

The Ski and Snowboard Guide to the Alps' Best-Kept Secrets

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Introduction

Every year, more than 20 million skiers and snowboarders flock to the Alps to take part in the world's most famous seasonal multi-billion dollar industry.¹ The percentage of those tourists that are traveling to Europe from North America grows each year, and has increased most significantly in the past three.² And while the events of September 11, 2001, significantly affected the tourism industry, the numbers of North Americans traveling to Europe for winter vacations have not fallen nearly as much as those who were traveling to Europe during the three other seasons. What's more, statistics are showing a rebound in ski and snowboard tourism from North America to Europe – starting this winter.

Meanwhile, skier visits to U.S. resorts in the 2001/2002 season were down 5.5% from 2000/2001 visits.³ The 'Extreme Sports' industry explosion and the comparatively strong value of the American dollar has prompted tens of thousands of Americans to head for Europe, in search of a higher quality of winter tourism at a far more affordable rate.⁴ Those who know where to look, find this in the Alps' best winter resorts. Those who don't, need a guidebook – *this* guidebook.

The Ski and Snowboard Guide to the Alps' Best-Kept Secrets will be the first guidebook ever to give a complete look at the Alps' amazing breadth of terrain, nightlife, culture and affordability. It will be a comprehensive directory to over 60 ski areas, which offer some of the best skiing in the world, in some of the least-visited regions of the Alps. Full of travel, lodging, dining and resort destination advice for low, mid- and high-budget travelers, this book will cover every aspect of a European ski or snowboard vacation for the serious snow enthusiast.

Most of the featured resorts in this book are largely unknown to skiers and snowboarders outside of Europe, and, until now, information about them in other guidebooks and on the Internet has been scant. Aside from cold statistics and (sometimes outdated) pricing information, there are few resources for skiers and snowboarders interested in exploring the Alps on skis or snowboards. Picking up where all other books and Web sites have left off, our book will streamline readers' searches through customized information that is specific to every type of traveler.

But it is the perspective with which the authors write that will truly set it apart. As Americans who have lived in both North American and European ski towns, the authors' have had to face the same travel uncertainties and hurdles that the book's audience faces. This point of view will permeate the text and lend the book a provocative, *insider* feel.

Why the Alps, Why Now?

¹ www.austria-tourism.biz

² www.austria-tourism.biz

³ National Ski Area Association Kottke National End of Season Survey 2001/2002, Preliminary Results.

⁴ www.austria-tourism.biz

Most people think a European ski vacation is beyond their budget. But when compared with virtually any North American ski vacation, Europe is invariably a more affordable destination for most U.S., and many North American skiers and snowboarders. For a family of East Coast skiers, a weeklong Colorado ski vacation, with airfare, will cost about \$1,900 per person. A vacation in Austria (with a far higher quality of skiing and lodging) will cost just \$1,200 per person, including trans-Atlantic airfare!⁵ Because entire regions in the Alps rely on tourism as their primary industry, prices for lodging and skiing are extremely competitive.⁶ With lodging deals and incredibly low off-season airfare between most major U.S. cities and Europe, a vacation in the Alps is becoming an amazingly attractive proposition. (See specific comparison of Vail, Colorado, and Zillertal, Austria, in the Market section, page 8.)

But it isn't just the affordability that makes the Alps so attractive. The Alps offer some of the world's best skiing: challenging terrain, mixed with stunning mountain vistas. What's more, the Alps are one of the most accessible large mountain ranges in the world. A ski or snowboard vacation here is truly unforgettable.

The Ski and Snowboard Guide to the Alps' Best-Kept Secrets will be an easy-to-pack, compact size, with a durable jacket and easily referenced, color-coded sections. It will include approximately 65 region and area maps and many full-color images by some of the best snow-sports photographers. It will also include the following special features:

- **Traveler's Tales.** Written by seasoned ski and snowboard travelers, the guide will include revealing, *real-life vignettes* that will help readers understand what traveling in the European Alps is all about. Full of surprise discoveries and lessons learned, these anecdotes will undoubtedly save readers from countless logistical headaches and cultural blunders, making them savvy European travelers even before they step off the plane.
- **Agendas.** The *Suggested Route* section will filter the myriad travel and lodging choices into flexible, easy-to-implement itineraries and sample agendas that address the needs of each traveler at every budget level. There will be *Suggested Route* itineraries for each of the countries and regions featured in the guide.
- **True Images.** Each year, ski and snowboard magazine publishers sell snow-hungry skiers and snowboarders millions of tantalizing images of untouched, alpine winter terrain; but they often don't tell those readers how to get there. Beyond the standard ski area maps, the guide will also offer *actual photographs* of the resorts with graphic overlays, revealing terrain details for skiers and snowboarders who need more detail than most trail maps provide. This will be a distinctive feature of the guide that will set it apart from all other existing ski guides.

⁵ Delta.com, and Vail.com/ Apparthotel Landhaus Veronika, ski-Zillertal3000.com for week of Feb. 10, 2003.

⁶ www.austria-tourism.biz

- **Local Knowledge.** In the *Classic Lines* section, the authors will reveal insider's guides to the most aesthetic and essential skiing and sightseeing in the Alps. These are the absolute must-see ski runs, train rides, and mountain sites that form the foundation of every unforgettable Alps experience.

Chapter Outline

Introduction

Part One: Regional Overviews

Chapter One: Bavaria

The Basics

Suggested Route

Chapter Two: The Dolomites

The Basics

Suggested Route

Chapter Three: Eastern Austria

The Basics

Suggested Route

Chapter Four: Eastern Switzerland

The Basics

Suggested Route

Chapter Five: France

The Basics

Suggested Route

Chapter Six: Tyrol

The Basics

Suggested Route

Chapter Seven: Western Switzerland

The Basics

Suggested Route

Part Two: The Guide

Chapter One: Austria

Introduction

Ski Area/Resort Descriptions, Each Including the Following Elements:

The Facts

- Photos
- Embassies

- Dough
- Lift Passes
- Getting Around
- Ski and Snowboard School
- Tourist Offices
- Annotated Trail Map
- Area Statistics

The Essentials

- Food, Shelter & Transportation
- Entertainment & Nightlife
- Down-Day Activities

Rest Day Activities

The Classic Lines

Chapter Two: France

Introduction

Ski Area/Resort Descriptions, Each Including the Following Elements:

The Facts

- Photos
- Embassies
- Dough
- Lift Passes
- Getting Around
- Ski and Snowboard School
- Tourist Offices
- Annotated Trail Map
- Area Statistics

The Essentials

- Food, Shelter & Transportation
- Entertainment & Nightlife
- Down-Day Activities

Rest Day Activities

The Classic Lines

Chapter Three: Germany

Introduction

Ski Area/Resort Descriptions, Each Including the Following Elements:

The Facts

- Photos
- Embassies
- Dough
- Lift Passes
- Getting Around
- Ski and Snowboard School

- Tourist Offices
- Annotated Trail Map
- Area Statistics

The Essentials

- Food, Shelter & Transportation
- Entertainment & Nightlife
- Down-Day Activities

Rest Day Activities

The Classic Lines

Chapter Four: Italy

Introduction

Ski Area/Resort Descriptions, Each Including the Following Elements:

The Facts

- Photos
- Embassies
- Dough
- Lift Passes
- Getting Around
- Ski and Snowboard School
- Tourist Offices
- Annotated Trail Map
- Area Statistics

The Essentials

- Food, Shelter & Transportation
- Entertainment & Nightlife
- Down-Day Activities

Rest Day Activities

The Classic Lines

Chapter Five: Switzerland

Introduction

Ski Area/Resort Descriptions, Each Including the Following Elements:

The Facts

- Photos
- Embassies
- Dough
- Lift Passes
- Getting Around
- Ski and Snowboard School
- Tourist Offices
- Annotated Trail Map
- Area Statistics

The Essentials

- **Food, Shelter & Transportation**
- **Entertainment & Nightlife**
- **Down-Day Activities**

Rest Day Activities

The Classic Lines

Throughout the Book

Vignettes and Priceless Advice

Anecdotes

Cultural Clues

Humorous Travel/Dining Advice

The Big Ten

Chamonix (F)

Central Switzerland (CH)

Dolomiti Super Ski (I)

The Haute Savoie Region (F)

The Jungfrau Region (CH)

Les Portes du Soleil (CH)

Les Trois Vallees (F)

St Anton (A)

Soelden (A)

Val d' Isere (F)

Verbier (CH)

Detailed Outline

The book's Introduction will describe, briefly, the reasons why the pages that follow are important and useful to a North American (or any non-European) skier or snowboarder who is traveling to Europe and is A) enthusiastic about his or her sport; B) wants to find the best possible resorts and terrain; and C) hopes to arrive in Europe with some local knowledge.

