

Let it snow

The resorts in the Alps that get the most snow

by Fraser Wilkin

North America has long been obsessed with snowfall figures, and resort statistics are widely available for public consumption (as you'll see from the 'Snow reliability' sections of our resort coverage there). Not so this side of the pond, where resort authorities are less forthcoming, and reliable data is harder to obtain. We set snow-sleuth Fraser Wilkin the task of tracking down the snowiest resorts in Europe.

The table shows winter snowfall averages (at or close to village level) in some well-known Alpine resorts. It's no surprise that Lech and Zürs are near the head of the table; we have long sung their praises for powder hounds. Lech's 7.3m a season is impressive enough, but Zürs (just up the road and sharing the same ski area) gets almost half as much again with a staggering 10.4m. That's way more than Colorado's snowiest resort, Winter Park – which gets a mere 5.5m at resort level – but a fair bit less than the powder capitals of the world – Utah's Snowbird (13.3m) and Alta (11.7m).

We've always recommended Obertauern for reliable snow, too. But the resort isn't big on the UK market; it deserves a closer look considering it gets nearly 9m of snow a year and, at 1740m/5,710ft, is a high resort by Austrian standards. But the other resort in the top flight probably comes as a surprise. Avoriaz beats well-known snow-reliable names such as Tignes, Val d'Isère, Val Thorens and Cervinia. With a winter average just shy of 8m a season, Avoriaz is the snowiest resort in France. The reason the place doesn't have a reputation for amazing snow is that at 1800m/5,910ft it is by far the highest resort in the Portes du Soleil ski area that it shares with several others. The top of the ski area is only 2300m/7,550ft, most of the skiing is below Avoriaz's height, and it goes as low as 950m/3,120ft. If it's lots of powder you want, don't bother. But if it's snow in the streets you are after, then Avoriaz is hard to beat.

Down at the bottom of our Alpine league table are a hotch-potch of resorts. We've long criticised places such as Megève, Söll and Kitzbühel as being low and unreliable for snow. And Selva is saved only by the superb snowmaking and piste grooming throughout the Sella Ronda. But Chamonix, Zermatt and St Moritz? Remember that the snow statistics are taken at resort level and Chamonix town is low – a mere 1035m/3,400ft. But its slopes go up to almost 4000m/13,000ft, and in the cult sector for powder, the Grands Montets, most of the slopes are above 2000m/6,560ft, where you get serious snowfalls. Zermatt and St Moritz? As we've always said, these resorts have relatively dry climates. But they are high, and

38

EUROPEAN SNOWFALL LEAGUE TABLE

Over 8m	Zürs, Obertauern
7-8m	Avoriaz, Lech
6-7m	Les Arcs (2000), Tignes, Val Thorens, Cervinia
5-6m	Val d'Isère, La Plagne, Alpe-d'Huez
4-5m	Obergurgl, St Anton, Méribel (Mottaret), Isola 2000
3-4m	Megève, Zermatt, Chamonix, St Moritz
2-3m	Selva, Kitzbühel, Söll

We love it when you get snow like this; and there's a good chance of it in the Vorarlberg (which includes Lech, Zürs and Warth-Schröcken, as well as Stuben, pictured here) →

STUBEN TOURISMUS



precipitation here normally falls as snow, the slopes go up to over 3000m/10,000ft, snowmaking is extensive, and grooming is good – a recipe for reliable, sunny on-piste cruising.

LESS WELL-KNOWN NAMES DO WELL, TOO

In this edition we have a chapter on the Bregenzerwald region for the first time. Never heard of it? Not surprising because it is tucked away between Germany and Switzerland at the westernmost end of Austria, skirted by all the major road and rail links and ignored by UK tour operators. But one of its biggest resorts, Warth-Schröcken, gets an average of a whopping 10.7m of snow a season, more than anywhere else in the Alps. We shouldn't be too surprised at this because it is only a few kilometres up the valley from Lech and Zürs; you can ski there and back off-piste, but the road is closed in winter because of too much snow. Nearby Damüls has its own ski area and has won an award as the most snow-sure village in the world. And where is the snowiest place in Switzerland? Little old Braunwald, whose nearest big resorts are Engelberg, Andermatt and Laax, and which averages over 9m of snow a year.

THE 2007/08 SEASON: A GOOD VINTAGE FOR SNOW

Following the meagre snowfalls of 2006/07 and media talk of global warming and the end of skiing in the Alps, it was a great relief to see early snowfalls blanketing the slopes last season. Schladming was the first non-glacial resort to fire up its lifts – on 26 October, a full month ahead of schedule. But it was November when things really kicked off, with a series of potent storms slamming into the northern side of the Alps. The heaviest snow fell across eastern Switzerland and northern Austria, where records tumbled and many resorts declared it their best start to a season for 30 years. There were fewer extremes further west, but most resorts still reported excellent early conditions. Further heavy snow fell in December and January, before warmer, drier air engulfed much of Europe in February. But, with such healthy bases, few resorts were adversely affected. The storms returned in March, and further snow in April ensured a strong finish to the season, especially at altitude. Despite a slow start, North America had a superb season – one of the best overall since records began. The only exceptions were in parts of the south-west (California, Nevada), but even here snowfall averages were only a little below par, and there was still some great skiing to be had. Colorado certainly had a winter to remember, with Aspen, the pick of the big names, clocking a cool 11m, some 80% above average. Most Utah resorts also impressed (16.5m for super-snowy Alta), as did the northern Rockies (15.3m for the top of Jackson Hole – a new record). Most Canadian resorts had a solid rather than spectacular season, though Fernie, close to the US border, did manage over 12m, some 30% above average.