

FILL YOUR BOOTS

Calling all powder pigs and lovers of the white stuff – want to find the deepest snow in the Alps? After much intensive research, we can now reveal where...

Words Fraser Wilkin

FANS OF SUNNY SKIES, please look away now. You may find some of the following material offensive. We've completed the most exhaustive investigation ever undertaken to bring you a comprehensive rundown of Europe's snowiest resorts.

While North Americans have long been obsessed with snowfall – their stats being widely available for public consumption – this isn't always the case this side of the pond. European resort authorities are less forthcoming and reliable data is harder to obtain. But while our stat-parading buddies get us drooling over their powder-laden slopes, we shouldn't be too quick to turn our backs on Europe.

To get to the bottom of Europe's snowfall averages means a lot of digging around, talking to tourist offices, lift companies, piste patrols and weather

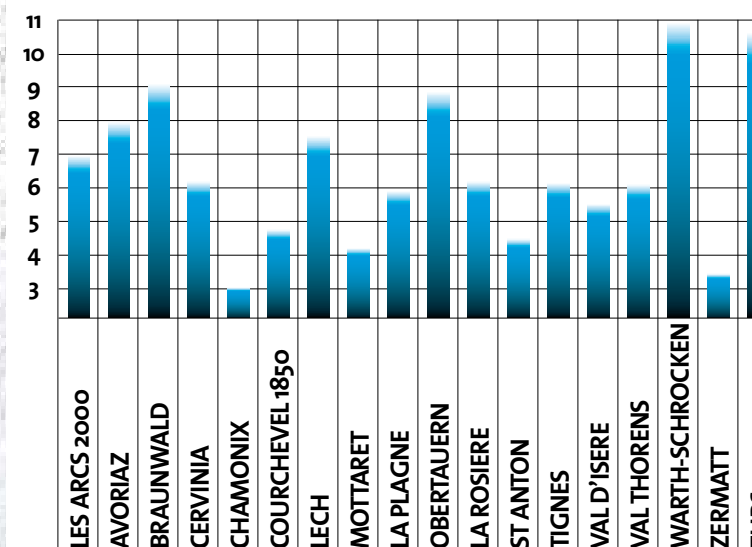
agencies. This – coupled with some seriously brain-numbing calculations – has enabled us to piece together the most complete guide to Europe's powder stashes.

First, however, a word of caution. We're not talking about the most reliable pistes. Want to play it safe? Then the altitude and glaciers of Saas Fee might be your answer – but this isn't somewhere you can expect to be digging out the car on a regular basis. No, this is about snowfall – where it falls thickest and fastest; where you're most likely to be cut off after a storm; where you could see snow falling out of the sky as well as piled up on the ground. Most importantly, however, this is about where, after a big dump, you might find powder around your waist, not your ankles. This is about the snowiest resorts in the Alps. >>>

THIS IS ABOUT WHERE YOU MIGHT FIND POWDER AROUND YOUR WAIST

How the top European resorts stack up

Based on snowfall averages – in metres – at resort level, here's how our pick of the snowiest places in the Alps (see over the page) compare to Europe's household names



Pounded peaks

The snowiest resorts in the Alps are one thing, but there are some even snowier mountains. In Europe, data becomes scarcer as you head upwards, so it's easier to make comparisons at or close to resort level. But here's a speculative look at some of the Alps' snowiest high peaks. Although the resorts at their bases couldn't match the 7m-plus average snowfall of our top five, over the page, they shouldn't be ignored.

Gemsstock 2965m Andermatt

Little old Andermatt in Switzerland may have been left behind in the mega-resort boom of the 1960s, but it does have both an amazing climate and an extraordinary mountain. This is one of the few resorts that benefits from storms on both sides of the Alps and at nearly 3000m, the mighty Gemsstock seems to cop it from all directions. Throw in some seriously steep terrain and it's not hard to see why the place has a cult reputation.



Les Grands Montets 3275m Chamonix

Somewhere near Europe's highest peak had to feature sooner or later – the sheer scale of the mountains around the 4810m Mont Blanc plays havoc with the weather. Les Grand Montets, above Argentière in Chamonix, ranks among the most powder-laden mountains in France. At nearly 3300m, the summit is too exposed for proper assessment of snowfall. But with more than 8m a year at the 1950m mid-station, Les Grands Montets is among Europe's snowiest ski domains.