The Introduction will also contain a short cultural primer for first-time visitors to Europe. This will address some basic customs and preferences that will require foreknowledge, such as tipping at meals and general etiquette. These factors will be addressed throughout the *vignettes* in each chapter, but the Introduction will initiate the basic discussion of cultural nuances.

The Introduction will describe the many ways the guide can be used to save money and time, and how it can be your best friend in a tight squeeze. Specifically, the Introduction will begin by outlining the book's contents and structure, briefly noting the best approaches to various information searches. The Introduction will also provide some groundwork thinking for planning a European ski or snowboard trip, specifically addressing:

- Best and worst times of year to visit, depending on specific destination and objectives
- Transportation and reservation issues
- Gear concerns, i.e. renting, shoe sizing, specific equipment needs, and cost/convenience of traveling with gear
- Language barriers and interests, or, where to go to avoid or embrace a European language
- Maximizing the value of your vacation and avoiding needless expenses, while focusing on comfort.

We'll conclude the Introduction with a brief look at the ever-evolving cultures of skiing and snowboarding, including trends, fringe or derivative sports, and gear and advances in technology.

Part One: Regional Overviews

This book will cover over 50 ski areas and resorts within Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland. However, within these national boundaries lie seven regions with unique terrain, snow and cultural characteristics. These seven regions are Bavaria, The Dolomites, Eastern Austria, Eastern Switzerland, France, Tyrol and Western Switzerland. All of these regions offer excellent skiing and snowboarding, but their specific characteristics make them more appealing to some types of travelers and less appealing to others. With this in mind, we'll use Part I as an introduction to these regions, which will then be referenced within the five country chapters through color-coded margins.

The Basics

Each regional overview will contain some similar, essential information, such as:

- Terrain: A visual sketch of geology of the region: *What are the mountains and resorts like?*
- Weather: What are the prevalent weather systems and snowfall patterns that characterize the region? *What is the snow like?*

- Culture: What is the history of skiing here? What role have resorts played in the development of the regional culture and society? *What are the people like?*
- Extra expenses/travel specific to the region. *What does it cost?*
- Special attractions. *What is there to do and see?*
- Ideal season to visit each region. *When should I go?*

Also, each regional description will conclude with a top-five section: A brief review of the best five resorts in each region. While all resorts featured in the guide are excellent and well-worth visiting, these five are especially note-worthy due to snow conditions, accessibility, value, and the overall feeling of quality.

Part One will also include an overview map of the Alps, with all major roads and featured ski areas clearly noted.

The Suggested Route

Each of the seven region descriptions in the guide will include a *suggested route* itinerary, featuring the highlights of each region organized into an efficient travel plan. Readers will be able to follow the suggested route itinerary or variations of it. The suggested travel plan will encompass the best resorts of each region connected by the most accessible modes of travel, and will be ideal for travelers wishing to spend seven to 10 days in a region of the Alps.

Part Two: The Guide

Part Two will be the meat of the book. Again, it will be divided into five chapters, and within these chapters, ski areas that fall into the seven major regions will be cross-referenced through color-coded margins. Within each country chapter, the ski areas and resorts will be listed alphabetically. The following details will open each ski area or resort description:

- Photograph of mountain
- Trail map of mountain
- Area statistics including skiable acreage, opening and closing dates, number of lifts, number of runs and percentages of beginner/intermediate/advanced terrain, average snowfall and costs for lift ticket per day.
-

Tourist Office Information

The system of tourist offices in the Alps is amazing. Every town hosts a well-staffed office of friendly, English-speaking tourism experts. These people prove incredibly valuable in many situations. Each tourist office can provide the traveler with more than enough information on resort happenings and amenities. They can book lodging, recommend dining, and assist in almost any imaginable situation. Phone numbers and email addresses will be provided for the tourist office in every featured resort.

The Essentials

In this section, the authors will provide options for low-budget, mid-budget and high-budget vacationers, with detailed lists of costs per day. The Essentials are:

- **Food, Shelter and Transportation** Estimated costs for accommodation and transportation around the area, including notable eateries and inns:
 - Two to three lodging (including listed amenities) and dining (including type of cuisine and atmosphere) options will be given for each budget.
 - Contact information will be listed for each lodging option, including toll-free numbers and email/web site info, where available.
- **Entertainment and Nightlife**
 - Most of the ski areas to be featured in the guide offer some sort of nightlife, and we will reveal the best of what's available. The most popular bars and clubs will be listed and described, with attention given to cover charges, après-ski happy hours, live music, etc.

Down-Day Activities

Every ski trip should have a rest day, and sometimes weather or sore bones make them obligatory. What to do? Sightsee? Swimming? Shopping? For those looking for a not-so-down down-day, high-intensity activities such as paragliding or ice climbing will be listed, along with information on guides and equipment. Statistically, 90% of visiting skiers and snowboarders in the Alps ski for only 75% of their vacation.⁷ *The Alps' Best Kept Secrets* will include alternative entertainment information -- more than any other guide.

The Classic Lines

This will be one of the guide's most distinctive, and valuable, features. This section will reveal the authors' favorite linked ski runs, or "lines" at each resort. It will also detail the best, and often least crowded areas of the resort in which to ski, snowboard, eat, or just hangout.

The authors will provide directions to and descriptions of the *classic lines* within each resort. These routes are the stuff of legend, and range from awe-inspiring runs suitable for beginners and experts alike, to descents only for highly skilled skiers and snowboarders with mountaineering experience and knowledge. Some lines are famous for their difficulty within skiing and snowboarding annals. Most of them include sections that meander through the most scenic areas of the Alps. We will also include information on area guiding services and the low-down on must-visit alpine huts.

These classic lines are the signature features of the European resorts. But sadly, the vast majority of American tourists miss them. Other guidebooks have failed to include them, and although most classic lines are easily accessible, and even mainstream, uninformed tourists too often overlook them. These lines are the true highlights of a skiers' vacation, creating the foundation of an unforgettable ski or snowboard experience in the Alps.

⁷ Mayrhofen TVB 2001 (Tourism Authority)

Throughout the Book

Vignettes and Priceless Advice

These will be short, entertaining, and sometimes-cautionary tales, littered throughout the book. They will give readers insightful advice, written from experience, including:

- Travel/language anecdotes
- Blurbs about trains and cheese and wine and girls and boys and beer and sausages and jambon-baguettes and the best and worst bars
- How to approach the locals
- Cultural idiosyncrasies (why Switzerland is so freaky clean; an exploration of the traveling female Swede phenomenon; an ode to crepe banana chocolate at 4 am; a study of the East Coast telemarker, and the Southern California ski-boarder)
- The differences between the snow in the East, West, and Southern Alps
- Etcetera

These pockets of information will give tremendous value to *The Ski and Snowboard Guide to the Alps' Best-Kept Secrets*. They will be what make it such a unique, insightful tool, giving the reader information that he or she could never find on any Web site or in any other guidebook or brochure. Coupled with ski area photographs and in-depth descriptions of resort towns, this guide will be the most useful and entertaining ski and snowboard guide in print.

The Big Ten

These are the largest, most popular ski areas in the Alps. They have become famous over the years for good reason, and although the book will focus on leading its readers to the best resorts that have escaped attention from American media, these areas will receive honorable mention and some attention in the book. The Big Ten are: Chamonix, and the Haute Savoie region (F), Val d'Isère (F), Les Trois Vallées (F), Les Portes du Soleil (CH), The Jungfrau region (CH), Central Switzerland (CH), Verbier (CH), Dolomiti Super Ski (I), St Anton (A), and Soelden (A). Descriptions of these resorts will not make up their own chapter; they will be included with their respective region chapters, earmarked for readers.

