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Why so many non-skiers are choosing to go on holiday to ski resorts

Is not-skiing actually the new skiing? Our writers test if you can still enjoy a winter break in the mountains without sliding downhill

Sarah Baxter

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It wasn't your traditional winter fairytale. But it was all the more special for it. I was dressed in a jolly red-and-pink suit that wouldn't have looked out of place on one of Santa's helpers. Only it was made of polyamide and neoprene, and was designed to keep me dry should I tumble into Lake Fuschl, the waters of which hovered around 4C.

Despite the temperature and season, I'd eschewed sleighs and skis and was instead stand-up paddling into a spectacular alpine scene. There wasn't a cloud in the sky; sunshine dazzled off the snowy hills and the lake itself, which looked snatched from the Caribbean. I could see trout finning through its crystal-clear, emerald green water. Grinning stupidly at the beauty of it all, I clenched every muscle from my toes to my temples, dipped my paddle and tried hard – regardless of the elfin drysuit – not to fall in.

Winter SUP-ing (stand up paddle boarding) is new for Austria's Fuschlsee in 2024. Which seems an on-trend addition to the area's programme of activities, at a time when *not* skiing might be the new skiing.



Discover designated winter hiking trails in picturesque places including Lake Fuschl | CREDIT: Lisa Eiersebner

More people than ever are seeking the benefits of holidays in the snow – the soft silence, the immersion in winter nature, the magical sights – without the hurly-burly, high-adrenalin and environmentally detrimental aspects of traditional pistes. Slow holiday specialist Inntravel has reported that bookings for its non-ski snow holidays are up by 150 per cent on last year.

“When the mountains are covered in snow, and the alpine views are stretching into the distance, there’s a certain sense of serenity,” says Inntravel’s Amber Welford. “Being on the mountain is good for wellbeing and also helps gain a greater perspective. Snow holidays for non-skiers are a growing trend because people are discovering more benefits to this sort of holiday that surpass just hitting the slopes.”

I'm no skier. But I *am* a fan of getting out into the crisp mountain air, ideally followed by *kaiserschmarren* and schnitzel. Inspired to see what all the fuss is about, the non-skiing husband and I had taken the Nightjet sleeper from Paris to Salzburg to see if Inntravel's activity break at the Hotel Seerose, in nearby Fuschl am See, might *really* be the best way to do winter, no downhilling required.

Fuschl is low key. There are no chairlifts or après-ski rowdy bars here, and it's all the more appealing for it. In winter the emphasis in this Salzkammergut village is on hiking, snowshoeing, sightseeing – and, now, SUP-ing – amid magnificent mountains. In reality, it's a summer resort, which means, unlike many alpine retreats, Hotel Seerose is actually cheaper in winter.



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Walking through its doors felt like a warm hug. The Schocher family, who have run the hotel for years, know what they're doing. The decor is traditional, the arrangements smooth, the saunas hot, hot, hot, the rooms cosy, the food excellent and profuse – five courses each night, running from venison ragout to fresh lake char.

Of course, the weather was a bit of a gamble – but with no skiing on our schedule I wasn't overly concerned. Fuschl sits at 2,200ft (an altitude that would ring alarm bells for skiers). From January to March snow is almost a given, but come in December, as we had, and the snow is hit and miss. "Last week was a winter wonderland!" we were told, unhelpfully, as rain gloomed our first day. Reassuringly though, "go higher" – to spots like Hintersee,

Postalm or the Zwölferhorn – and you're bound to find snow even when there's none down by the lake.

Over the week, we had a mixed bag of conditions, but none stopped play. Rain and shine, we followed the numerous designated winter hiking trails. We walked a peaceful circuit of Lake Fuschl, marvelling at its extraordinary colour even as clouds hung heavy above. We hiked to the ruins of Wartenfels castle and startled two chamois who didn't hear us in the dampening mizzle. And we took a day trip to Bad Ischl – hub of the Salzkammergut's 2024 tenure as Capital of Culture – and hid from changeable weather at chandelier-hung Cafe Zauner, which has been serving an eye-watering array of cakes since 1832.



Bad Ischl is hub of the Salzkammergut's 2024 tenure as Capital of Culture | CREDIT: Austria Tourism

Then, on sun-soaked days, we climbed to the hidden-away Eibensee through forests more snow-sparkled than Narnia. We wandered St Gilgen's jolly Christmas market before following the pilgrim trail around Lake Wolfgang; we finished in Strobl as the sun set over the town's chestnut roasters and trumpeting brass band. A higher hike, up the 5,000ft Faistenauer Schafberg, was a tougher ask, every third step sinking thigh-deep in powder. But the day was too fine, the views too big, the joy too great not to do it. In hindsight, hiring snowshoes – easy to do locally – might have been a good idea.