The Valluga 2810m St Anton

No one knows exactly how much snow falls on the Valluga's high bowls, but they soon will, as the opening of a new weather station is imminent. If this is not Europe's snowiest mountain, it must be close. It's the highest point of the Arlberg, a region that seems to snag every storm that passes the northern face of the Alps, and its resorts are among the snowiest in Europe.



M. LAMPINEN, SWISS-IMAGE.CH/CHRISTOF SONDEREGGER, OT CHAMONIX

1 Warth-Schröcken 10.7m

Ideal for staying in fairytale villages with magical snow

A limited ski area keeps Warth-Schröcken under the radar of most snow lovers. Never heard of it? Well, perhaps it's time you sat up and took notice, for the picturesque villages of Warth and Schröcken, in the sleepy backwaters of Austria's Vorarlberg region, share both a ski area and a colossal secret – they are the snowiest villages in the Alps. It's an enviable title to have, and nearby Damüls, equally pretty and with its own separate hill and lift pass, is a close rival for the accolade. German journalist Reinhardt Wurzel has proclaimed Damüls to be "the snowiest village in the world". But the 9.3m average he based this on

spanned just seven years. So which place bags the glory? Austrian weather records spanning over a century suggest that Warth-Schröcken is actually top dog, with a jaw-dropping 10.7m a season. And this at just 1269m. Unfortunately, getting to the slopes here is relatively tough – the road from Lech is closed in winter, which counts Innsbruck out as a potential airport. Zurich (two hours away) and Munich (three hours) are the nearest major airports, but, as yet, there is no public transport from either.

Resort 1269m to 1494m
Slopes 1494m to 2050m
Lifts 15
Pistes 55km, 54% blue, 31% red, 15% black
Snowmaking 5 slopes
Six-day lift pass £135
Tourist office
 0043 5583 35150;
www.warth-schroecken.at



2 Zürs 10.4m

Big area with huge dumps – for powder hounds tired of competing for first tracks in nearby St Anton

For a big-league Alpine ski area, this is as snowy as they come. Even in recent years, Lech in Austria has averaged over 7m a season. Hard to believe, then, that neighbouring, linked Zürs, also covered by the Ski Arlberg pass, gets a third as much again with a staggering 10.4m. But be prepared to bed down after a heavy snowfall as the only road out of here is prone to avalanches and can close for hours on end.

(Figures for Lech-Zürs)
Resort 1450m to 1720m
Slopes 1450m to 2450m
Lifts 33
Pistes 117km, 39% blue, 48% red, 13% black
Snowmaking 58%
Six-day lift pass £165
 (Ski Arlberg pass 2008/09)
Tourist office
 0043 5583 2161;
www.lech-zuers.at



America's powder powerhouses

Deciphering who the bigger powder giant is in a European-North American face-off isn't as clear cut in favour of our transatlantic cousins as you might think. In Vail, for example, the seasonal average of 9m is taken near the mountain top (3400m), not at resort level (2500m). This is typical of many North American resorts and, on the rare occasions that resort-level data does exist, the contrasts can be striking. If you consider that Winter Park (below), Colorado's snowiest major resort, gets over 9m up top, compared to 5.5m at its base, then things take on a whole new perspective.

That said, Colorado resorts are still a safer bet for reliable snow than European ones. That's because their continental climate is more stable, and a blend of high altitude and low humidity tends to ensure that the pistes stay in good shape, even in times of drought.

Whichever way you look at it, there are several US resorts whose averages sit head and shoulders above anything the Alps can offer. In Utah, Snowbird and Alta (with 11.7m and 13.3m respectively) measure snowfall close to their resort bases, as do Grand Targhee in Wyoming (11.8m), Sugarbowl, California (11.8m), and a handful of minor resorts in the Pacific Northwest, all with 11m or more a season.



4 Obertauern 8.8m

High, modern, purpose-built resort that provides a snowsure playground for intermediates

Often overlooked by Brits (only a handful of tour operator beds are available here), Obertauern – located at 1740m – deserves serious consideration as a resort with a truly formidable reputation for snow. Most of its slopes are of intermediate difficulty but, if you're feeling brave, tackle the steep blacks higher up. Being a fairly modern development it's not as cutesy as some of its neighbours, such as Schladming or Filzmoos, but if you're used to starting your day at 700m, then moving up a kilometre could be quite a revelation.