The Market

In the past decade, the snowsports industry has gone through tremendous changes. Long-suffering from declining skier visits, the popularity surge in snowboarding during the late 1990s lit a much-needed fire under the ski industry, leading to some competition between makers of skis and makers of snowboarders, and resulting in remarkable technological advances in snowsports equipment. Consumers reacted, and both manufacturers and resorts profited. Skier visits in the U.S. increased from 46,722 in 1990/1991 to 57,337 in 2000/2001.⁸

Teenagers discovered snowboarding, and turned to it by the millions. People who grew up on skis rediscovered the sport – with a big boost from new parabolic designs. Families started reconsidering ski vacations.

These changes occurred just as travel to Europe became a more economically feasible option for North Americans. As a result, word is beginning to spread about the wonderful skiing and snowboarding opportunities in Europe, and there are plenty of newly-converted or reborn skiers and snowboarders who'd love to know more about what's on the other side of the Atlantic.

Our Reader

Our target reader is a college-educated man or woman, between the ages of 23-50. He/she most likely resides on the East or West coast of the United States, and works in an industry such as technology or business, earning a mean household income of over \$70,000 per year.

He/she considers him/herself an intermediate to expert skier or snowboarder and skis or snowboards at least 10 and as much as 40 days per year, taking at least one ski vacation each winter.

Our book would attract an audience that combines the readership of *Powder*, *Snowboarding*, and *SKI* and *Skiing* magazines. Our target audience includes the 1.8 million readers of *SKI* magazine, who have a median household income of \$74,993 and spend more than 17 days per year skiing⁹. It also includes the more adventurous and travel-ready readers of *FREEZE* magazine, who average 22 days on the snow each year; as well as the 1.2 million passionate, skilled and worldly readers of *Skiing* magazine, of whom 36% have vacationed outside of the U.S. in the past three years.¹⁰ From the newest members of Generation X through to the first retirees of the Baby Boomer generation, our readers are financially secure enough to travel to the Rockies from the East or West coast, with or without their families, but are always looking to improve the quality of their vacations through value or comfort. They are always striving for the best vacation experience, in the best vacation spots.

⁸ National Ski Area Association Stats

⁹ Mountain Sports Media, *Ski* Magazine media kit.

¹⁰ Mountain Sports Media, *Ski* Magazine media kit.

In other words, our reading audience is comprised of people looking for a ski vacation that stands apart, in terms of snow and terrain quality, but also in terms of amenities, cultural experiences and value. For them, a ski or snowboard trip to the best resorts of the Alps is the perfect vacation.

Our Subject

In the past year, over 20 feature articles on European skiing appeared in ski and snowboard magazines such as *SKI*, *Powder*, *FREEZE*, *TRANSWorld Snowboarding* and *Snowboarder*, drastically increasing North American awareness of and interest in the Alps as a destination.

These articles include *Europe: Worth the Trip*; *Ski the Alps: Hot Spots, Packages*; *Switzerland: Gstaad's Alter Ego*; *Europe 101*; *Austria: The Hills are Alive*; *In the Land of the Jungfrau* and *Ski Deals in Europe*. An article in *Snowboarder* magazine describes a low-budget snowboarding trip to France, for which the writers spent an average of \$43.72 USD per day.¹¹

The travel industry is also recognizing the influx of travel to Europe. A recent *Travel & Leisure* article suggested an eight-day trip to Switzerland's Wengen, and compared the costs of a European ski vacation with stateside trips. In all cases, the European trips were more affordable.¹²

While the Alps have long been famous for their skiing, their affordability is a new phenomenon. The competitive nature of European resorts has driven prices down to a very affordable level for Europeans, and the gradual devaluation of European currencies with the coming of the Euro-dollar has created a very attractive opportunity for Americans to experience the Alps. Even throughout the entire post-9/11 recession the dollar has done exceptionally well against European currency, and market leaders forecast further recovery and gain against the Euro in the second half of 2002.¹³

European ski areas are experiencing a remarkable influx of American skiers, and for good reason. Depending on your departure city, it is often cheaper to take a European mountain sports vacation than to stay stateside. Ski packages (which generally include lodging/lift ticket combinations) tend to be more economical and flights to major European airports rival, or beat, coast-to-coast, or coast-to-mountain flights, in the U.S. Also, airport-to-resort ground transportation is often cheaper, and less of a hassle, in Europe.

Surprisingly, few North American skiers or snowboarders know this. The Alps are a huge, untapped resource for North American skiers and snowboarders, and North American skiers and snowboarders, in turn, comprise a huge and untapped market for this book.

¹¹ http://snowboardermag.com/features/magazine_features/europe/

¹² *Travel + Leisure*, "The High Life, Affordable Skiing in Europe," web exclusive by Shax Reigler

¹³ *Investors Business Daily*, May 21, 2002; *Modern Maturity*, February, 2002

A Case Study: Vail, Colorado VS Zillertal, Austria

Vail sells itself as the #1 resort in North America.¹⁴ Ideal for every type of winter snow enthusiast, Vail attracts families, young couples, retirees, and singles.

Zillertal, Austria, uses a similar marketing scheme, billing extensive nightlife, with extensive family friendly amenities. They are both very well rounded, high-quality resorts. The similarities, however, end there.

Vail boasts of an incredible 5,289 acres of terrain served by 29 lifts. All for over \$55 per day for a lift pass.

Zillertal, on the other hand, humbly advertises over 150 lifts, serving over 100,000 acres of skiable terrain, with one lift ticket costing just \$28 per day.

What's more, a weeklong ski vacation in Vail will cost more than \$1,900 per person for a family of four, including airfare from JFK. That is assuming that you stay in the moderately priced accommodations in Vail Village, where you *could* spend up to \$900 per night for a family of four.

In Zillertal, Austria, a weeklong vacation will cost around \$1,550 per person in a family of four, including airfare from JFK to Munich. You will stay in a luxurious suite with full kitchen, two bathrooms, living room, two bedrooms, a private balcony, and a view, all for under \$200 per night for the entire family. In your hotel you will find three saunas, an indoor pool, hot tub, tepidarium, fitness center, solarium, need we go on?

Even the best North American resorts pale in comparison with the average resort in the Alps.

¹⁴ <http://www.vail.snow.com>

Publicity and Promotion

With our combined experience, knowledge and networks within the ski and snowboarding gear, safety, travel and clothing industries, promotion and publicity for this book will be quite possibly our easiest task.

As a frequent contributor to both ski and snowboard-specific and general outdoor magazines, Mary Catherine O'Connor has a number of editorial contacts within some of the publications most widely-read by our target audience, such as *Outside*, *Freeze*, *SKI*, *Skiing*, *Freeskier*, and *National Geographic Adventure*. But contacts aside, editorial reviews of *The Best-Kept Secrets* within these magazines is quite likely, simply because it is a title in which readers of all these magazine have a strong interest.

As a hotel host, ski model, and experienced guide in the Alps, Matt Gerdes is actively involved with ski industry professionals across America and Europe. With considerable experience in the marketing and retail end of the ski and snowboard industry, Matt is confident that this book can be sold in retail ski and snowboard shops across North America and the United Kingdom.

Proposed Publicity Schedule:

January-March 2003

- Research book through visits to all areas to be included
- Arranging photo and map production

April/May 2003

- Fact-checking and additional research

June/July 2003

- Reserve and purchase print advertisements in *SKI*, *Freeze*, *Powder*, *Snowboarding* and *Snowboarder* magazines
- Pitch book review to editors at *SKI*, *Freeze*, *Powder*, *Snowboarding* and *Snowboarder* magazines, as well as general sports magazines, such as *Outside*, *Hooked on the Outdoors*, *National Geographic Adventure*, and smaller regional publications, such as free weeklies in ski towns across the country. Also pitch reviews to action-sports websites, such as MountainZone.com

September 2003

- Place online advertisements: SkiNet.com, PowderMag.com, TRANSWorldsnowboarding.com

October 2003

- First Week: Book Released
- Plan book tour in conjunction with ski film tours with ski filmmakers Warren Miller, Teton Gravity Research, Matchstick Productions, and TRANSWorld
- Execute promotional plans with sports stores, including national chains such as REI, as well as smaller chains and specialty stores in ski resort towns across the country

Competitive Analysis

Competition is quite scarce. This is obvious within just a few mouse-clicks on Amazon.com. A search for the words “Ski” and “Europe” reveals seven books – five of which are out of print! Of the two lone survivors, *Ski Europe* (World Leisure), by Charles Leocha, and *Ski & Snowboard Scotland* (Luath), only the former matches our subject area and targeted audience.

