

Snow question

Just how good was 2008/09?

by Fraser Wilkin
and Chris Gill

An excellent season for snow? Certainly. One of the great seasons? Up to a point. The season 2008/09 will probably be remembered as one of the great Alpine winters, but in most areas that's more to do with when the snow arrived than how much arrived all in all. High season was remarkable, with a record base in place on the south side of the Alps and heavy falls on the north side – so everyone was happy.

We've assembled over the page an overview of how the season panned out in different areas of the Alps. But first, a general summary of how the season progressed.

Over the whole season it was basically resorts on the south side of the Alps that saw their snowfall records broken; but in many parts of the Alps there were some very snowy spells, and as a whole the Alps had one of their most satisfying winters in some years.

Slow starts had become the norm in recent years, but the last two seasons have seen plentiful early snow. Northern Austria didn't do particularly well at the start – even the super-snowy Bregenzerwald was below average in early season – but elsewhere winter came early, and in the southern Alps dump after dump arrived through November and December.

The most spectacular falls were recorded in the relatively unknown resort of Isola 2000, way down south near the Mediterranean coast. It saw over 3m of snow fall in December alone and was cut off for the first of many times during the season – the heavy falls continued into January. Many other resorts on the south side of the Alps had a share in this action, from Montgenèvre in France, close to the Italian border, through Italy's Monterosa (close to the Swiss border), to the resorts of the Dolomites, close to the Austrian border – one of Italy's least reliable areas for natural snow, and entirely used to relying on its excellent snowmaking.

Further north, conditions in January were basically good, without breaking records – we had good snow off-piste in Les Menuires and Val Thorens, for example. But in February a radical change in weather patterns brought major dumps to northern areas, especially Austria. Low resorts in the Tirol and Salzburgland, where snow quality is often a concern, had great conditions through February into March. With the weather coming from the north, February was quiet in Italy, but in such a mega-snowfall year this was of little consequence. Alagna in the Monterosa area, for example, reported a snow base of 4m-plus throughout the season.

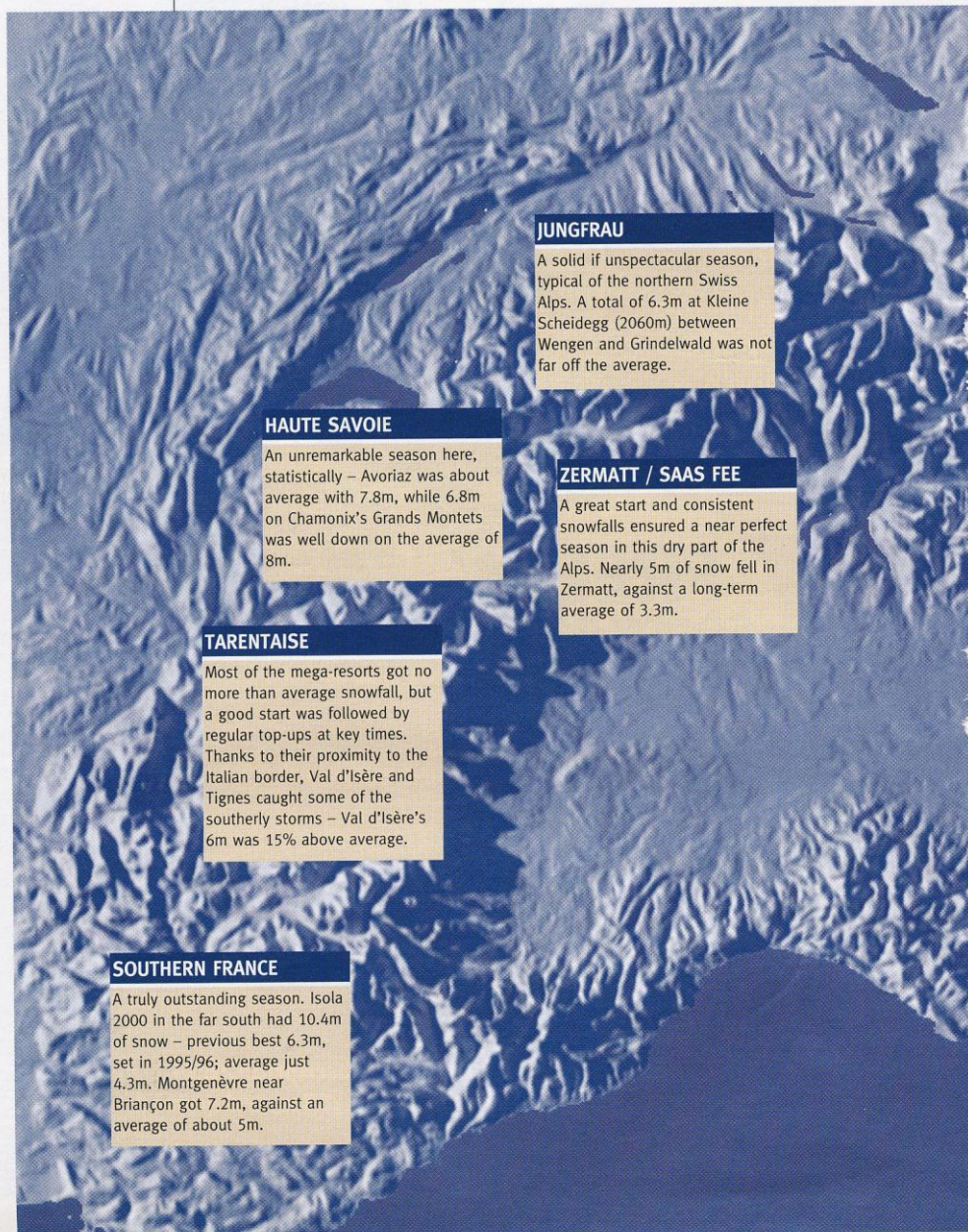
For a few remarkable weeks mid-season, every resort in the Alps reported excellent conditions – something of a rarity. And that, probably, is the key to understanding the memorable impression created by a season that broke few records in the northern Alps: at the time when it mattered, the snow was there.

