

Ski holidays

Inside Gstaad, the ski elite's 'last paradise'

Between Geneva and Bern lies a Swiss oasis of calm long adored by high-rolling celebrities, finds Gabriella Le Breton

In an Alpine world increasingly addicted to spectacle – the glitz of St Moritz, the swagger of Courchevel – Gstaad has perfected something far rarer: discretion. Pronounced by party queen Paris Hilton to be an “oasis of calm”, this is where the elite come not to be seen but to disappear.

In a similar vein to Klosters, pedigree matters more in Gstaad than posturing, with both villages stubbornly retaining their Alpine aesthetic and rural roots. Yet where Klosters's prime retail option is Coop supermarket, Gstaad's cobbled streets quietly teem with haute couture, fine jewellery and art.

This spirit is embodied by Ultima Promenade Gstaad, a chalet that places guests in the heart of town, yet feels gloriously removed from it. Built in 1962 for Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, the vast property has been transformed into an ultra-luxury rental residence – veritable gold dust in central Gstaad.

From the outside, its heavy eaves and carved timber facade are Bernese Oberland in style, step through the ornately carved wooden door and the inside feels more like a swanky boutique hotel. Contemporary artworks adorn the reclaimed timber walls, each with a QR code that counts the years in an instant. It is Gstaad distilled: discreet, cosseting, cultured and impeccably turned out.

As one of the first guests to stay at Ultima Promenade Gstaad, I was warmly welcomed by the staff, who are headed up by the unflappable Amandine. I declined her offer to unpack my luggage while I sipped vintage champagne by the fire but accepted her suggestion of shimmying down to the chalet's nightclub to be fitted for my ski rental kit, bubbles still in hand. I mentally logged the private cinema and capacious spa before mentioning I'd like to take a stroll around town, only to discover my boots, hat and jacket already laid out for me by the front door. Service here isn't merely intuitive; it's prescient.

An icon among A-listers

Stepping outside, I found myself in one of the most distinctive streetscapes in the Alps. The cobbled route is lined with traditional chalets (since 1955, new builds must follow classic Bernese Oberland style) featuring pitched roofs illuminated in the dusky winter light by thousands of fairy lights.

These “Julie Lämpli” represent a tradition that dates back to when Julie Andrews moved to Gstaad and gave the town 1,000 Christmas lights to line the promenade. Andrews, who famously described Gstaad as “the last paradise in a crazy world”, sponsored the display for 12 years, a ritual the town has upheld ever since.

This sense of continuity runs deep in Gstaad's recent past. In 1904, the farming village found itself connected to Lake Geneva's grand hotels and international travellers by the Mon-



treux Oberland Bernois railway. Spotting the potential for tourism, a local teacher named Robert Steffen bought some land above the village and built a whimsical turvetted chalet – the Gstaad Palace – in 1913. Together with its contemporary, Le Grand Bellevue Care House and Spa, the two hotels sealed the town's destiny as a luxury icon.

The Palace is visible from virtually everywhere in Gstaad (particularly

Grand central: the sprawling Ultima Promenade Gstaad sleeps up to 20 in the middle of town

when illuminated in Barbie pink at night). Just paces away is the freedeed Hotel Olden, where Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton had “their” table, reportedly sharing it with local farmers.

Continuing along the promenade, cookie-cutter chalets house artful displays of Dior, Hermès, Louis Vuitton and Chopard; the long-established Perret Comestibles grocery store boasts a Champagne fridge and caviar section; and a private jet broker is on hand for those who might be interested in a Pilatus PC-12, among the few planes able to land at the Gstaad Saanen airfield.

Joining suave-looking locals sipping *vin chaud* at Gstaad Alive, a pop-up bar opposite the town's 19th-century chapel, it was easy to picture Ginter Sachs and Brigitte Bardot sauntering past. One woman swept by in a fur coat perfectly matched to that of her miniature dog, while a toddler gambolled past in a cashmere coat, his granny pushing a fur-trimmed stroller, clad head to toe in fur. Nobody seemed to notice.

Other celebrity fans famously illuminated Roger Moore, whose tales of riotous evenings spent at David Niven's chalet with Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton and Peter Sellers still circulate.

Moore always appreciated the way locals either didn't know or didn't care who the A-listers in their midst were. “They're more interested in my car than they are in me,” he said. “(Today, guests staying at Le Grand Bellevue hotel can take a spin in Moore's beloved vintage Bentley S3.)”

It's an attitude that prevails. When I asked my ski instructor Angela to share the celebrity gossip, she shrugged. “Who really cares? Nobody bats an eyelid; it's just the way it's always been.”

Mild weather, scenic slopes

Speaking of skiing – as relatively few people do while in Gstaad – it's superb, when conditions are favourable. Moore once enthused: “The climate in Gstaad is simply perfect. It never gets too cold or too warm. The benefit of Gstaad's altitude of 1,050m is that winters aren't as cold as they are in St Moritz or Aspen.”