There are a few perennial titles, which, though they are not written specifically for North Americans, provide some useful information. These are *The Good Skiing and Snowboarding Guide* edited by Peter Hardy and Felice Eyston (Overlook Press) and Ali Hanan's *Snowboard Guide: Europe* (Low Pressure Publishers). Finding these titles stateside, however, is rather difficult.

What’s more, we were unable to find any book – either in print or out – that addresses the incredible terrain, the outstanding cultural amenities and the present affordability of the Alps alone, not to mention the hidden jewels of the Alps.

And in a wider sense, it seems many of the already-published guidebooks have left readers dissatisfied, as evidenced by these user reviews:

***Ski Europe* (World Leisure), by Charles Leocha**

A California reader posted this review on Amazon.com:

“...Author has included some email and web site information for ski area accommodations, tourist offices, etc, but it just touches the tip of the iceberg... Book lacks maps of Europe and of ski areas... Data, no flavor“.

***The Good Skiing and Snowboarding Guide* (Overlook Press), Edited by Peter Hardy and Felice Eyston**

A reader from Washington had this to say on Amazon.com:

“This book...lacks the reader input and real experience of going and being there. Most info can be picked up from travel guide and brochures.”

These customer reviews address a very serious issue: the total lack of quality information about skiing in Europe. Co-author Matt Gerdes experienced similar frustrations prior to traveling to Europe for his first season there five years ago. All existing guidebooks offer little more than what you find on a ski areas’ website. What’s worse, they are dry, unclear to a non-European audience and make for some arduous reading.

Our book will address the personal information that is essential to making an informed decision about a trans-Atlantic trip. Just as with a stateside ski trip, readers want to feel secure about the

destination areas they visit. Questions abound: *Is this resort ideal for my family? What is the overall value? Can I even handle the skiing at this resort? Will I be bored, and feel I've wasted my time? What does the place look like?* *The Ski and Snowboard Guide to the Alps' Best-Kept Secrets* will provide all the answers.

About the Authors

Mathew Gerdes has skied over 1,000 days in the last 10 years, on three continents and in twelve countries. He has spent the past five years searching for and discovering the best aspects of ski resort towns in Europe, and subsequently guiding Americans through those resorts. A constant observer of the mountain 'extreme' sports development in the U.S. and Europe, he is completely in tune with ski and snowboard industry trends.

His work has recently appeared in *Cross Country Magazine*, *XCmag.com*, and *Paragliding Magazine*.

Mary Catherine O'Connor is a writer specializing in outdoor sports and travel. She has held editorial positions at *Outside* magazine, *MountainZone.com*, *ZuluSports.com*, and her work has appeared in *Outside*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Sports Illustrated for Women*, *Blue* magazine, as well as a number of other magazines and web sites. She acted as managing editor for *The 1998-99 Ski Guide to the West* for Reno Air's in-flight magazine and is currently working as an editorial assistant on a business book, to be published next year.

She spent five seasons living at a ski area and writing about skiing and snowboarding, and has written a number of profiles on the top athletes in both sports, and about mountain culture and travel.

Full portfolio from both Gerdes and O'Connor available upon request.

Sample Chapter

Mayrhofen-Hintertux, Austria

At the head of the Zillertal valley in Tyrol, Austria, Mayrhofen is quickly rising to the top of Austria's premier resort list. For the winter of 2001-2002, Mayrhofen opened a system of new lifts, connecting itself with four other ski areas and the Hintertux Glacier, making it the largest individual resort in the family of eleven Zillertal resorts. Mayrhofen has long been a favorite of travelers from the UK, but as yet remains a secret to North Americans, who often overlook the Zillertal in favor of Kitzbuhl to the east and St Anton to the west. We highly recommend Mayrhofen and Hintertux for family-oriented travelers, intermediate skiers, and expert/avy-savvy skiers looking for anonymity—there is no 'freeride' scene in Mayrhofen, but there is freeride terrain.

The skiing in Mayrhofen is nothing short of excellent. There is truly something for everyone, from new beginners to hardened ski and snowboard mountaineers. The latter will find that while Mayrhofen does not lack in expert terrain, there are comparatively few expert skiers and snowboarders—most of who stick to ski the groomed runs. Mayrhofen is a boon to those who are after untracked powder. We have frequented Mayrhofen for several years now, finding thousands of acres of incredible off-piste terrain ripe for the pickings.

Intermediate and even beginning skiers will find miles of well groomed, aesthetically pleasing terrain. All of Mayrhofen was designed with families and beginner-intermediate skiers in mind, meaning that lift access, ski trails, and even the town's bus system are facile in their efficiency. It is still Europe, however, so timid readers beware; like anywhere in the Alps, crowded lift lines and gondolas may require the use of one's elbows to remain standing during the busiest times of year. The typically composed and well-tempered middle-aged German woman will have no qualms about elbowing a fellow vacationer right out or her way (while blatantly standing on their skis) in the bottlenecked mob of a lift line.

Snowfall and Climate. Mayrhofen is the undisputed jewel of the Ziller valley, located at the mouth of four steep alpine valleys. The town itself, at just 2,066ft, does not typically receive more than a few feet of snow per year, which usually falls only from December to February. The ski areas that surround the town, however, remain covered from November to April, with the Hintertux Glacier open to skiing the entire year.

The town of **Hintertux** is roughly twice the elevation of Mayrhofen, and the climate is cooler year round. Snow accumulates in the village of Hintertux in December and stays until March. Hintertux is much smaller than Mayrhofen, nestled snugly in the end of the Tux valley (Hintertux means 'behind Tux'). Although officially connected with Mayrhofen, Hintertux is its own ski resort, with two massive twenty-four-person gondolas, ten T-bars, three gondolas, and a handful of chairlifts capable of moving 34,800 people *every hour*.

Travelers wishing to visit Zillertal who prefer a smaller, alpine village-type ambience will enjoy Hintertux. But, be forewarned: On sunny days during the high season the ski area becomes *the destination* for many of the tourists in the valley with a week-long pass, so don't expect to be alone on the slopes. The lift system moves an incredible amount of people though, so if you make it through the bottom gondola before nine o'clock, the lines for even the two most popular upper lifts are almost never longer than 10 minutes.

The Facts. Mayrhofen is less than 80 kilometers from Innsbruck, where the closest international airport is located. Two hundred kilometers to the north is Munich, the largest city and international airport in the region. While Innsbruck is closest, at an hour's drive, Munich is usually about \$100-200 USD less expensive for flight arrivals. Four-Seasons Travel (+43 5235 67734) provides the best value shuttle service at just 20E from Innsbruck and 35E from Munich.

Embassies. The nearest American Embassy is in Vienna; a four-hour train ride to the east. In a situation that would require you to procure another passport or the like, contact the Mayrhofen tourist office for assistance in arranging transportation to Vienna.

Dough. ATM machines are common in Mayrhofen, and Austria in general, as are banks. The Raiffeisen bank chain usually offers the best exchange rates- avoid money changing stores as they usually charge twice the commission and give a poorer rate than most banks. The Raiffeisen logo is easy to spot; it looks like two black monkey wrenches crossed against a yellow background.

Lift Passes. The Zillertal Super-ski pass is good for 11 ski areas in the valley and can be purchased with or without the Hintertux glacier. For four days 'with glacier' it was 115E at the time of printing- about \$25US per day. Don't miss the Hintertux glacier; by far the best option is to purchase a four or more day pass 'with glacier', it's well worth the small extra cost. Single and multi-day tickets can be purchased at the normal ticket windows located at the base of every valley-floor gondola or tram.

