

Early Season Skiing: 5 of Europe's Best-Value Resorts

Barbara Diggs

Alpine pines dusted with sugar-snow. Inviting wooden chalets nestled on the mountainside. Noisy cafés filled with brilliantly bedecked skiers. Deep powder. European skiing can be pricy, but hitting the slopes off-season is an excellent way to shave hundreds, if not thousands, off the cost. Thanks to the soaring altitudes of the Alps, you can find snow cover in Europe as early as October, but with accommodation at a fraction of peak-season rates. What's more, lift passes cost less in early season. Tignes and Val d'Isère charge just \$350 for a week (you couldn't get two days at Vail for that price). Let's look at some of the most affordable off-season ski resort options in Europe.

France: Tignes and Val d'Isère

These two resorts have a slew of north-facing peaks and an abundance of runs above 8,000 feet in altitude, practically guaranteeing great snow from October on.

Val d'Isère is the classic picturesque Alpine ski town. A former farming community with medieval roots, the central village is filled with chalet-style hotels and apartments, and an energetic après-ski scene. There's even a cinema that regularly features Hollywood movies in English.

In contrast, Tignes has the reputation of being the place for more seriously sporty types. Don't look for much quaint charm here. Modernistic, cubed high-rises from its 1960s development are a jarring sight in such a naturally beautiful setting.

Still, countless ski enthusiasts swear by Tignes. Because the three main Tignes villages were designed expressly for excellent skiing, they have a superb infrastructure, maximizing time on the slopes and not in transit. What's more, Tignes gives you easy access to its geological superstar, the Grande Motte glacier. This mountain of ice has such reliable snow cover that it's even open for several weeks each summer.

If you're after maximum charm, après-ski activities, and convenience to the lifts, look at properties near the center of Val d'Isère. A two-bedroom apartment in a

residence with a fitness center, swimming pool, and sauna costs \$745 for a week in late November. (See: *Ski-planet.com*.)

Switzerland: Saas-Fee and Zermatt

Nobody does Alpine beauty like Switzerland. The ski resorts, even the modern ones, feel charming and authentic, melding beautifully into the mountain scenery. Resorts are organized and run like well-oiled machines. And the meals are phenomenal, even at the random mountaintop ski station cafeterias: Who doesn't like rösti and raclette?

Switzerland's best early-season skiing just happens to be at two of the country's most famous resorts: Zermatt and Saas-Fee.

It's easy to fall in love with Zermatt's dark-wood, chalet-style buildings and narrow streets. Horse-drawn carriages clip-clop through the town's center (Zermatt is almost entirely car free), transporting guests past more high-end watch shops and chocolatiers than one would think possible or necessary in a small town.

The skiing is excellent. Over 200 miles of runs for every level mean that all but the most novice skiers can enjoy the stunning

vistas and wide lanes of the Theodul glacier. You can even ski across the border into Italy to have pasta and Chianti for lunch.

But the jewel in the crown is the Matterhorn. Its familiar north face is a near-constant presence from both Zermatt and the slopes. Skiing under the steady gaze of this ancient wonder is downright exhilarating.

Fall is a great time to go: You get to experience all the advantages without paying top dollar for housing. Rent a large, bright, one-bedroom apartment in the center of Zermatt, with an equipped kitchen and a balcony offering a beautiful view of the Matterhorn, for \$710 a week in early November. (See: *Vrbo.com*.)

Saas-Fee, "the Pearl of the Alps," has a reputation as one of the prettiest villages in Switzerland. It's filled with traditional Valais-style wooden houses, giving the place a quaint, timeless feel. Saas-Fee is also car free, except for necessary service vehicles. Nestled in its small valley, surrounded by

gorgeous plunging slopes, the village feels quieter, cozier, and less commercial than Zermatt.

Saas-Fee has a glacier, too, which means that good snow is expected even in October and November. The resort is family friendly,

with a high number of beginner and intermediate slopes, and the infrastructure works beautifully, with easy access to the lifts from almost anywhere in the village.

Because Saas-Fee is smaller than Zermatt, you don't have quite as wide a selection of apartment rentals. But you definitely get more bang for your buck here. A spacious two-bedroom apartment that comes with basic features but breathtaking mountain views rents for just \$694 a week in November. (See: *Vrbo.com*.)

Sweden: Åre

You don't have to limit yourself to the Alps for early-season skiing. Sweden's ski town Åre (pronounced "Aura") is one of the best ski resorts in Europe. Located in Jämtland, on the Åreskutan Mountain at over 4,000 feet (and just 220 miles south of the Arctic Circle), Åre gets great snow. You can find an attractive apartment with a kitchenette for just \$342 a week in early November. It's set within a residence that has a sauna and a large common room with a pool table and fireplace. (See: *Booking.com*.) ■

"Zermatt and Saas-Fee are almost entirely car free."



Tignes was purpose-built for skiing, meaning that the slopes are right on your doorstep.

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