Just as the climate is gentle, so is the terrain. Gstaad offers a sizeable 200km of pistes, dispersed across four distinct areas. Terrain is flattering and scenic, with sunny red and blue slopes meandering through woods and past working farms. Glacier 3000 is the

A high society, exclusive Gstaad carefully retains the quintessential Alpine aesthetic

snow-sure option, with numerous high-altitude pistes and some long, challenging black descents. Serious skiers add heli-skiing, with choppers lifting off from Saanen.

That said, skiing here often feels like a means of reaching preferred lunch spots (such as the Sonnenhof, where Tina Turner and David Bowie once broke into spontaneous song), with energy saved for late-night dancing at the Gstaad Palace's notorious Green-G nightclub. Après-ski is similarly restrained: afternoon tea (Champagne optional) at Charly's or hot chocolates at the tiny Chocolate Shop. Mostly, though, the parties happen in the sanctuary of Gstaad's sumptuous chalets.

Upon my return to Ultima Promenade Gstaad after a day on nearly empty slopes, staff member Max eased off my ski boots as his colleague Lily poured the tea. Stretching out before the fire, I debated the Himalayan-salt-walled sauna or snow shower before indulging in an Augustinus Bader treatment and cocktails. Here, in a world where Alpine luxury is increasingly loud, Gstaad remains gloriously quiet, and stubbornly private.



SNOW REPORT

Resorts in the Alps remain nearly fully open despite a slight drop in snow depths, says Patrick Thorne

FRANCE

It has really felt like spring in the French Alps this week. Plenty of sunshine pushed the mercury above 10C in the valleys and even high peaks saw positive temperatures in the afternoons. Most areas are posting more open terrain than they have had all winter, with the snowpack at 147 per cent of its average for early March. Alps d'Inns reports the deepest base in Europe – the only one to have reached four metres.

The forecast There's more sunshine and mild temperatures forecast for the coming week, with the freezing point at around 2,000m. However, some

snowfall is expected from the weekend, which could deliver 20–40cm to high slopes by Monday in the southern Alps.

AUSTRIA

Austria has also had a mild, dry week, and the warmth has caused fog to form at times. Just a dusting of snow was recorded on high slopes such as the Kitzsteinhorn Glacier near Zell am See. Most areas are almost fully open, including the Arlberg, which has 90 per cent of its terrain skiable after heavy snowfall and avalanche danger closed its slopes.

The forecast It is expected to remain mild

and sunny, with valley highs reaching 15C and just a slight chance of a few snowflakes up high.

ITALY

It has been a similar picture across Italy. However, some occasional light snow showers have been reported on high terrain, including above Passo Tonale. Both Cervinia's shared cross-border area with Zermatt and the Via Lattea region, which incorporates Sestriere and Saaze d'Oulx, have more than 320km of slopes open.

The forecast

Ski events at the Paralympics will take centre stage in Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Currently, it looks like wall-to-wall sunshine for the start of the games, with temperatures ranging from 10C in the resort in the afternoons to -10C up high overnight.

SWITZERLAND

St Moritz has posted the most snowfall in the Alps this week, with 11cm in 72 hours – a testimony to how dry it has been recently. The freezing point has typically risen above 3,000m in the afternoons.

The forecast

A weak front is set to move through over the weekend; it's expected to bring 10–20cm of snowfall on



A light snow has dusted Italy's Passo Tonale

higher slopes and potentially rain in the valleys.

CANADA

Despite milder conditions this week, most Canadian ski areas remain fully open with deep cover. Conditions are increasingly freeze-thaw at lower elevations and powdery higher up, where Whistler reported a 20cm snowfall on Wednesday.

The forecast

Occasional snow showers and plenty of sunshine are forecast for Canada. Daytime highs should reach 5C inland, dropping to overnight lows of -10C at higher altitudes.

UNITED STATES

It has been a little more wintry in the western US this week, with Utah's Snowbird and Park City both posting 20cm over the past few days. Jackson Hole is also seeing regular snow top-ups and has just passed 7.3m of snowfall since November – a positive story in an otherwise poor season for region. On the east coast, conditions in New England remain wintry.

The forecast

Temperatures are set to stay below freezing. More light snowfall is forecast in the Rockies over the weekend, but it will be milder and drier in California and on the west coast.

Essentials

Gabriella Le Breton was a guest of Ultima Promenade Gstaad and the Gstaad tourism board

The eight-bedroom Ultima Promenade Gstaad offers seven nights from CHF75,000 (£67,000) for up to 20 guests. Price includes airport transfers, in-resort driver service, breakfast, afternoon tea and soft drinks, with food charged at cost for lunches and dinners (ultima.com)

Lunatic offers one-way flights from London Luton to Saanen from £14,500 (£12,645; lunatic.com)