Getting Around. The 'Post Bus' system runs from Mayrhofen to Hintertux, stopping at each major town. It is free to skiers and leaves Mayrhofen every hour. There is also a bus service that runs throughout the town of Mayrhofen, bringing skiers to and from each of the three ski areas in town. If you are staying at any of the recommended lodgings in the town of Mayrhofen you can walk to the Penkenbahn Gondola, access the ski area, and then ski all the way to Hintertux (with one short shuttle bus ride). The comfortable Zillertal 'Green Line' bus leaves the Mayrhofen train station every hour for Hintertux, and is free.

Ski and Snowboard School. Ski schools abound in Austria and are very competitive. The art of ski instruction was invented and perfected in Austria, and to this day a veteran ski instructor is regarded as a kind of demi-god, usually having had some success, often of the Olympic kind, in ski racing during their younger years. SMT, Ski-school Mayrhofen Total, has offices on main street and offers quality instruction in English +43 5285 64476.

Tourist Offices. The Mayrhofen tourist office is large and well staffed, located in the ‘Europa House’ on the North end of town. Ask anyone where the Europa House is and they’ll point you right to it. Email- mayrhofen@zillertal.tirol.at

THE ESSENTIALS

The prices and quality of lodging in Mayrhofen are of an amazingly good value. The competitive nature of the tourism industry keeps the prices of food and lodging well below half that of normal American ski towns. The quality of food and lodging is generally very good, but lacking in variety. There is a kind of unwritten industry standard that most restaurants and hotels adhere to closely.

The small alpine villages that are regularly spaced in the valley from Hintertux to Mayrhofen contain more than 15,000 guest beds. During the high season, even with so many beds, it can be very difficult to find a room on short notice. If you plan to visit Mayrhofen during Christmas, the end of February, or Easter, make your reservation well in advance.

Sleeping - Budget.

Pension Anna, (+43 5285 78334) is ideally located in downtown, and offers clean rooms with separate baths starting at 39E for two people with breakfast.

Pension Grinberg, (+43 5285 89445) is also downtown, offering double rooms starting at 35E with breakfast.

Sleeping - Middle of the Road.

The Jochberg, (+43 5285 67445) is a picturesque late 1800’s era hotel perched on the side of the Ziller gorge. It is very quiet, but rather remote. If you don’t have a rental car, opt for one of the other two, or a hotel in town. For the money, this is an excellent hotel with a warm, rustic feel. Doubles start at 49E. www.wirtshauszumjochberg.at

Hotel Maria Theresa, (+43 5285 54776) is on the North end of town, easy walking distance from the Gondola. Double rooms with private bath and breakfast start at 45E.

Gasthof Edelweiss, (+43 5285 34995) is near the center of town. Double rooms with private bath and breakfast start at 50E.

The Hotel Rindererhof (+43 5287 47355) in Hintertux, is located at the bottom of the Hintertux ski-lift system. Seventeen kilometers up-valley from Mayrhofen, this hotel is in a superb location for those wishing to make Hintertux their base. www.rindererhof.at

Sleeping - Pure Class.

In Mayrhofen, you just might be able to afford classy lodging, even if you typically wouldn’t spring for a Four - or Five-star hotel.

All Pure Class lodging options include: Swimming pool, Sauna, Hot Tubs, Fitness rooms, Breakfast, Ski storage with boot dryers, and private parking.

Landhaus Veronika, (+43 5285 63347) is a two-minute walk from town, surrounded by pastures, with mountain views from every room. Each room is well appointed with a full kitchen, dining area, and luxurious bathroom. The indoor swimming pool and sauna area is amazing, surpassing that of some five-star hotels in America, and never crowded. With just 10 rooms, Landhaus Veronika is a sort of retreat. Rooms range in size from four to six beds, the largest featuring a living area, two bedrooms, full kitchen, two full baths, etc... Prices are from 89E to 139E for two people, each additional person adds 32E to the price of the room. www.apparthotel.com **Author's Favorite***.

Hotel Elizabeth, (+43 5285 53948) is Mayrhofen's only five-star hotel. The rooms do not feature kitchens, but are luxurious none-the-less. The Elizabeth does have an excellent restaurant, however, serving some of the finest fare in town. Doubles start at 95E.

Hotel Neu Hintertux, (+43 5287 43885), in Hintertux, is a large, newly remodeled four-star hotel at the base of the Hintertux lift system. Double rooms start at 79E. www.neu-hintertux.com

Eating - Budget.

There is a grand-total of two options for really cheap food in Mayrhofen. The 'Middle of the Road' restaurants are actually quite affordable, so unless you are really on a tight budget, or have a penchant for sausage-in-a-bun and 'pommes' (french-fries), you can probably afford to sit down and be served.

The 'Wurstl Stand', next to Apropos Pub, serves sausage, 'burgers', and fries. Beer and soft drinks can also be purchased from the street side stand, and you can eat and drink on the sidewalk. You can eat for less than 6E with a beer.

The 'Grillkuchl', downtown, across from Moe's Pub, is a sit-down-style, almost fast food restaurant. Most of the menu is deep-fried, but salads can be got. You can manage to get pretty full here for less than 7E.

Eating - Middle of the Road.

More than two thirds of the restaurants in Mayrhofen will fall in this category. Most of the restaurants serve similar food at similar prices and aren't hard to find, but here are a few of the best.

Ciao, (+43 5285 73445) is also across from Moe's Pub, 54 Hauptstrasse. Serving a small selection of pasta, salads, and varying specials, Ciao has been a local's favorite since it opened recently in 2002. Good pasta dishes can be had for less than 8E, 15E for a good meal with drinks.

Hotel Pramstraller, (+43 5285 63449) is near Landhaus Veronika, 200 Durst St. The hotel restaurant serves typical Austrian fare from Wienerschnitzel to Apple Strudel, at a reasonable price (usually less than 12E per entree).

Cafe Rundum, (5285 43992), is in a round, brightly painted building on the east side of downtown. The Cafe serves good food and excellent homemade Italian-style gelato. Get full for less than 15E.

Eating - Pure Class.

There are two clear standouts in the category of fine dining in Mayrhofen.

The first, Wirtshaus zum Griena (+43 5285 76645), is in a five-hundred-year-old wooden building, and sports the sparse furnishings and interior design particular to the time period in which it was built. The food is also decidedly of the ancient traditional type, similar to what the natives ate hundreds of years ago. The Wilderer Pfandl is a stew of wild venison served in a cast iron pan with a traditional dumpling, and is highly recommended. For dessert, try Moosberrschmaren, a type of scrambled crepe smothered in blueberries. Wash it all down with a tall glass of Erdinger Hefeweizen for the most authentic Austrian meal you will ever experience. The cost for a meal and dessert with drinks will be around 20-30E per person. **Author's Favorite***

The second is located just north of town on a hill in Hippach, a neighboring village. Sieghard is a small but truly excellent restaurant serving finer variations on Austrian cuisine, and a variety of other dishes in the realms of seafood and Italian specialties. Expect to pay upwards of 40E per person for a multi course meal and dessert. Sieghard usually features several 'Menus' (see restaurant vignette) ranging in price from 20E to 30E.

Nightlife.

Nightlife in Mayrhofen is up to the standards of most resorts in the Alps, the largest difference being that the scene is dominated by adults over 25 for much of the winter. The most popular bars and clubs don't change much, unlike Chamonix, so we can make several recommendations confident that they will be hip next year and for several years to come, like they have been for many seasons past.

In Mayrhofen, 'The Scotland Yard Pub' is guaranteed to be one of the first bars to fill up on any given night. It is especially popular with the British crowd, and a few of the bartenders don't even speak German! Happy hour is from five to eight pm, every night except Monday, when they are closed.

Apropos bar is a basement affair popular among the younger locals and many tourists. The owner seems to have been a popular and convincing drag queen in his hey-day, and the walls are adorned with interesting photos of his exploits as such.

In keeping with the European tradition of bar first, club second, The Arena, at 29 Hauptstrasse, gets going at around midnight, when the bars slow down. The Arena plays mostly house-techno music like every other late night Euro-disco, but often features live music as well.

In Hintertux, follow the signs to Tux1, the happening-est, (and only) club in town. Tux1 features some never before seen action-props, like bars and benches that shake when the bartender activates the life-like thunder claps that shake the club, with fog and mist effects to top it off.

REST DAY ACTIVITIES

The resort of Mayrhofen is well rounded. Catering to families and young people, there is a plethora of nightlife options, and a refreshing variety of activities other than skiing and snowboarding.