Resort 1740m
Slopes 1630m to 2315m
Lifts 26
Pistes 100km, 60% blue, 36% red, 4% black
Snowmaking 86km
Six-day lift pass £140
Tourist office
 0043 645 67252;
www.obertauern.com



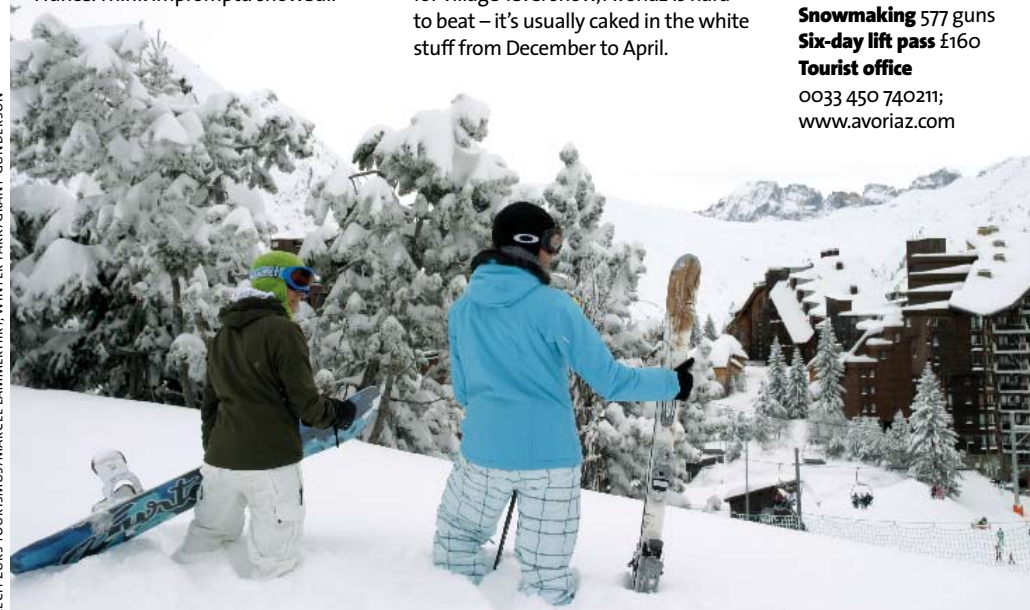
5 Avoriaz 7.9m

Ski-in/ski-out convenience at the heart of a huge, varied area

The village may be rather angular, with its wood-clad high-rise buildings, but the bucket loads of snow it receives gives Avoriaz a welcoming Alpine feel. With an average just shy of 8m a season, this is the snowiest resort in France. Think impromptu snowball

throws and snowmen decorating the car-free streets. While local slopes are high, it's a shame that there are so few runs above 2000m – the Portes du Soleil area that Avoriaz is part of is, on the whole, uncomfortably low. However, for village-level snow, Avoriaz is hard to beat – it's usually caked in the white stuff from December to April.

(Figures for Portes du Soleil)
Resort 1800m
Slopes 950m to 2300m
Lifts 209
Pistes 650km, 14% green, 39% blue, 37% red, 10% black
Snowmaking 577 guns
Six-day lift pass £160
Tourist office
 0033 450 740211;
www.avoriaz.com



3 Braunwald 9m

Perfect for a low-key short break in unspoilt surroundings

This idyllic car-free village (just 90 mins from Zurich) has a legendary snowfall of around 9m – the highest average of any resort in Switzerland. Mileage-hungry skiers and snowboarders may be disappointed though, as Braunwald has a mere 32km of pistes. Its slopes also get a lot of sun and are vulnerable to the Föhn (a warm, dry wind from the south). If things look snowy, however, Braunwald could be just the ticket for a short break.

Resort 1256m
Slopes 1256m to 1904m
Lifts 8
Pistes 32km, 19% blue, 66% red, 15% black
Snowmaking 12 cannons
Six-day lift pass £99
Tourist office
 0041 556 536565;
www.braunwald.ch



EUROPE'S TOP 5