

POW WOW

Last season was a monster in terms of snowfall. We get geeky with the stats to reveal where it hit hardest and which resorts keep it the longest

Words Fraser Wilkin

LAST SEASON WAS UNQUESTIONABLY A GREAT ONE for both the Alps and the Pyrenees. Although parts of the northern Alps, including Courchevel and Chamonix, actually received below average snowfall over the course of the winter, what they did get was early snow followed by regular top-ups. This ensured cover from start to finish.

If conditions in the northern Alps were consistent, further south they were nothing short of spectacular. From late October, storm after storm peppered the southern flanks of the Alps. By the time the lifts opened, resorts such as Arabba in Italy, which received 7.3m in total, were celebrating one of their best season starts in living memory.

For some there was actually too much snow. Just days after opening, the French resort of Isola 2000 was completely cut off – the first of many times during a season in which it received a total of 10.4m. In Italy, authorities in Passo Tonale were overcome when 4m fell in December alone.

If there was one region that missed the early fun it was northern Austria. But by February it too had joined the party and, for a few weeks mid-season, every resort in both the Alps and the Pyrenees reported excellent conditions. March continued strongly and, although April fell below expectations, the 2008/09 season had by then earned its place among the greats.

So why so much snow for the south? The answer lies in the behaviour of the Atlantic jet-stream, a band of high level winds that determine the direction storms take as they head across the Atlantic towards Europe. Last winter, this path

was much further south than usual, exposing the southern face of the Alps to a relentless barrage of storms.

That's two epic years in a row for the Alps – in fact, come to think of it, the 2005/06 season was something of a vintage too, and 2004/05 was as cold as any in the last 20 years. So the 2006/07 season was a bit of a stinker, but let's be realistic for a minute, the odd lean winter is part of the deal, and has been for as long as people have been skiing the Alps.

After a slow start in 2008/09, North American resorts can also reflect on yet another good season, with only western Canada failing to deliver above average snowfalls – 6.6m over the course of the season for Fernie is just two-

thirds of what the resort would expect in a normal year. Elsewhere, early concerns quickly evaporated. Alta in Utah lived up to its self-styled billing as snow capital of the world with a massive 17.7m, some 30 per cent above average, but Steamboat in Colorado who's average is 9m, also caught the eye with nearly 12m.

So what happened to global warming? Just so it's clear, we're not disputing it, but if snow reliability in the Alps is on the slide, can't say we've really noticed. There are plenty of great seasons ahead and at least one French weatherman, Fred Decker of www.lameteo.org, thinks that the early omens are good for 2009/10. He predicted, back in May, an unusually cold and snowy November for the Alps. He's been making seasonal forecasts for some years and is respected in meteorological circles, having worked with forecasting agencies for 15 years – let's hope he's right! ▶

STATS MAGIC...

The problem with analysing snowfall is inconsistent data.

■ A resort's average snowfall over several winters is more revealing than the total for one season, and the number of years for which resorts have data varies. ■ Some resorts calculate averages from November to May, others from December to April. ■ Few have proper weather stations; those without rely on piste patrol measurements. ■ North American snowfall stats mostly refer to the upper mountain; most Alpine measurements are taken at resort level.

STORY OF THE SEASON

Check out resorts that broke records – we've moderated some figures to create a level playing field



VAL D'ISÈRE ●
2008/09 6m Average 5.4m

Val d'Isère, at 1850m, shares 300km of world-class pistes with neighbouring Tignes. Its proximity to the Italian border meant it caught the Mediterranean-fuelled storms that battered the southern Alps last season. Pre-Christmas conditions in the combined area were exceptional, with almost a metre on 15 December – one of the greatest 24 hour totals ever recorded in these parts.



ZERMATT ●
2008/09 4.8m Average 3.1m

The high-end resort of Zermatt at 1620m, linked to Cervinia in Italy, has an extensive variety of slopes. The model of consistency, it enjoyed a near flawless season. Although there were few spectacular snowfalls, a great start followed by regular top-ups ensured that the 200km of pistes stayed in excellent shape for much of the season. Its 4.8m snowfall may sound modest, but this is a drier part of the Alps and 5m of snow is rarely seen.



KITZBÜHEL ●
2008/09 3.2m Average 2.5m

An indifferent early season was followed by a super snowy February that utterly transformed the landscape of Austria's northern resorts. Some of the resorts were cut off after receiving nearly 2m of snow in a week, and the Austrian military were deployed to drop supplies for them. In Kitzbühel, at 760m, there is a lot of tree skiing, so most of the 150km of pistes remained open and those stuck in resort had a great time.



WARTH-SCHROECKEN ●
2008/09 11.3 Average 10.8m

Although the southern Alps was on spectacular form, it was the north that again sneaked top spot with a cool 11.3m. Offering 60km of gladed runs, these unspoilt villages, just across the hill from Lech, Warth (1495m) and Schroeken (1270m) are the snowiest in the Alps. So snowy is the microclimate here that even in their worst winter in history (2006/07) more snow fell here (5.5m) than you normally expect in Val d'Isère.



ABRIES ●
2008/09 10.1m Average 4.2m

Abries is a village at 1600m with its own ski area and resort. It's one of eight villages that serve five small but unconnected ski areas in the Queyras region just south of Serre Chevalier. The area made the news with massive snowfalls that triggered avalanches and repeatedly closed the access roads. Local experts estimate that up to 20m of snow fell on the region's 3841m Monte Viso peak during the course of the season – making it the snowiest winter since 1978.



