

ESCAPE TO THE SLOPES

Whatever you're looking for in a ski trip, Helen Taylor picks out a destination to suit

Whistler, British Columbia, Canada
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COUPLES RETREAT

Whistler, British Columbia, Canada



Nita Lake Lodge

Whistler Blackcomb is one of North America's premier ski resorts. Home to not just one but two enormous mountains, marked with some 200 runs, 16 alpine bowls and three glaciers, you certainly won't be disappointed by the impressive variety of challenging terrain. Head to Whistler for easy greens and wide, open bowls, but to Blackcomb for gnarly tree-runs and breathtaking glacial skiing. When you've had enough of either, switch it up and take a ride on the impressive Peak2Peak gondola, which traverses 4.4km across the tree-carpeted valley that lies between the two mountains.

Whistler Blackcomb isn't only worth visiting for the skiing – take a romantic evening's

stroll through the floodlit village, with its stylish outdoor clothing stores, numerous bars and restaurants. Or, visit the new Audain Art Gallery with its permanent collection of paintings by Emily Carr – British Columbia's most famous artist – or the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre for an insight into the history and culture of the Canadian First Nations. And, every Sunday evening during the winter season, watch as Whistler's best skiers, riders and all-round dare-devils launch themselves off an epic jump and through a blazing ring of fire, accompanied by fire-throwers, fireworks and music, in the weekly Fire and Ice Show. The resort is a two-hour drive north from Vancouver International Airport. The journey, along the sea-to-sky-highway, is in itself worth experiencing, with its stunning ocean vistas, soaring mountains and dramatic waterfalls.

Where to stay:

Canada is renowned for its cabin-style hotels and chalets, which take their inspiration from the impressive pine forests found across the country. To immerse yourself in Whistler's wilderness culture, stay at Nita Lake Lodge, in Creekside Village; the only lakeside hotel in the resort. Creekside Village benefits from its own ski-lift, which is often less-crowded than the lifts at the base of Whistler and Blackcomb villages, at peak times. Other luxury stays include the Fairmont Chateau and the Four Seasons Resort.

Elsewhere: British Columbia is home to 20 other ski resorts, all with fresh powder and jaw-dropping terrain. For those looking to explore off the beaten track, Revelstoke Mountain Resort, just west of Banff National Park, is known for its powder skiing and advanced terrain.

FAMILY FRIENDLY

Villars-sur-Ollon, Switzerland

Villars-sur-Ollon, a sunny south-facing ski resort that sits high above the Rhone Valley, in the heart of the Vaud Alps, is a go-to destination for young families looking for a stress-free ski holiday. Less than a two-hour drive from Geneva airport – straight along the motorway – its ease of access, mild weather and beginner-friendly terrain make it a popular spot for second-home owners. More of a



Villars-sur-Ollon, Switzerland



Hilton Niseko Village, Niseko, Japan

town than a village, with sprawling suburbs of luxury chalets, Villars is also home to several international schools and is the ideal place for children to learn to ski.

Because of its slightly lower altitude, between 1,300m and 3,000m, in the past the resort has suffered from poor snow quality, but a recent multi-million investment in new snow cannons means it now has enviable snow conditions and well-groomed runs all season-round.

The slopes at Villars-sur-Ollon also link to those of Les Chaux, just above the village of Gryon. An area pass will cover Villars and Les Chaux, as well as Les Diablerets and Glacier 3000 – linked to Villars by lifts, and Leysin and Les Mosses – a short drive or train ride away from Villars. As well as its 44 lifts, one of which is a railway that winds its way from Villars to Bretaye, the resort features 44km of cross-country trails, sledging runs and three snowparks.



Villars-sur-Ollon, Switzerland

Where to stay:

Choose from a range of luxury and mid-range hotels. The stand out is Chalet RoyAlp Hotel & Spa, the only five-star hotel in the town. Located in the heart of the village, it has ski-in ski-out access and a Michelin-star restaurant. Its 63 rooms combine modern luxury with a cosy mountain chalet feel and children aged nine and younger stay for free in their parents' rooms. There are also plenty of self-catered, large family chalets available for rental. Elsewhere: The ultra-glamorous village of Verbier is only an hour's drive from Villars, if you'd like to visit for the day.

ADVENTURE

Niseko, Hokkaido, Japan

Resorts in Europe, Canada and the US have always been popular among British skiers, but Japan, a popular choice among Aussies, is also worth some serious consideration, especially for powder-hounds. Located on the island of Hokkaido, Niseko has built a reputation as Japan's premier ski destination. Due to its proximity to Siberia, which pumps out near-constant storm cycles, it's renowned for its world-class powder skiing, especially its wide, open bowls and tree-lined runs, with an average of 15m of snow each season. Niseko consists of four interlinked ski resorts – Niseko Village, Grand Hirafu, Hanazono and Annupuri – that girdle the base of Mount Niseko Annupuri, the large ski area. Each resort has its own lift, but one lift ticket covers all four resorts, as well as the Niseko United Shuttle Service.

Aside from its powder, Japan stands-out as a competitive ski destination for its night skiing.



Hilton Niseko Village

At Niseko, the resort's main runs remain lit until 8.30pm – think riding deep-powder runs through an illuminated forest. For a taste of Japanese culture, no ski trip to Niseko would be complete without a trip to a local onsen, a steaming pool of thermal hot springs, and a taste of sushi or a trip to the town of Niseko itself – a short drive from any of the four resorts – with its laid-back, surf-town vibe.

Where to stay:

Liz Cairns, Asia Specialist at Flight Centre, recommends staying at the Hilton Niseko Village. Winner of 'Japan's Best Ski Hotel' four years in a row at the World Ski Awards, the hotel offers fabulous facilities in a beautiful setting. It's next door to the village gondola, so you'll be on the slopes in less than ten minutes.

Elsewhere: The whole of Japan is known for some of the best powder skiing in the world. While Niseko is located on the north island, Hakuba is another large ski area on Honshu Island, in the Japanese Alps, with 11 independent resorts catering to all ski abilities.