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SKI destinations on both sides of the Atlantic are growing in size although, thanks to favourable exchange rates, not necessarily in price: in Austria and in Utah resorts have joined forces on piste to create the fourth- and the fifth-largest linked ski areas in the world respectively.

However, resort social mobility marches on with several resorts going further upmarket. Val Thorens opens its fourth luxury hotel and the unassuming Maurienne Valley gets its first four-star property in the little-known resort of Val Cenis. Meanwhile, French mammoth Val d'Isère is making itself more accessible to beginners – by flattening an entire mountain top.

Resort news

In Austria, Saalbach Hinterglemm (saalbach.com), together with Leogang in the province of Salzburgerland, will be linked from December by a new 10-seater gondola to little Fieberbrunn in Tirol, to create a giant 270km ski circus from four medium-sized small resorts – ideal for intermediates looking to put big mileage beneath their feet each day.

Whether it will spoil the village atmosphere of Fieberbrunn remains to be seen. Inghams (01483 345 650, inghams.co.uk) offers a week's half-board at Sporthotel Fontana in Fieberbrunn from £799pp with flights and transfers.

On the world resort leaderboard in terms of piste length, the Austrians have just managed to nudge ahead of the US: Park City Mountain Resort and adjoining The Canyons – both now owned by Vail – have linked and merged to become plain Park City, with 265km of marked terrain (parkcitymountain.com).

The Farm (001 435 615 8080) is a new Park City restaurant with an innovative menu focusing on ingredients sourced from local artisans. The rustic restaurant has a wide selection of wines. Ski Independence (0131 516 3421; ski-i.com) offers a week's b&b at Park City Peaks Hotel from £1,097pp with flights and transfers.

Opening in Courchevel 1650 (courchevel.com) in mid-December is Aquamotion, the new £48 million water park – the largest in the Alps. There's aquabiking, surfing, indoor and outdoor pools, climbing and more to keep families happy (aquamotion-courchevel.com).

Val d'Isère (valdisere.com) is completely reshaping the summit of Solaise mountain above the resort to create a whole new mid-mountain station at 2,500m that will become a hub for skiers and snowboarders. Bulldozers



Pole position: Utah's newly expanded Park City, main and inset top; dining at The Farm, inset below

Time to slope off

This winter brings expanded ski resorts, smart new hotels and chalets, interesting new restaurants and more. By **Felice Hardy**

have shifted a million tons of earth this summer to create a new arrival point for four new lifts and a day lodge. Surrounding slopes have been regraded from 16 per cent to seven per cent to build a learning and tubing area.

Powder White (0845 463 6227, powderwhite.com) offers a week half-board at the new Chalet Nokota from £599pp excluding travel. Sleeps eight.

New hotels

There are plenty of new openings in France this winter. The Totem (terminalneige.com) opens in Flaine in December. The rebuilt three-star is the first in a series of affordable mountain hotels of the Sibuet family's Terminal Neige brand (its other gorgeous properties include the Fermes de Marie in Megève). Here ethnic-inspired interiors are influenced by Native American culture. At the in-

house Friendly Kitchen restaurant you can tuck into fresh pasta and tapas at lunchtime or buy a lunch box. For dinner, different "food corners" feature a soup bar, a healthy corner, Italian and Savoyard specialties. A week costs from £709pp b&b with flights and transfers through Erna Low (020 7584 2841, ernalow.co.uk).

Native American influence can also be found at Le Taos (hotel-le-taos.com), a new four-star hotel in Tignes-le-Lac, which has been inspired by the culture of Taos in New Mexico. Its Mesa Verde restaurant is decorated with mineral rocks, smooth sandstone

and colourful patchwork. The spa features Nohém products combining ingredients from around the world. A week costs from £443pp, based on five sharing a two-bedroom self-catering apartment including Eurotunnel crossings, through Ski Collection (skicollection.co.uk).

White 1921 (white1921.com), a new four-star sibling for its St Tropez namesake, opens this winter in Courchevel 1850. It has 26 bedrooms decorated in mountain style, an in-house ski shop, spa and fitness area. A week costs from £1,150pp b&b with Snow-wise (020 3397 8450, snow-wise.com).

At increasingly chichi Val Thorens, Le

Pashmina (hotelpashmina.com) will soon become the resort's fourth luxury hotel. It has bedrooms, suites and apartments and a l'Occitane spa. On the roof is an igloo-pod: a heated, furnished geodesic dome that opens out onto the sky so you can sleep under the stars. From €255 per person per night half-board.

The unassuming resort of Val Cenis is home to the first four-star in the Maurienne Valley. Hotel Saint Charles (maranathahotels.com) mixes bedrooms and apartments, and there's a restaurant with slope-side terrace, a spa and pool. A week costs from £710pp including Eurotunnel crossings via Peak Retreats (0844 576 0170, peakretreats.co.uk).

In Austria, ex-racer Hermann Maier opens the Adeo Alpin Hotel (adeo-alpin.com) in St Johann in Tirol with the idea of bringing down the cost of skiing for families. Think budget airline on snow, but without hidden extras. Three nights' room-only cost €87pp.

New chalets

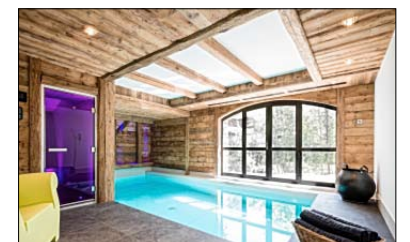
Two interconnecting chalets make up Chouqui, which is a new addition to Verbier's chalet scene, with nine bedrooms, a vast 15-metre indoor pool, spa and games room. Nine staff are on hand for ultra pampering. It costs £27,000 per week for 20 guests through Verbier Exclusive (01608 674 011, skiverbiereexclusive.com).

Jejap is a chocolate-box-style chalet in Morzine, featuring an impressive glass wine tower rising four storeys – each one representing a different wine colour. It costs from £15,975 for 10 adults and four children through Consensio (020 3393 0833, consensiochalets.co.uk).

Shar Pei is close to the Belvedere chairlift in Val d'Isère, ensuring easy access to snow-sure skiing. It sleeps eight with a mix of contemporary and traditional Alpine style and highlights include an indoor pool. A week costs from £1,525pp fully catered, including in-resort driver service with Scott Dunn (020 3603 7968, scottdunn.com).

Chalet Zebra in Méribel (sleeps 12) has an impressive suspended central fireplace surrounded by large, comfortable sofas, as well as wrap-around terraces and bathrooms with huge walk-in showers. VIP Ski (0844 557 3119, vip-chalets.com) offers a week's half board from £1,159pp with flights.

Bijou Petit MarMau in La Tania is perfect for either a family or two couples. The stand-alone property is a few minutes' walk from the village centre, has two ensuite bedrooms, and the crèche is next door. A week's half board costs from £850pp with flights through Le Ski (01484 548996, leski.com).



Winter warmers: clockwise from above left, The Farm restaurant; Petit MarMau; Chalet Zebra's suspended fireplace; a bedroom at Chalet Chouqui; the pool at Chalet Shar Pei; ex-racer Hermann Maier co-owns the Adeo Alpin Hotel