

# Adventure



## Europe's Secret Stashes

The Alps' low-key resorts serve up big terrain and plentiful powder. **BY MARY CATHERINE O'CONNOR**



**THE ALPS FIRST** lured American jet-setters in the 1960s and '70s and drew extreme skiers (and wannabes) in the decades that followed. In the past few years, however, they've become more affordable and appealing to the rest of us, thanks in part to low transatlantic fares and rising prices at stateside resorts. Furl-clad Texans still descend on marquee destinations such as Zermatt and Chamonix, but at the following five Alpine resorts you'll find a lower profile, serious terrain, and reasonable prices.

**Engelberg** (41-41-639-7777 or engelberg.ch), in Switzerland, is the rare locals' mountain that's easy to get to. College-age hipsters from Lucerne (23 miles to the north) and families from Zurich (two hours by train) hit the mostly intermediate marked trails. To access the best of the steeps, hire a guide from Skischule Engelberg (\$230 per day; 41-41-639-5454 or skischule-engelberg.ch). If the snow is stable and your backcountry skills are up to par, the school's Beat "Big Daddy" Bruhlmann (who is pals with literally everyone on the mountain) will bring you to the Laub, one of the best off-piste runs in the Swiss Alps. Just a few inches of fresh snow on this wide-open 3,800-foot-long face will make your entire winter. Afterward, everyone meets up for a Swiss-brewed Eichhof beer at the Yucatan bar (41-41-637-1324). Later, crash at the cozy, family-run Hotel Central (from \$76 per night; 41-41-639-7070 or central-engelberg.ch).

The Tyrolean influence looms large in **Mayrhofen** (43-5285-67-60 or mayrhofen.com), located in Austria's Ziller River valley, an hour's drive southeast of Innsbruck. Lederhosen are an everyday sight, yodelers perform nightly, and the women really wear those St. Pauli Girl dresses. Most visitors — predominantly German and Dutch skiers — are amazingly predictable, visiting the same hotel or pension each year, eating at the same restaurants, sticking to the same runs. That makes it easy to avoid the crowds, as do Mayrhofen's 5,000 vertical feet of skiable terrain. The area accessed by both the 150er-Tux gondola and the six-person Schneekar chair, for instance, stays untracked for days after it snows. When you've gotten your fill of powder, grab a bite at Vroni's Schi-Alm (43-5285-63-494), a restaurant near the top of the Nordhang chairlift, then fly back to town — literally — on one of the tandem paragliders that launch next door (Flugtaxi Mayrhofen; from \$90; 43-664-205-5011). For top-notch digs with a spa, stay at Hotel Veronika (from \$94; 43-5285-633-470 or apparthotel.com), run by native Kathrin Huber and her Yank husband Matt Gerdes — who is often the sole American in town.

What little attention Germany's ski country gets is paid to Garmisch-Partenkirchen, a resortopolis with 28,000 residents and plane-loads of visiting American ski clubs. But an hour's drive west you'll find the Bavarian pearl of **Oberstdorf** (49-8322-7000 or

Backcountry skiing in Engelberg, Switzerland

CHRISTIAN FERNETZ/NOELBERG/TITUS

oberstdorf.de). If some of the lodges and restaurants in the largely car-free village seem a bit old-timey, stick with the more upscale ones, such as Parkhotel Frank (from \$120; 49-8322-7060 or parkhotel-frank.de). The cuisine, too, is mostly Old World: meaty, creamy, heavy — and delicious. On the snow, however, German modernity and engineering are reflected in everything from the high-speed lifts to the precisely groomed runs. Oberstdorf's ample snowpack — a storm last winter dumped nearly ten feet in three days — and advanced terrain, particularly off the Kanzelwandbahn chair in the Fellhorn area, puts it on par with bigger guns in Switzerland and beyond. Its cross-country trails are abundant and demanding as well — enough so that it will host the 2005 Nordic Skiing World Championships. After a day on skis — skinny or fat — visit the wellness center at the Parkhotel Frank for a treatment (the brusque hay massage is one quintessentially German option).

Judging by appearances, you'd never know that the 23 cozy villages that comprise **Portes du Soleil** (33-450-733818 or portesdusoleil.com), which straddles the border between France and Switzerland, are connected by the world's largest international ski resort. Even more surprising are the low lift-ticket prices:

\$41 for a daylong pass to all 403 miles of groomed runs and 209 lifts. The French side gets the larger crowds and has the infrastructure to support them; at Les Gets, for instance, an hour's drive from Geneva, you'll find a grocery store and Internet cafes. Some of the best runs are off Les Gets' northwest-facing Points de Nyon — wide-open bowls with Mont Blanc for a backdrop. But unless you're fluent



Paragliding from Oberstdorf resort, Germany; below, the Italian town of Cortina d'Ampezzo



## PLANNER

**TRAVEL** Roundtrip fares from New York to Munich or Geneva run about \$400. Tour operator SkiEurope (800-589-7339 or ski-europe.com) posts ski reports and trail maps for 60 resorts and sells reasonably priced packages.



in French, have a tremendous sense of direction, and are a whiz with a ski map, hire a local guide like Jean-Luc Tamanini, a veteran from Chamonix, in Les Gets (\$280 per day; 33-450-439762 or guidesdesgets.com). The villages on the Swiss side are generally less accessible and more intimate. On the snow, however, the choices are endless. Morgins is the highlight, and its Hôtel Beau-Site (from \$117; 41-24-477-

1138 or beausite.net), an ancient wooden boardinghouse, is no less charming for being pretty much your only option.

Despite a hoity-toity reputation **Cortina d'Ampezzo** (39-0436-32-

31 or cortina.dolomiti.com), Italy, is neither pretentious nor prohibitively pricey. A stay at the stylish, turn-of-the-century Grand Hotel Savoia (39-0436-3201 or savoiacortina.it) will run you about \$100 a night, and there are plenty of smaller, less formal places for around \$50. Larch trees and towering spires of rouge dolomite (the mineral namesake of this Alps range) line Cortina's slopes, which buzz with Prada-clad downhillers, backcountry trekkers, and a few snowboarders. If you can stomach it, hit the infamous steep slopes of the Tofana Schuss, host to the annual Women's World Cup Downhill race. Be sure to have lunch at Rifugio Averau (39-0436-4660) and order the exquisite cappelli dell'Alpino, a ravioli version of the hats worn by the Italian soldiers who defended this terrain during World War I. **U**