

WHERE to SKI AND Snowboard 2012

The editorial

The editors have their say

HOW WAS IT FOR YOU?

Last season was certainly a strange one. We were probably lucky, but we enjoyed excellent piste skiing throughout January, February and March in various parts of the Alps, and even some worthwhile off-piste here and there. No, we never needed goggles. Yes, we did ski on quite a bit of artificial snow (including the bit at Mayrhofen shown below). But we hit stones on a piste only a couple of times, in the French Alps in late March. Other people weren't so lucky, and our snow statistics meister Fraser Wilkin has the figures:

The northern Alps endured one of its least snowy winters on record: 2.3m of snowfall in Val d'Isère and 3.4m in Lech is less than half of what they get in an average winter. But this doesn't quite tell the whole story. Most of this snow fell early in the season (when it was also cold) and, at altitude at least, the base was laid for a reasonable season.

Things weren't so good lower down, especially in the north-western Alps, where the likes of Morzine and Villars never really got off the ground. Eventually, a brutal spring thaw put paid to any hopes of a late flourish.

The southern Alps fared better, with 3.8m for Arabba in the Dolomites, 5m for Courmayeur (mid-station) – close to average – and a way-above-average 6m for Isola 2000. Snowiest of all, though, was little-known Limone-Piemonte, south of Turin and close to the Mediterranean, with an impressive 9.7m. Meanwhile, North American resorts had the best overall winter for 36 years. Both Breckenridge in Colorado (13.2m) and Snowbird in Utah (19.8m) broke their all-time records; but this year's top spot belongs to Kirkwood in California with a massive 20.4m.

SNOWPXL.COM / CHRIS GILL

Seriously impressive snowmaking was in evidence all along the Zillertal in March, including here at the Ahorn cable car at Mayrhofen ↓



THE RAIN IN FLAINE FALLS MAINLY ...

While we had Fraser's attention, we put to him an interesting question posed by reader John Rockliff when he reported on his January holiday in Les Carroz, in Flaine's Grand Massif region: 'When we were in Les Carroz it poured with rain up to a point above 2000m. In January 2008 we got exactly the same thing in Châtel, not far away. Have we just been unlucky? Or is rain more likely in this part of the Alps?'

The short answer, John, seems to be: Yes, but also Yes. You could, of course, have visited those resorts without hitting rain, but it seems rain is more likely in these places than in some other regions (and we've had rain in both resorts too). Fraser explains:

Altitude, of course, affects the likelihood of rain, but geographical location is also key. Rain at altitude in winter is almost always associated with warm fronts – advancing boundaries between a warm air mass and a cold air mass. These generally arrive from the west and mostly affect the northern Alps – so the north-western Alps are most at risk. Here, rain has been known to reach 2700m, even in midwinter. If you encounter rain in Morzine, your instructor will

pop into a phone box and come out wearing a cape, so that his suit doesn't get soggy. That tells you something about the incidence of rain.

This risk of rain quickly drops as you move south and east. As you go south, you get fewer warm fronts. As you go east, the effect of the fronts is reduced. In the heart of the Alps, in valleys sheltered from the westerly winds, cold air gets trapped in, while advancing warmer air rides over the top. You can get rain over 2000m in Chamonix on one side of Mont Blanc while it is snowing at 1200m in Courmayeur on the other side. If you really want to minimise the risk of rain, pick a high resort deep within the Alps: best of all would be St Moritz, where midwinter rain is virtually unheard of. It has to be said, though, that low-risk-of-rain resorts are also not the snowiest of resorts. The famously snowy resorts of north-west Austria, in the Bregenzerwald and Arlberg regions, can have a rain problem. [I've skied in pouring rain in Lech in midwinter, adds editor Gill.] Further south, as in the French Alps, the risk diminishes.