



There's still a month to go until the start of the main snow-sports season, yet fresh powder in the Alps and North America means we can hit the slopes already in several dozen ski areas. And despite the cold financial front, some ski nations, including the US, are hoping to replicate the record levels of business they enjoyed last year – even though warning signs such as unusual early discounting for peak New Year week might suggest different. It seems skiers and boarders will always want an annual fix of the white stuff and there is certainly plenty that's new out there in the resorts and on the mountains to keep everyone entertained. **Patrick Thorne** (above), aka the Snowhunter, has located, visited and reported on every kind of ski resort in the world. Here's his exclusive guide for *The Independent Sunday* on how to make the most of the 2011-12 ski season

Where in the world can you slope off to?

From Finland to Mount Fuji, new and established destinations are upping their game to attract winter-sports enthusiasts

France remains the most popular destination, hosting two-fifths of the British market, but few new resorts are offered there this winter, perhaps because there's already such a huge choice. The ongoing process of supplying better accommodation continues, however, with a number of new options in France, including an impressive new Club Med village in Valmorel, soon to be opened by the Prime Minister François Fillon, offering access to the family-friendly resort's 150km of piste.

And the giant ski area Paradiski, which includes 20 individual ski villages around La Plagne and Les Arcs, has a new resort called Edenarc, a very modern development styled in glass with an indoor-outdoor pool complex. It's available through Erna Low among others.

In Austria, new options from Inghams include St Christoph am Arlberg and Kaprun, high-altitude resorts, or associated ski areas, with a reputation for good snow cover until May.

St Anton's fans will also be interested to hear of new TheMOOSER, a stylish, contemporary ski-in-ski-out hotel, which will open its doors on 2 December. Kaluma Ski is the exclusive British operator offering these new lodgings.

At Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy's flagship resort in the stunning Dolomite mountains, the Rosapetra Spa resort opens this month, a new option available through Crystal.

And Neilson is now offering

PACKAGE vs DIY

Hard times bring a more competitive approach

Snow-sports enthusiasts will be keen to cash in on the trend across the ski-travel industry to provide high-value packages.

These include some, or all, of the elements of your holiday – travel, transfers, food, accommodation, rental and lift pass – for one pay-before-you-go price.

Such deals shelter you from the effects of the weak pound abroad, as well as representing increasingly good value over DIY packages that rely on using no-frills flights, which can cost £100 each way for just your suitcase and skis, before you've even secured your seat.

"We recognise that times are still hard and are responding to that overwhelmingly important issue by going all out to give outstanding value for money," says Inghams chief executive officer Andy Perrin, whose company has added 42 new chalets and chalet hotels across its 80 resort destination choices, where catering costs are covered for guests.

Folgarida, a small Italian resort that's part of the growing ski area around Madonna di Campiglio, where you can access 150km of piste this winter once the link to another ski area at Pinzolo is completed.

Closer to home, Scotland will get its first new chairlift for more than a decade with a new lift installed at Glenshee. Further north, Finland is regaining lost ground and is returning to most of the main operators' pages after a few quiet years. Finnish ski destinations were dropped by operators straight after the financial crash, when they experienced problems selling accommodation and charter-flight seats. Thomson is offering the less well-known options of Ruka and Iso-Syote for this winter.

Bulgaria has long been known as a budget-ski holiday destination but a glamorous new villa near the resort of Pamporovo in the Rhodope Mountains may change all that. Villa Gella has six double bedrooms, each with its own fireplace. It provides guests with a library, an indoor pool, spa, ice-skating rink, and the services of a private chef.

Serbia is back on the ski map this year – though you'll only be able to buy a package to its slopes on one week this season. Kopaonik, a popular budget destination before the Balkan wars, which has been the subject of huge investment in new lifts, will host the Big Snow Festival from 23-29 March 2012, to which packages will be available through the event organiser. With Tui having pulled out