Paragliding. The best place in Europe to get a tandem flight is from the Vroni's Schi Alm restaurant at the top of the Nordhang lift in Mayrhofen. Flugtaxi Mayrhofen is run by three experienced paraglider pilots who have made paragliding their career. They will land you in front of your hotel at the end of the day for around 110E, or give you a shorter flight to the bottom of the gondola for 70E. Of course, they say, "If you don't like it, it's free!" They are all three professional and safe pilots, with thousands of soft landings to their credit.

funflights@hotmail.com

Swimming. Erlebnisbad Mayrhofen is an indoor swimming and waterslide park in downtown. Saunas, hot tubs, lap pools, and an inner-tube river are all indoors. Depending on what facilities you wish to use, the cost is around 8E per person.

Innsbruck. One of Austria's most beautiful cities lies nestled in the floor of the 'Inn' valley, straddling the Inn river. Innsbruck's old town is a classic arrangement of cobblestone streets and alleys, with medieval and post-medieval buildings and churches. The Golden Roof, in the center of the old town, is a popular tourist attraction.

The Spannagel Hohle. A rock and timber hut constructed atop a collection of rock and ice caves halfway up the Hintertux Glacier serves standard Austrian meals. From this hut, tours of the ice caves beneath depart daily. Stalagmites/tites, deep caves and glacier ice makes it a worthwhile tour. You can purchase a one-ride ticket to the Tuxerfernerhaus and walk a hundred yards down to the Spannagel hut, or visit the caves on your lunch-break while skiing the glacier.

CLASSIC LINES

[Classic lines will be noted on two accompanying maps, numbered for reference.]

Mayrhofen - Intermediate to Advanced. Skiing from the Mayrhofen side of the ski area to Hintertux is an experience that should not be missed. From the Penkenbahn in downtown, continue to the 'Tux150er' tram, then skiing south towards Hintertux. Along the way you will be treated to amazing alpine vistas, trails meandering through alms and mountain huts, and well-prepared slopes. From Eggalm, you must ski to the bottom station and catch the bus to Hintertux for the last few kilometers. The glacier is well worth the trip, but beware—traveling from Mayrhofen to Hintertux and back makes a very full day; don't get stuck halfway in the afternoon when the lifts close.

Mayrhofen - *Expert with Apy-savvy*. Ride the 150er tram, and then ski down directly beneath it. The skier's left side of the peak, the Wanglspitz, is less traveled and more aesthetic with countless lines that are left untouched for weeks. There is an easy traverse back to the tram in the valley floor, but mind the creek during times of low snow cover.

Hintertux - *Intermediate to Advanced/Expert*. Ride the Tuxerjoch quad chair and follow the ridge out to skier's left. At the mountain restaurant, turn right down the first section of piste and then make an immediate left onto the cat-track heading towards Mayrhofen. This is the 'Schwarzer Pfanne', and is one of the most classic off-piste trails in Austria. There must be snow down to the level of the town of Hintertux; if there isn't, there will be a 'closed' sign.

Hintertux - *Expert with Apy-savvy*. From the top of the highest 'Gletscher Bus' lift, ski down the right side of the skier's-right piste, and turn right as soon as you can- where the natural cliff boundary ends. Follow the traverse all the way right until you see the Gletscher Bus lift-line, and then ski beneath it and to the right. You end up in a long, flat valley, from which you can scout your lines for the rest of the day on the north-facing slope to your left. The best lines are directly beneath the Spannagel Hohle, and to skier's right. There are literally hundreds of lines, however, and they are virtually never skied. The authors have never seen another track, other than their own, in three years—this is a very difficult area to find without advice.

The Griar Alm - *Food and Entertainment*. Reservations (5285 43885). From Mayrhofen get a Taxi (Taxi Kroll, 5285 73349), and head for the 'Griar Alm', the driver will know where it is. The four-wheel-drive taxi will take you up a snow-covered road to a mountain hut- the Alm. The Griar Alm is a very old building serving a limited amount of traditional Tyrolean food, but a seemingly unlimited variety of Tyrolean Schnapps. That's *Tyrolean* Schnapps, not the American interpretation that more closely resembles cough syrup- see the *Schnapps Vignette*. Be sure to sample at least a small amount of the alpine specialty, but use caution, as the evening isn't over when you stumble through the door. For 5E you get a 'Rodel', a Tyrolean runner sled, to get back to the bottom of the road with. The Rodel track is well maintained, and fast. Arrange for the Taxi to pick you up at the bottom of the road at a certain time- most drivers work well into the wee-hours.

Vroni's Schi - Alm. *Food and Entertainment*. Reservations not required. Vroni's Schi-Alm (Ski-Hut) is hands-down one of the best mountain restaurants in Tyrol. When the President of Austria vacations in Mayrhofen, he makes a point of eating lunch at the Schi-Alm, and shaking Vroni's hand. The restaurant has a cozy home-like feel, tastefully decorated with antiques and family photos. The quality of food is well above the norm for mountain restaurants, with a wider selection and a very thoughtful presentation.

The restaurant started as a Volkswagen-sized shack from which the owners, Martin and Vroni, sold sausages for years. The old shack still stands across from the present restaurant that has grown to a considerable size in the last twenty years. The authors recommend the Schi-Alm over any other restaurant in the ski area of Mayrhofen- if you are at Hintertux and won't be back to Mayrhofen in time for lunch, try the Tuxerjoch haus, but don't try to compare it with Vroni's.

PRICELESS ADVICE. Don't miss the Hintertux Glacier. Hintertux can be accessed by skiing from Mayrhofen or any of the other Zillertal-3000 lifts, and then taking the Hintertux ski busses for the last few kilometers that aren't connected by lifts, or by riding the 'Green Line' bus from Mayrhofen, which departs from the Mayrhofen train station every hour. The latter is convenient, comfortable, and free. Hintertux is a huge ski area with wide-open groomed runs and acres of off-piste terrain. Arriving at Hintertux on a sunny day at ten o'clock in the morning during the high season can be annoying due to the lift lines at the bottom, but this is only a problem for just a handful of days per year. Arriving before 9 am or after 11 pm may be smart during the busiest weeks.

The line at the bottom of the Mayrhofen gondola can appear to be very long, but unless it reaches the street it won't take more than fifteen to twenty minutes, quick compared to many US resorts. Working your way to the left side of the line will set you up to be the first one on the gondola, instead of the last one squeezing in.

Mayrhofen Vignettes

The Real Mc Coy, Tyrolean Schnapps. Tyroleans have been distilling Schnapps in the mountains and valleys of their land since before medieval times, and the methods used haven't changed much. Private mountain stills continue to produce the highest quality (and potency) of schnapps, but bottles of this are hard to come by. They're not impossible to find, however, and if you have the inclination, it would be well worth your time to ask around; red-nosed mountain bartenders and older ski area employees are a good place to start.

Schnapps is distilled from either fruit or roots and herbs, the latter being referred to as 'Meisterwurz', or 'Krauter Schnapps'. Mainstream schnapps is almost always of the former type, distilled from pear, apricot, or berries. The potency of either typically exceeds eighty-proof, with some private stills distilling considerably stronger strains. One of our most memorable tastings was from a re-used rum bottle, marked only with the insignia of the distiller in permanent marker. Schnapps is a household item in Tyrol, commonly used to quell upset stomachs (particularly after overeating), to kill a cold or flu at its onset, and to instill bravado. Of particularly high quality is the homemade 'Original Zillertaler Meisterwurz' of roots and herbs, distilled by Mayrhofen local Josef Thanner (5285 62375).

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It's Tirolerisch, not German. Residents of Tyrol speak a dialect of German that is completely unintelligible to most North Germans. Though from the same Germanic roots, Tirolerisch has developed on its own, isolated from the rest of the world by largely impassable mountain ranges. Throughout the last several hundred years people in villages and counties in Tyrol have actually fashioned their own accents and slang from the Tyrol dialect, to the end that a resident of Zell immediately knows if a newcomer is from either Ramsau or Hollenzen, though the two villages lie just meters apart and are separated only by a creek. The dialect is not written, and all Austrians read and write 'HochDeutsch' or High German, the official language.

