



PHOTO: HELLOBG

Hitting the luxe slopes

With year-end holidays round the corner, now's the time to plan for an escape to a luxurious mountain resort

BY RAHITA ELIAS

IF you are tired of the heat and humidity in sunny Singapore, a ski holiday may just be what the doctor ordered. With the year-end holidays just round the corner, there is no better time to plan for an escape to a luxurious mountain resort catering to your every need and desire. Just a few hours on the plane and you will find yourself breathing cold, crisp air thousands of metres above sea level and revelling in powdery white snow under bluebird skies.

In general, those going on ski holidays tend to be well travelled and are looking for new and unique experiences. They comprise a mix of families, couples and friends.

Lucy Jackson, co-founder and director of Lightfoot Travel, says: "With families, the aim is for their children to experience snow, which is obviously something uncommon in most parts of Asia and allows them to open up their horizons to new adventures."

Lightfoot Travel, which specialises in tailor-made luxury holidays, offers itineraries on the high end of the spectrum. Costs can vary significantly depending on the destinations, the style of accommodation chosen and the type of transfers required.

Ms Jackson says: "Recently, one of our clients had very limited time in Europe, so he did not want to waste what little time he had on the road to Courchevel (a ski resort in France). We helped to arrange a private flight to the nearest airport, which had a long enough runway, and then a helicopter transfer to the village. He had quite a bit of luggage, which required a separate van.

"Sadly, the weather wasn't cooperating on the return journey, so the helicopter could not take off, but we managed to quickly arrange a separate land transfer to the airport." In general, Singapore-based residents tend to go on ski holidays at the

end of the year or over Chinese New Year. She advises: "Due to high demand for these specific periods, it is advisable to travel outside of these dates when possible so as to have a little more quiet – and better rates!"

She also suggests: "To make the most of the mountains, we advise people to stay at least 10 days, particularly for beginners as it takes some time to get used to the various sensations and be comfortable on your skis. Plus, the majority of ski resorts offer alternative activities to skiing, so if you need a break to rest those sore muscles, there are many different ways to keep travellers entertained for quite a while."

Not surprisingly, Japan is one of the top ski destinations for Singapore-based residents.

"For reasons of proximity, our most popular ski destination is Niseko in Japan. There is a wide array of superb chalets, apartments and chalets as well as world-class dining. Niseko is ideal for beginners as the powder is hands down the best in the world and makes learning an easy process," Ms Jackson says.

Niseko, often referred to as the Mount Fuji of the north, is the biggest and most popular cluster of ski resorts in Hokkaido. According to *Japan-Guide.com*, it is probably the most visited ski resort by foreign travellers and is very English-language friendly. Powder snow, which is ideal for skiing, is almost guaranteed in the area as it receives one of the heaviest snowfalls in Japan. Depending on the resort, the ski season starts around late November or early December until May.

Another major ski destination is Hakuba, which is located in the Japanese Alps in the Nagano prefecture. The ski season begins around early to mid-December until April or May.

Among the many luxurious accommodations available in Hakuba is the One Happo Chalet. The five-bedroom chalet comes with its own gym, spa, *onsen* and glass-topped pool table. It also has its own wine room, showcasing up to 700 imported global wines, including Krug and Dom Perignon champagnes.

A week's stay will set you back about 4.2 million yen (\$50,000), and daily house-keeping services can be arranged at extra cost. Apart from skiing, guests can opt to go snowshoeing, visit a historic *sake* brewery or an ancient temple complex. They can also take a day trip to see the famous snow monkeys, which soak in the area's hot springs to keep warm in the winter.

While Japan's proximity makes it a popular ski destination for Singapore-based residents, European destinations are also a major draw.

Après-ski culture

Lightfoot Travel's Ms Jackson notes that the après-ski culture in Japan is not as developed as in the Western ski resorts. Après-ski refers to any form of entertainment, nightlife or social events in and around ski resorts.

Ms Jackson adds: "European ski resorts still remain very popular, particularly for avid skiers as they offer more variety than Niseko, longer slopes and an amazing après-ski culture – which can often start with a glass of mulled wine right on the slopes!"

She adds that Verbier in Switzerland is reputed to be the most exclusive ski resort in the world.

"Ski-wise, though close to half of the slopes are classified as 'easy', the resort is best suited to experienced and adventurous skiers. Verbier is also one of the rare

resorts that has a longer season and is open from mid-November all the way to the beginning of May. The chalets here are opulent and luxurious."

Verbier is also a great place for celebrity spotting. According to the *Daily Mail Online*, you just might bump into British and Danish royalty, the Beckhams, Leonardo DiCaprio, Jude Law and Jamie Oliver on the slopes there.

St Moritz, also in Switzerland, has been attracting skiers from around the world for over 150 years for on and off-snow activities. It has 350 kilometres of world-class ski pistes or marked trails. However, Ms Jackson says, the real draw is the St Moritz Lake and its profusion of events and activities, which include ice skating, horse racing, curling, polo and even golf.

Luxury is also the name of the game at Courchevel in France's Trois Vallées, which is the largest lift-linked ski area with close to 600 km of pistes. "The resort was awarded the 'Familie Plus Montagne' label, which proved that it truly is a family-friendly holiday destination with an extensive sledging run, crèches, ski lessons for kids from 18 months and much more."

Over in North America, Whistler is a favourite.

"In addition to the many slopes, Whistler offers several non-ski activities such as ice-skating, snow tubing, zip trekking, dog sledding, sleigh rides, ice climbing among many other things," says Ms Jackson.

A ski holiday therefore does not need to be limited to just skiing. Adventurous and sporty travellers can choose from a wide variety of snow-based activities, while the more laidback ones can just soak in their in-house hot tubs and drink hot *sake* while enjoying the panoramic view. **W**