NASSFELD ●
2008/09 7.8m Average 5m

The province of Carinthia in southern Austria falls below the radar of most Brits, but Nassfeld, at 1500m, offers 110km of varied, snowsure slopes served by the world's longest gondola. In 2008/09 Carinthia never had it so good, with almost 8m of snowfall at resort level (1500m), and an upper slope base exceeding 5m by the end.



BAQUEIRA BERET ●
2008/09 11.2m Average 5m

Following two lean years, it snowed by the bucket-load in the Pyrenees, with records galore for the peaks. Upmarket Baqueira Beret, at 1500m, is a favourite playground of the Spanish royals and offers 104km of varied pistes to suit most abilities. Last season it clocked a massive 11.2m, which comfortably beats the previous record of 10.2m, and is more than twice what is expected in a normal winter.



ISOLA 2000 ●
2008/09 10.3m Average 4.3m

Just 90 mins from Nice, purpose-built Isola at 2000m is a convenient ski-in/ski-out resort offering 120km of reliably snowy slopes. Records are there to be broken, but last season was truly extraordinary, with a huge 10.4m falling at resort level, smashing the previous record of 6.3m set in 1995/96. Isola received more than twice its average which was surpassed early in the New Year.



PASSO TONALE ●
2008/09 10.9m Average 4.8m

This was Italy's year, and nowhere in Italy did better than Passo Tonale, a high, purpose-built development at 1885m on the western extremities of the Dolomites with 100km of snowsure slopes. Last season's massive 10.9m of snow – nearly half of which fell before the new year – was only eclipsed by Warth/Schroecken (above right), the perennial winner of the "snowiest resort in the Alps" title. The local weather agency says it was the snowiest in these parts since 1951.



ANDERMATT ●
2008/09 14.5m Average 9.5m

With just 40km of piste and at 1445m, Andermatt is all about the pow. Heavy snow arrives from all directions, and last winter most of it came from the south. Here snow is measured at the 2150m mid-station of the Gemsstock mountain which lived up to its rep as one of the snowiest peaks with 14.5m.



5 MOST RELIABLE RESORTS

These resorts are some of the safest bets in the Alps – even though they may have modest annual snowfall, what snow they do get tends to stick around.

Key factors for snow retention include altitude, the direction the slopes face and whether there is a glacier, though geographical location is also important. Resorts set deep within the Alps tend to hold on to snow better than those near the northern edge where the warming effect of the Gulf Stream is strongest.



SAAS FEE

If the limited terrain doesn't deter you then few resorts offer greater snow reliability than Saas Fee. Granted, this corner of Switzerland is rather dry, but with most of the slopes between 2500m and 3500m, the resort's average slope altitude is unrivalled in the Alps. Couple this with one of Europe's finest glaciers and you shouldn't have much difficulty finding good snow here, no matter how lean the season is.

Resort 1800m
Slopes 1800m to 3500m
Lifts 22 **Pistes** 100km, 25% blue, 50% red, 25% black
Snowmaking 8km
Six-day lift pass 334 francs
Tourist office 0041 279 581858; www.saas-fee.ch

OBERGURGL

Boasting an exceptionally long season (mid-November to early May), even though it doesn't have a glacier, Obergurgl is widely regarded as Austria's most snowsure resort. Others may get more snow (Lech gets nearly twice as much) but few hold on to it better than Obergurgl. This is thanks not only to its altitude, but also the fact that it lies deep within the Alps, which affords it greater protection from mild Atlantic winds.

Resort 1930m
Slopes 1795m to 3080m
Lifts 23 **Pistes** 110km, 32% blue, 50% red, 18% black
Snowmaking 90%
Six-day lift pass €218.50
Tourist office 0043 572 00100; www.obergurgl.com



CERVINIA

Despite the westerly orientation of its main slopes (they get a lot of afternoon sun) Cervinia is comfortably the most snowsure of the major Italian resorts. Height is key. The village sits at 2050m with the slopes reaching a top height of 3450m (3820m if you count Zermatt). For a southern Alpine resort, natural snowfall is also high with an average of over 6m at resort level and at least 10m up top.

Cervinia
Resort 2050m
Slopes 1525m to 3480m
Lifts 24 **Pistes** 150km, 22% blue, 60% red, 18% black
Snowmaking 53km
Six-day lift pass €190
Tourist office 0039 0166 949136; www.cervinia.it

ESPACE KILLY

If there's anywhere to bet on when it comes to snow then the Espace Killy (Val d'Isère and Tignes) would be it. Nowhere in Europe offers such extensive, snowsure terrain. The resort heights are impressive enough and most of the slopes are high above the two villages. Add in the two glaciers to choose from and there is every chance of finding great snow.

Resort 2100m
Slopes 1550m to 3455m
Lifts 89 **Pistes** 300km, 15% green, 40% blue, 28% red, 17% black
Snowmaking 378 guns
Six-day lift pass €208
Tourist office Val d'Isère: 0033 479 060660; www.valdisere.com. Tignes: 0033 479 400440; www.tignes.net



VAL THORENS

You simply can't ignore the highest resort in Europe. An average snowfall of 6m is nothing remarkable given the altitude. But with two glaciers and lots of shady north-facing slopes, plus the whole of the Trois Vallées on its doorstep, this is one of the few resorts that can give Val d'Isère or Tignes a run for their money when it comes to extensive skiing on ultra-reliable snow.

Resort 2300m
Slopes 1800m to 3230m
Lifts 29 **Pistes** 140km, 12% green, 37% blue, 40% red, 11% black
Snowmaking 38%
Six-day lift pass €208.50
Tourist office 0033 479 000808; www.valthorens.com