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HORNS OF A DILEMMA

Should the rhino fear or welcome Africa's Chinese influx?

WHAT LARKS

Behind the scenes of the BBC's Great Expectations



Top of the tree
Decking the halls at Chatsworth

Four of the best places to ski in Eastern Europe by Francesca Syz

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KRANJSKA GORA SLOVENIA Only a few miles from the borders of Austria and Italy in north-west Slovenia, Kranjska Gora in the Julian Alps is an option for those on a budget and also for beginners and families, who can enjoy gentle nursery slopes and excellent tuition from friendly English-speaking instructors. More experienced skiers will enjoy the Podkoren Trail, where two World Cup slalom events are held annually. Nearby, the alpine valley of Planica hosts World Cup ski jumping. The area is popular for cross-country skiing, with more than 25 miles of marked trails. You can also enjoy tobogganing, horse-drawn sleigh rides and day trips to Venice or Lake Bled. The popular four-star Hotel Larix sits at the centre of the resort and has an Aqua Larix Spa complex with an indoor pool, whirlpool, Turkish bath and a large dining area with a cosy open fire.

The details Inghams offers seven nights from £524 pp including half board at the Hotel Larix, return flights from Gatwick to Salzburg, transfers and welcome drinks. Six-day lift passes cost £131, six-day boot and ski hire costs £75 and six days of two-hour ski lessons £75 (020-8780 4447; inghams.co.uk).



POIANA BRASOV ROMANIA Literally translated as 'Sunny Glade', the Transylvanian town of Poiana Brasov, 4,000ft above sea level, is Romania's most popular ski resort. It is ringed by four mountains, Piatra Craiului, Bucegi, Piatra Mare and Postavaru, the last of which you can shoot to the top of in a cable car to admire the views. The resort has a skating rink, sports fields and a gondola ski lift as well as 12 slalom runs, eight miles of marked ski runs and six miles of cross-country trails. Ideal for beginners and intermediates, the ski school has excellent English-speaking instructors. There is also a lively après ski scene with restaurants, bars and clubs. The nearby city of Brasov makes a great day trip, with its Gothic, Baroque and Renaissance architecture, ancient churches, museums and shopping, and Count Dracula's Castle in Bran is also a short distance away. Hotel Sport, one of the town's best, is launching a new spa for 2012. **The details** Balkan Holidays offers seven nights from £688 pp including half board at the four-star Hotel Sport, return flights from Heathrow to Bucharest and transfers (0845-520 1263; balkanholidays.co.uk). Ask Balkan Holidays for 2012 prices for ski packs (lift passes, boot and ski hire) and lessons.

PAMPOROVO BULGARIA Located in the heart of the dramatic Rhodope mountains, Pamporovo is one of Bulgaria's sunniest ski resorts and one of the southernmost in Europe. With excellent snow cover between December and April, it is an ideal resort for beginners and intermediates, but with challenging slopes for the more experienced skier, very good off-piste skiing and snowboarding. If you are travelling with a group, an original and utterly decadent accommodation option is the family-owned Villa Gella in the mountain hamlet of Gela (the legendary birthplace of Orpheus), an exclusive-use property not far from Pamporovo. There are six bedrooms, all with working fireplaces and sweeping views over the pine forested valleys (one has a huge Jacuzzi), a firelit sitting/dining-room, a spa floor with indoor pool, massage area and steam room and award-winning Terra Tangra wines on tap. Villa Gella is seven miles from Stoykirk, which has ski lifts that will whisk you over to Pamporovo (private transfers can be arranged at additional cost). **The details** Carpe Diem Luxury Travel offers seven nights at Villa Gella with a chef for £7,200, half board, for up to 12 people (020-7402 5330; villagella.com). Three-day lift passes from £54.



JASNA SLOVAKIA There has been much recent investment in the ski industry in Jasná in the Low Tatras National Park, so its facilities rival many of its better-known European counterparts but prices remain considerably lower. Located on the slopes of Mount Chopok, Jasná offers four separate resorts and 20 miles of skiing serviced by 23 lifts. It has a new high-pressure artificial snow system, ensuring good skiing conditions throughout the season. While it is particularly good for beginners and intermediates (there is an excellent ski school and some great long blue runs through woods), it caters for all levels and is also good for snowboarding and other high-adrenaline sports. A snowball's throw from the ski lifts, the family-friendly Hotel Grand offers direct access to the slopes. Its wellness centre has a large heated pool, saunas and a relaxation room. You are also a complimentary 25-minute bus hop away from amazing thermal baths. **The details** Baltic Holidays offers seven nights from £835 pp, half board, at the four-star Hotel Grand, including return flights from Gatwick to Kraków and ski pass for six days. You will also be entitled to 30 per cent off lessons and ski hire (0845-070 5711; balticholidays.com). Next week: winter bolt-holes