

Where it pays to go off piste

Prices in A-list ski resorts are seriously steep. **Sean Newsom** and **Karen Robinson** find great value away from the glitz

As inevitably as a glass of *vin chaud* follows the last successful black run of the day, so a love of skiing and mountain life will at some point trigger the desire to own a ski chalet or flat. Yet one glance in an estate agent's window in an A-list ski resort and your hair will turn winter white. Apartments for €1m, chalets for 5, 10, even 20 times as much: at this level, the property market is just a playground for the super-rich.

The answer? Go off the beaten track. Not only are the smaller, less blingy resorts far more affordable, you'll be getting a genuine Alpine home with life going on year-round, rather than a glorified ski locker.

Traditionally, there's a good reason for the popularity of the priciest resorts: altitude, altitude, altitude. The higher they are, the more guaranteed the snow and the longer the ski season. These days, though, the Alps are about more than simply sliding down them on expensive planks. Spring, summer and autumn are increasingly attractive to walkers, mountain-bikers and climbers, who want nothing more than sparkly clean air. And in the smaller, lower villages, you're more likely to find a real community, rather than a bland internationalised ski station.

The mountain folk of the Alta Badia, high up in the Italian Dolomites, have a certain rugged individualism. They'll bid you "*Bëgnnäs*" — welcome — in Ladin, the area's thriving language, and they eschew the 750 miles of ski runs and 450 lifts in favour of *sci alpinismo*: walking to the top of the mountain, drinking in the silent splendour of this craggy Unesco World Heritage Site, then schussing down

runs of untouched powder snow.

In San Cassiano, a village of about 800 inhabitants, less hardy visitors can use the lifts, and dine each evening in one of the two Michelin-starred restaurants. It's a discreetly upmarket destination — the owner of Illy coffee has a home here — and local regulations mean a restricted property market. But Hugo Pizzinini, whose family owns and runs the Rosa Alpina hotel, is developing five flats and two houses, all in the local chalet style, but with modern eco comforts (00 39 0471 849500, rosalpina.it).

Two two-/three-bedroom flats in the main building are still for sale, each with 1,400 sq ft of living space, as well as terraces. The first-floor unit is priced at €2.1m (£1.765m) and the penthouse, which has even better views of the mountains that tower over the village, at €2.2m; €50,000 secures a space in the underground car park. The remaining 3,000 sq ft house costs €2.5m.

Timothy Plaut, 57, a retired banker, and his family had skied over most of the Alps — French, Swiss and Austrian — but wanted to find a mountain retreat that wasn't swarming with "fellow residents of the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea".

So, in 2006, he bought a large farmhouse in tiny Pescol, 15 minutes' drive from San Cassiano, which had been rebuilt by a developer, then had it finished off inside by local craftsmen, all of which cost him about €1m (then about £700,000). The fact that there is no "immediate access to shops or ski lift" in Plaut's hamlet, unlike busier San Cassiano, is not important. And he likes to spend more and more time there in summer, when the scenery, "a patchwork of meadow and forest" is at its most beautiful.

If you are looking to develop a deeper relationship with the mountains, then buying into a community that has a life beyond the ski season makes a lot of sense. You'll also generally find more useful shops, less traffic and, above all, a greater sense of being abroad, rather than in a mountain suburb of Mayfair or Moscow. And if the pistes on your doorstep aren't counted among the world's best, that hardly matters — because, within a half-hour drive, there's almost certain to be a resort where they are.

For a slice of the real Alps, here are 10 more locations to conjure with.

BONNEVAL-SUR-ARC, FRANCE

Not many skiers make it to Bonneval. It's at the far end of the unfashionable Maurienne Valley, and to get there from Chambéry airport you have to drive past at least seven other resorts. But if

you're after splendid isolation, this is the place. It has just 16 miles of groomed slopes, but oodles of off-piste — and no queues. You'll feel as if you're skiing in the 1950s.

Effectively, there are two villages here: the historic knot of Bonneval-sur-Arc, clustered around the church, and Tralenta, a huddle of hotels and restaurants at the bottom of the lifts. Both have a delicious end-of-the-line atmosphere. In Tralenta, a new development of 20 self-catering flats, La Bergerie, is due for completion in 2014. Prices start at €230,000 for a 490 sq ft one-bedder (00 33 4 79 05 95 22, montagneimmo.fr).

LE BIOT, FRANCE

Le Biot is set in green and pleasant Haute-Savoie, east of Geneva, which is now almost as famous for mountain-biking as skiing. There are no lifts here, but it's only eight miles to bustling Morzine — part of the Portes du Soleil area, which claims a staggering 400 miles of

pistes — so that hardly matters.

You're also only an hour's drive from Geneva, so it's no surprise that the village has been swollen by second homes; but there's plenty of atmosphere, as well as a Saturday market. Best of all, there are some stunning properties up for grabs — notably the six-bedroom Le Chant du Nant, set in half an acre of land and yours for €1.18m (020 7870 7181, winkworth-international.com).

SAMOENS, FRANCE

The pretty town of Samoëns (population 2,300) has long been an anomaly among French ski resorts. For 500 years it was home to a celebrated community of stone cutters and masons, and they've left their mark on its historic core — which is dotted with fountains and chapels, rather than après-ski bars. The altitude is a modest 2,360ft, but a gondola links Samoëns to the intermediate-friendly Grand Massif ski area, and its position on the northwestern edge of the Alps gives it the priceless virtue of accessibility: Geneva airport is only an hour away. Erna Low Property (020 7590 1624, ernalowproperty.co.uk) is selling one-bedroom flats in Samoëns Cardinal, a new low-rise residence on the outskirts of town, from €209,000.

BERNEX, FRANCE

Bernex is never going to hit the big time as a winter-sports destination, but if you're looking for an Alpine retreat with year-round potential, put it on your hit list. There are 20 pistes in the small local ski area, with lifts into the vast Portes du Soleil 20 minutes' drive away. In summer, the proximity of Lake Geneva is a boon. [Winkworth](http://winkworth-international.com) (020 7870 7181, winkworth-international.com) has Chalet Chez Pollien, a three-bedder in the adjacent village of Chevenoz, for €371,000.

VAUJANY, FRANCE

Little Vaujany has done rather well out of the local hydro-electric power station — each year the village receives a sizeable income from EDF, and it has built not only a cable car linking it to Alpe d'Huez and the Grandes Rousses ski area, but

also a 25-metre indoor pool. Property development has nearly reached the planned maximum of 7,000 beds — but in the suburb of La Villette you can still hear the chickens cluck as you click into your ski boots. Studios in the new White Crystal residence are available off-plan from €114,120 through Erna Low (020 7590 1624, ernalowproperty.co.uk).

GRESSONEY, ITALY

The Aosta Valley may be stuffed to the gunwales with skiing, but it has never hit the big time like the Tarentaise, over in France (home to Val d'Isère, Méribel and Courchevel). Many of its resorts still feel like villages, and they're set within spectacular landscapes, to boot. Gressoney-la-Trinité, wedged up at the far end of a narrow valley, with the snowy bulk of the Monterosa massif beyond, is a place for those who like their mountains raw, muscular and magnificent. The real attraction is the almost limitless off-piste, much of it

Continued on page 14



Le Biot €1.18m

Nestled beside a babbling brook, Le Chant du Nant (its name means "song of the stream") has a four-bedroom main house and a two-bedroom annexe. There's also a six-person sauna, ideal for soothing all those post-ski aches and pains. winkworth-international.com