Dialect is discouraged in high schools, and Austrian school children arrive at elementary school and immediately set to learning HochDeutsch in order to read and write. Even as adults, locals converse almost exclusively in dialect, reserving their hochdeutsch for the hordes of German tourists that make up over 70% of the Austrian tourism economy. Also: one of the most common, and offensive cultural faux pas is to call an Austrian a German. Austrians are not Germans, any more than Americans are Mexicans or Canadians.

Sample Vignettes

Andy Solos the Aiguille. It was during his second winter living in Chamonix when my friend Andy decided to ski down from the Aiguille du Midi by himself. He recalls it like this....

I woke up late, intending to take a mellow day, possibly not even ski. By around noon I had decided that I should ski anyways, and thought I'd take a quick run down the vallee blanche, to take in the scenery and get some fresh air. It was around 2 pm by the time I got off the top tram and began to walk down the ridge trail. I clicked into my skis, and dropped in to the 'tourist trail' in the valley. At this point even the last of the daily horde of guided tourists had made it down to the flat section of the vallee blanche trail, and I was the only skier still so high. I cruised on past Mt. Maudit, admired the view of the Dent du Geant, and came around the corner where the trail winds through the steepest and most crevasse-riddled section of the glacier. It was then that I noticed that a rolling fog bank had made its way almost up to where I was on the glacier, and was coming towards me at a disturbingly consistent crawl.

I realized that climbing the 4,000ft back up to the top tram station would be impossible in less than two hours, and skiing through the fog on the glacier was hardly an option. I thought about stopping and building a snow cave to spend the night right here on the glacier, but because I was skiing such a mellow, well-known line, I had decided against bringing my shovel and avalanche kit (shovel, probe, etc.). I also wasn't wearing sufficient clothing to survive the night on the glacier. I cursed myself for becoming so callused to the alpine dangers that had surrounded me daily for the past two winters. I had become arrogant, to think that it would be 'no problem' to take a late run down from the Aiguille. But I had to act. I decided to try and make it through the fog, to try and feel my way down the trail through the Mere du Glace ('Sea of Ice').

I skied down, slowly trying to follow the tracks left by the guided tourists. It didn't last long though, and I soon realized that I had strayed from the safe trail and was lost in the fog on the glacier. I recalled all of the stories I had heard of people falling into 40m crevasses on the glacier, and none of them had happy endings. I continued to slowly sideslip my way down through the ice. It was slow going, and after a while I got a creepy feeling and stopped. I could see about six feet in front of me, enough to realize that there was a significant drop off below me and to the left, with crevasses to my right.

I stood there until I began to shiver from the cold, and pretty much just resigned myself to my fate. It was pushing 4pm, and there was only an hour and a half until sundown. I pointed my skis down, hoping to hip-check the landing and not tumble too far. I don't remember my thoughts on how big I expected it to be, but after counting to three I thought I was finished. At the count of four, I felt the snow smash upward into me, and after a couple of cartwheels, I came to a stop. I didn't seem to be injured, and after wiggling my toes and thanking the glacier gods for allowing me to retain all of my equipment, I continued down.

Miraculously, it got flatter and flatter, and I realized that I had made it all the way to the flat section of the Mer du Glace, where I soon found a guide tying his six clients together for the remainder of the descent. They too had been caught by surprise, and had decided to either live or die together, roped at the hips. I declined the offer to tie in with them, but did express thanks at being able to follow them the rest of the way out the valley. I passed them once we reached the James Bond trail and skied down to town in the dark alone. It was a funny feeling to be walking through town on the way back to the hostel, none of the people around me having realized what I'd just been through. I had just cheated death, and it was a marvelous but scary feeling. When I got back to the hostel it was past dark, and my friends had long-since started to worry. They were stoked to see me, and the ensuing story went perfectly with a few liters of Après-ski Kronenbourg. I was elated, but cowed at the same time, and definitely learned my lesson.

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The Blizzard of OZ. It was in 1989 that Greg Stump dropped the film bombshell on the global ski scene. If French skiers invented 'Extreme Skiing', it was *The Blizzard of OZ* that affirmed its existence. This film was a fundamental element in the beginning of the multi-billion dollar 'Extreme Sports' industry- and it catapulted the careers of many of the best extreme skiers in the history of the sport- like Scott Schmidt and Glen Plake, the 'Original Bad boy' of mountain sports. It was the seed that grew into the 'X Games', bungee jumping, and the term 'Adrenaline Junkies'. It is the reason that more than 10 years later everything is being marketed as 'Extreme', from phone cards to Nissan 'Xterras' and hyper sweet energy-drinks.

Three of America's hottest 'Extreme Skiers' traveled to Chamonix to ski the *rad*. Extreme skiing was invented in Chamonix, but a few Americans in Squaw Valley had caught on by the late eighties, and were taking it to a whole new level. What better place to stage their debut than the very birthplace of Extreme, Chamonix?

Glen Plake's fluorescent, foot tall, Mohawk peaks above the sea of tourists in the Aiguille du Midi Tram. Mike Hatstrup stares dreamily out the window at the ocean of mountain peaks, and

Scott Schmidt, the undisputed soul father of Extreme skiing, looks confidently at countless lines that had never been skied. The trio step out of the Tram, March pass the signs and flashing lights that warn of Alpine dangers, through the ice cave, and onto the top of the ridge trail. To the left is a 4,500ft wall of ice and rock that is purely unskiable, and to the right is the Couloir Poubel, a 2,000ft chute, the wellspring of the vallee blanche. It only takes Scott a couple of minutes to confidently declare that it's good, and he'll ski it.

The rest is history, with the team tearing around Chamonix in a manner that the ski-world had never thought possible until they saw it with their own eyes, through the lens of Greg Stump. They threw desperate 360's off of cornices, and launched back-flips in unimaginable places, regularly dropping off of two story cliffs. It was a film that unconditionally changed the lives of every hard-core skier who saw it, myself included. I'd still have a copy of it if I hadn't worn it out long ago by watching it several thousand times.

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The Midnight Express. It's 3am; you are sweating, tired, and hungry. A full night of disco dancing has you worn out- you never thought it would come to this, getting down to a Cher dance re-mix at such an hour, but thankfully the only other Americans that witnessed it were right there beside you, and will never have the nerve to tell anyone else. You were just minding your own business, enjoying your drink and laughing at all the Europeans singing along to worn out pop songs, and then you saw her/him, smiling... smiling... well, wouldn't hurt you think. Mosey on down to the dance floor, and, next thing you know, it's 3am, you are sweating, tired, and hungry. Countless calories have been burned in the past few hours of dancing, and they must be replaced. You stumble out, and- there, a few meters down, on the main street, a neon sign illuminates the forms of several other freeriders desperately devouring 18 inch baguettes filled with sausage, French fries (pommes frites), and special sauce. You walk up to the counter and order- a Crepe Banana Chocolate, Si Vous Plait. A fresh banana sliced onto a perfect French Crepe, smothered in Nutella- another first. He folds it up and sprinkles powdered sugar over it, and takes your Euros with a smooth 'Merci'. It's pure heaven, and you look to the stars, the Aiguille du Midi top station light burning two miles above you, the moon sketching out the summit of Mt Blanc, reminding you that you're in the French Alps, a continent and an ocean away, enjoying your tenth 'first ever' in one day.

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Swedes. I've seen them everywhere- huge purple backpacks trekking around Thailand, Australia, Mexico, South America, you name it- they get around. They are almost always between the ages of 18 and 25, and when asked if it's a sort of 'right of passage' for young Swedes to travel the world at that age, one female answered, "No, have you ever been to Sweden?" "No", I replied. "Well, there isn't much there. It's a beautiful country, but it can be bland, and since we have no shortage of exposure to the rest of the world via TV, it isn't uncommon for us to get the urge to experience it first hand." Indeed, they do that, and don't seem to suffer from homesickness very much; often you will meet a Swede in the middle of a seven-month vacation.

