation of Val d'Isère's increasingly stellar foodie status, their latest two properties, Chalet Loup and Cala Slopeside, are bookable on a B&B basis, enabling guests to explore the French resort's après-ski bars and restaurants.

Another post-pandemic trend has been the growth of multi-generational travel. Demand has correspondingly surged for large chalets with hotel facilities and boutique hotels available to book exclusively. Cue the new Arla Luxury Home in the chic Austrian resort of Lech ([arlalech.com](#)). Sleeping up to 12 guests in five expansive bedrooms, it can be divided into three apartments and comes with open access to the spa at the Aurelio hotel ([aureliolech.com](#)), a snowball's throw across the piste. The 18-suite Aurelio hotel and its 10-room Aurelio Clubhouse Chalet are also both available for exclusive hire.

Families wanting to gather without remortgaging should consider Movi Family Apart-Hotel in Corvara, in the Italian Dolomites ([movifamily.it](#)). Set in the Alta Badia ski area, it offers spacious apartments for up to five guests, plus an indoor climbing wall and a kids' pool and playroom.

Horse-mad children will love the Naturhotel Forsthofgut in Austria's Saalbach-Hinterglemm-Leogang-Fieberbrunn ski area ([forsthofgut.at](#)). The ski-in/ski-out hotel provides complimentary childcare, full-board food, a forest spa and, new this autumn, its own stables where kids can take riding lessons. And with 270km of pistes (just shy of the 300km shared by Val d'Isère and Tignes), there is enough terrain here to keep the most demanding skiers on their toes.

Marrying tailored ski instruction, indulgent meals in the 10-bedroom Chalet Montfort in St Anton, bottomless champagne and plenty of laughter, Women Who Ski is a four-night ski experience created by Kaluma Travel ([kalumaski.com](#)). Hosted by Zoë de Pass, of [@DressLikeAMum](#), this winter's WWS trip will add the option of off-piste instruction from Austrian guide and former pro freerider Geli Hiesel to the mix, plus yoga sessions and spa treatments.

For more intrepid ski experiences, check out Mabey Ski ([mabeyski.com](#)). With adventures ranging from heli-skiing in the Arctic to skiing volcanoes in Japan, Mabey's top tip for this winter is a summit-to-sea backcountry trip on Norway's Lofoten Islands. Using the renovated minesweeper *HMS Gåsten* as your floating base, you will sail along spectacular fjords to ski on pristine peaks and enjoy untouched descents, before feasting on freshly caught crab, cod and lobster.

A skier's dream, St-Martin-de-Belleville offers quaint French Alpine farming village charm, access to the world's largest ski area (the Three Valleys) and the three-Michelin-star La Bouitte on the doorstep. Already home to some standout chalets, St-Martin bags the top spot on my must-ski-this-winter list with the arrival of a new five-star hotel, M Lodge ([mlodge.fr](#)). The 25-room, ski-in/ski-out hotel shares its rustic-chic design with its well-established sister properties, the Pure White Crystal and Pure Black Crystal chalets, adding a Valmont spa and intimate wine bar and restaurant.

Mix fresh powder with manicured pistes, and a dollop of decadent food from Michelin-starred chef Angela Hartnett, on the backcountry ski experience at Courchevel's Portetta ([portetta.com](#)). It combines five nights at the French hotel with two days led by a guide to take you deep into the Vanoise National Park, exploring the untouched Les Avals valley to summit Le Petit Mont Blanc and ski La Portetta couloir.

If uphill skiing sounds like a slog, consider a French heli safari with VIP Ski ([vip-chalets.com](#)). The pioneering chalet operator has tailored a week-long Ski Safari, combining accommodation in the boutique Bear Lodge hotel in Les Arcs with three days of heli skiing in Val d'Isère, the Three Valleys and Paradiski. With 1,325km of pistes, the skiing will be epic but don't forget the post-pandemic mantra – live life to the full – and indulge in plenty of tabletop après-ski dancing before hailing the chopper for a sunset flight back home □

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