March was unsettled, with further snow at times for all regions, and although April began with more snow for the south, it did not really live up to expectations – Avoriaz's paltry 12cm of snowfall was typical of the dry, mild month.

The good snow wasn't confined to the Alps. In particular, the Pyrenees – after two rather lean years – had an excellent season. It

got off to a cracking start: resorts in Spain and Andorra opened well ahead of schedule in November. But it was also sustained: Spain's Baqueira-Beret clocked a record 11.5m of snow for the season, an amazing 230% of its modest 5m annual average.

And 2008/09 ended up another good season for North America, partly due to good falls in the latter part of it. Only western Canada fell well below par. After a shaky start conditions did improve in Whistler, but a total of 8.9m of snowfall for the season is still 15% below average. Further south in the United States, Jackson Hole



JUNGFRAU

A solid if unspectacular season, typical of the northern Swiss Alps. A total of 6.3m at Kleine Scheidegg (2060m) between Wengen and Grindelwald was not far off the average.

HAUTE SAVOIE

An unremarkable season here, statistically – Avoriaz was about average with 7.8m, while 6.8m on Chamonix's Grands Montets was well down on the average of 8m.

ZERMATT / SAAS FEE

A great start and consistent snowfalls ensured a near perfect season in this dry part of the Alps. Nearly 5m of snow fell in Zermatt, against a long-term average of 3.3m.

TARENTEISE

Most of the mega-resorts got no more than average snowfall, but a good start was followed by regular top-ups at key times. Thanks to their proximity to the Italian border, Val d'Isère and Tignes caught some of the southerly storms – Val d'Isère's 6m was 15% above average.

SOUTHERN FRANCE

A truly outstanding season. Isola 2000 in the far south had 10.4m of snow – previous best 6.3m, set in 1995/96; average just 4.3m. Montgenèvre near Briançon got 7.2m, against an average of about 5m.

could not match its record-breaking exploits of 2007/08, but 10.4m of snow is still above normal and impressive enough by most standards. Colorado resorts also fared well, with nearly 11m for Vail (average 9m) and 11.9m for Steamboat, a quarter up on what it would expect. In California, Mammoth finished with 12.2m, 38% above normal. In the famously snowy state of Utah, even more famously snowy Alta had a stonking season, recording snowfall of 17.7m, some 30% up on a figure that is already the highest snowfall average of any major US resort.

VORARLBERG

Southern resorts may have broken their own snowfall records, but yet again Warth-Schröcken recorded the greatest snowfall with 11.3m – only just above average for these parts.

EASTERN TIROL

Like many low northern Austrian resorts, Kitzbühel had to wait until February before exploding into life – but then snow arrived at record-breaking rates for a time. Conditions remained excellent through March.

DOLOMITES

An extraordinary season for a region renowned for erratic snowfall, with heavy falls through the first half of the season. Arabba, in the Sella Ronda area, got 7.3m – almost exactly twice the average. There are reports that 15m fell on Madonna di Campiglio's top slopes – again, more than twice the normal amount. Passo Tonale, on the fringe of the Dolomites, got a remarkable 10.8m at resort level – second only to Austria's Warth/Schröcken.

CARINTHIA

A memorable season, with 8m of snow falling in Nassfeld (1500m) – some 40% above average. The 5m base at altitude by the end of season was a rare event on non-glacial terrain.