Nowhere have I seen such a high concentration as there are in Chamonix, however. Everywhere you look you are treated to the sight of tall, blond hair, blue eyed, Nordic looking young people. They seem to make up a solid third of the season ‘locals’ in the valley. The men and women both are often very proficient telemark freeriders, and can be seen fearlessly charging the most demanding of Chamonix’s lines, afterwards making one liter beer steins magically disappear at Après-ski. They are usually quite friendly, and always speak excellent English. If you visit Chamonix to ski or snowboard, you would certainly benefit from making the acquaintance of a Swede or two, as they are great fun to ride with.

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French Restaurants. Some things are just common sense to French people, like what drink to order with a meal. Americans, however, tend to be less knowledgeable on the matter, especially where it comes to the subtleties of French dining. It was during my second winter in Chamonix that I brought a friend to my favorite restaurant there, ‘La Cabolee.’ The restaurant is in the downstairs section of Pierre and his wife’s house, and there is room for about 30 diners, maximum. The place is usually full.

Andy and I had spent the day climbing, and skiing, the Couloir Capucian, a 4,500ft north facing line on the far side of the Vallee Blanche. It was an all day affair, and we were experiencing a significant calorie low. We both felt that the ‘Fondue Raclette’ was in order, and Pierre said, “Fine choice.” But Pierre’s wife does all of the cooking, solo, and our order was behind half of the restaurant’s other customers. (A sign outside warns would-be diners that this isn’t the place to get a quick bite, it reads- LA CABOLEE, SLOW FOOD.) Sitting with our menus, it wasn’t long before we discovered the Milkshake section.

“Oh bro, when was the last time you had a milkshake?!!”

“I don’t know, it sounds good though, and I’m fading with the hunger!” “Pierre!, Deux Milkshakes de banana, Si vous plait!”

Pierre’s eyes bugged and he looked shocked, but he quickly recovered and nodded his head with a shrug. They were delicious, but no sooner had we chugged the ice-cold kilo of dairy than our Fondue was arrived. Our tall milkshake glasses were whisked away and replaced with a bubbling vat of hot Fondue Raclette- a gallon of melted cheese and cream, with a mountain of cubed baguette to serve as the delivery vehicle. It was delicious ... for about 20 minutes. Then our digestive systems started to send the delayed message to our brain- “STOP! DAIRY OVERLOAD!”

There were still a couple inches of Fondue left in the crock, though, and we couldn’t let it go back to the kitchen! But we were slowing down, and Pierre saw it. We fiddled with it for a while, and then he came- “Weeth Fondue you take WHITE WINE! Not Meelk shake! Meelk shake FOR MEEC DONALDS!!!” Well, he took it away and we survived the embarrassment- but a warning to those who would order Fondue- take it with White Wine!

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The ‘James Bond Trail.’ No less than two James Bond movies have been graced by ski scenes filmed in Chamonix. The huge hanging glaciers, jagged peaks, and the highest mountain in Europe combine to make Chamonix a quintessential alpine paradise (like most ski areas in the Alps). Although most of the scenes were filmed in the Vallee Blanche, or in the Mere du Glace, it is the trail from the Vallee Blanche to town that has received the James Bond moniker by locals. It is a steep, narrow path about half of the width of a typical American ‘cat track’. The trail comprises the lower third of the Vallee Blanche run, about 4km.

Here again, you’ll sense the French ‘Laissez-faire’ ski area management attitude when you see herds of tourists flailing through the steep, windy sections, un-roped, with sheer drop-offs just centimeters from their skis. For slightly more advanced skiers, the James Bond trail is a ski adventure like no other in the world. It is truly unique- in the afternoon, when the guided tourists reach the trail, it’s like a video game, with the faster skiers trying to maintain their speed through the flat sections, and not hit anyone in the steep sections. It is rarely groomed, and all of the 15 hairpins are banked like a motocross course from so many skiers turning in the same place. The straight-aways are a myriad of camel humps, with opportunities to take them two or even three at a time.

Among locals, it is a manner of pride not to be passed on the James Bond, and they can often be seen elbowing their way through the gnarliest sections at 60kmh, shortcutting the switchbacks by flying through the trees. The grand finale is pointing it through the last hairpin, gaining enough speed to jump over the cog-wheel train track (taking advantage of the split second opportunity to check for on-coming trains), and bursting through the trees onto the beginner slope in downtown Chamonix, screeching to a halt by the bus stop. The ‘Chambre Neuf’ is minutes from here, and traditionally, the last one down the James Bond buys the first round of Kronenbourg.

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European Restaurants. It’s a little different. Overall you will find that the prices are similar, if not less than that of American ski town restaurants. One refreshing difference is that tax and tips are included in the price of the meal! That means when the menu says your Wienerschnitzel costs 9 Euros, it costs 9 Euros. Not 9 plus tax and tip. It is always nice, and considered polite to leave a small tip, usually around 5 to 10%, max. One thing you will quickly realize, however, is the difference in service between a waiter/waitress working for your tip, and one working for a salary.

Also, don’t ask for the leftover portion of your meal to go- they’ll look at you funny and won’t understand what you mean. And it isn’t customary to be served free tap water. In some countries you can ask for a glass of it, but often they will bring you mineral water instead, and charge you accordingly. In all but the classiest of restaurants it is expected that you will seat yourself, so

don't be afraid to do so. It is also customary for the waiter not to bring you the check *until you ask for it*- it is considered rude to bring it beforehand. In France, don't be afraid to spill your baguette breadcrumbs all over the table, they don't mind.

In all of Europe, look for the 'Menu'- no, not the Carte (French for menu), or Karte (German for the same), which is the *menu* as we know it. The European 'Menu' is a multi course package meal usually including a salad or appetizer, main course or two, and dessert. The 'Menu' can be a less expensive way to get a good-sized meal, or an extravagant multi-course experience, depending on the restaurant and the price.

News flash for Americans: An 'Entree', is like an appetizer, *not* a main course. Note the conspicuous similarity to the English word 'enter'. In German speaking countries the *main course* is 'Hauptspeise,' in France, 'Farine Principale,' and in Italy 'Secondi Piatti.'

§

European Lift Lines. Not every country is blessed with such organization and planning as the United States. One thing that every North American skier takes for granted is ski area crowd-control, the practice of managing a large line for the chairlift or gondola. There is no crowd-control in Europe, not even in Switzerland, and especially not in Austria or France. The bottleneck technique reigns throughout the Alps, and can be extraordinarily frustrating to visiting Americans, even the tolerant sort. A large crowd forms in front of the ticket turnstiles that each skier must pass through, like sand in an hourglass. The mob can be what most Americans would consider rude, stepping on each other's skis, stepping between each other's skis, taking their skis or boards off and standing in the line, etc.

Our advice to more reserved Americans is to, first of all, be prepared for it, which eliminates the shock. Then, accept it, and eat or be eaten. Europeans will walk all over you (literally) if you do not show some amount of competence in line. It does not require aggression; just a firm resolve to not be continuously cut-off. Overall, it is very tolerable, if not amusing, and should not by any means ruin your trip. Treat it as just another cultural idiosyncrasy that will make your vacation all the more memorable. Get to higher ground and snap a photo of the mob for your friends at home.

Also, an important footnote to this passage: **Lift lines and crowds are virtually non-existent during much of the winter.** Certain times of the season are uniformly crowded, and others quite relaxed, due to:

The Dreaded 'HIGH SEASON' 'High Season' is a term for the most crowded times during winter in the Alps. Christmas is crowded everywhere, from 20 Dec, to 5 Jan. Then, most resorts are less crowded during 'Low Season' until mid-winter school holidays, beginning the third week of Feb. In March, the crowds subside again until Easter. After Easter, the resorts are least crowded until the end of the season, typically the middle of April.

A Note on Crowds. The most crowded I have ever seen Europe, during a mid-winter holidays road trip in three countries, was nothing compared to Colorado or California at Christmas or even your average winter weekend. The size of most European resorts is sufficient to prevent unmanageable crowd problems. Because there are typically only one or two large gondolas or trams that shuttle skiers from the resort towns to the mountain, where the skiing is, the morning bottleneck at the valley lift is to be expected. The solution is simple; get there a little earlier. Europeans are habitual in their vacation schedules; party until after midnight, breakfast around nine, and then head to the slope. This means that there are rarely long lines in the valley floor at 8:30, when most lifts open, and usually long lines in the valley floor at 10:00, when everyone has eaten and is ready to ski.