On another bright afternoon we took a bus up to Faistenau for something a little different – it was the closest we got to a pair of planks all week. Here, Karin Wieser-Linhart has set up the Nordic Fun cross-country ski school and we'd signed up for a private lesson. Karin enthused about its benefits as she took us through the warm-up. For getting the body

working and the blood pumping in the mountains, there's no sport better, she assured. That is, if we could manage to stay on our feet.

All positivity and swinging ponytail, Karin was an excellent teacher and soon had us gliding, albeit inelegantly, across the groomed tracks. The movement, in the moments when I nailed it, was smooth, crisp and exhilaratingly addictive. And the views were tremendous: Faistenau sits in a bowl of hills and, as I slip-slid along, I watched the low sun cast everything from the tree-cloaked slopes to the onion-domed church tower a dreamy blush pink. Then I fell on my face.

But no harm done. And nothing that couldn't be fixed by another gentle winter stroll. Or a dip in Seerose's lake-view indoor pool. Or a nice warming (and reasonably priced) glass of Austrian blaufränkisch. Now, that's my kind of winter break.

Essentials

Inntravel (01653 617000; inntravel.co.uk) offers seven nights at Hotel Seerose from £1,035, half board, including flights to Salzburg or from £1,520, including a return sleeper train. SUP Box (sup-box.at) offers guided winter SUP-ing from €290 (£248) for two, including all kit. Nordic Fun (nordic-fun.at) offers cross-country skiing lessons from €118 (£100) for two. For more information see austria.info

Sarah was a guest of Inntravel.

Three more top winter resorts for non-skiers

Jungfrau, Switzerland

Best for dizzy heights

You don't need special skills, ski or otherwise, to reach the Top of Europe. Trains have chugged up to 11,000ft Jungfrauoch, Europe's highest railway station, for more than 100 years, offering the ultimate winter vista. Indeed, it's the excellent transport that makes this area so good for exploratory non-skiers. Trains, mountain railways and cablecars link spots like Grindelwald, Lauterbrunnen, Interlaken and Wengen, from where you can access winter hiking and tobogganing routes – including Europe's longest toboggan run.

Book it: Skiline (020 8313 3999; skiline.co.uk) offers seven nights at Grindelwald's Sunstar Hotel from £1,349, half board, including flights and transfers.



Take a picturesque train journey up to Jungfrauoch, Europe's highest railway station

Corvara, Italy

Best for foodies

Skiers love Alta Badia. But maybe foodies love it more? This delicious portion of the Dolomites hosts a glut of tasty winter events: Michelin-starred chefs create dishes for mountain huts, there are sunrise powder-snow breakfasts (accessed by snowcat) and cooking experiences with local Ladin bakers. Make Corvara your base: you'll have easy access to both the mountain cable car and Michelin-starred La Stüa de Michil. The new SkyAlps London-Bolzano flight makes it quicker to reach too ([skyalps.com](https://www.skyalps.com)).

Book it: Ski Solutions (020 7471 7700; [skisolutions.co.uk](https://www.skisolutions.co.uk)) offers seven nights at La Perla from £2,245, half board, including flights and transfers.

Samoëns, France

Best for village vibes

Though within the Grand Massif ski area, the charming village of Samoëns has retained its own identity. Indeed, it's France's only winter sports resort classified as a "national heritage site". People come not only to ski, but to wander the old square and covered market. And for chilly dips: Samoëns hosted the 2023 World Ice Swimming Championships, and ice swimming courses are run at Lac aux Dames. Alternatively, try cold yoga or winter rafting on the Giffre River.

Book it: Peak Retreats (023 9283 9310; peakretreats.co.uk) offers seven nights in La Residence Club Samoëns Village from £296 (five sharing), including Eurotunnel and a self-catered apartment.

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IM

Ian Millar 4 DAYS AGO

I couldn't agree more. Non skiers can have a terrific holiday in places where skiers go. The train to Jungfrauoch that takes you under the Eiger is pretty wonderful, but instead of taking the train all the way back down again, get off at Eigergletscher and walk or sledge down to Kleine Scheidegg. A truly stunning walk surrounded by high mountains. I also recommend Schilthorn with the revolving restaurant Piz Gloria made famous in the Bond movie On Her Majesty's Secret Service, afterwards walk along the Lauterbrunnen Valley surrounded on both sides by high cliffs and spectacular waterfalls which can be completely frozen. Another favourite is Zermatt with the famous Matterhorn. Take the mountain trains and gondolas and get off and hike back down the wide paths made by snowploughs back down to Furi and Zermatt. It is truly awesome. Skiers don't have all the fun!!

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REPORT

PM

Parsey Monious 4 DAYS AGO

For Heavens sake. Don't tell everybody! It's nicer and cheaper when it's quiet.

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