

Time to ditch the Med? The sky-high European holiday that is making a comeback

As extreme temperatures hit the Med, it's time to swap the beach for the mountains at these leading 'coolspots' in the Alps

By Sarah Baxter
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Alta Badia's devilishly handsome hunk of the Dolomites is good for everything from biking and hiking to food and culture | CREDIT: Alex Moling

Fight for a sunbed. Board an inflatable banana. Roast. Repeat... Holidays on the Med aren't bad, exactly, but things can get a bit samey, sticky and overcrowded by the sea – especially in light of the heatwave that has struck the Continent this week, with highs of over 40C reported in some areas.

Now consider summer in the Alps. Majestic mountain views that change with every footstep. Refreshing lakes and streams. Cooler climes. Authentic culture preserved. Activities and cheese galore. And fewer tourists than on the coast – or in the Alps at other times of year. Take the resort of Les Deux Alpes: 280,000 visitors during the ski season; 70,000 in summer.

“The idea of ‘Sommerfrische’ – summer holidays in the countryside – is becoming popular again,” says Martina Jamnig of the Austrian National Tourist Board. “People want to visit new places, enjoy the freedom.”

Simon Wrench at tour operator Inntravel agrees. “We have seen real growth to Alpine regions this year, with sales up 35 per cent. There is a particular draw to the Bavarian and Austrian Alps, fuelled in part by more people electing to travel by train. Combining Eurostar services and the efficient NightJet sleeper to Innsbruck and Vienna is a popular choice.”

This isn't new. The first Alpine tourists, in the 19th century, were summer visitors, drawn by the air and the burgeoning sport of mountaineering. Now the region is on trend again, due to the pandemic – which has made us crave big, healing places – and the fact that the Alps have upped their game.

Fine hotels are opening here. New for 2023, Six Senses has launched its first Swiss outpost, in Crans-Montana, while the Comodo design-hotel has shaken the Austrian scene. Elsewhere yurts, domes, hip hostels and treehouses now nestle amid the wooden chalets.

Also, the mountains are more accessible these days. With resorts desperate to swoop skiers to reliable snow in winter, new lifts are being installed, which summer explorers can also exploit.

On July 1 Matterhorn Glacier Ride II opened, the highest continuous Alpine cable car, linking Zermatt in Switzerland and Cervinia in Italy. In addition, many resorts offer free or reduced public transport. For instance, in Zell am See, Austria, guests get free Mobility Cards that cover local travel.

The breadth of activities is ever-increasing, too. The cycling boom has brought keen riders to the Alpine trails and passes; there are bike parks, bike festivals, bike concierges. But there are more eclectic offerings: new for 2023 in France, you could seek CBD-infused treatments at Four Seasons Megève or try goat agility classes in Morzine; the Paznaun Valley in Austria offers 300 new bouldering routes, nine running trails, four treasure hunts and a chance to try 3D archery.

The food is also excellent. Alpine stube still serve traditional meals and bonhomie, but they have been joined by world-class restaurants. The Tyrol region is second only to Vienna in holding the most toques, Austria's culinary gold-stamp; Ischgl alone has 10 awarded establishments, including Stüva, which has the top five-toque rating.

So, what are you waiting for? Now is the time to raise a schnapps to the Sommerfrische revival.

Best for cycling

Alta Badia, Italy

Alta Badia's devilishly handsome hunk of the Dolomites is good for everything. Hiking? There are 250 miles of trails. Climbing? Via ferrata were invented here. Culture? Tap into Ladin heritage. Food? Even the mountain huts serve Michelin-standard meals. But its cycling might be best of all.

The tough Maratona dles Dolomites Enel race is a big draw. But cyclists can challenge themselves on the same roads all summer. Or come for the Sellaronda Bike Day (September 16 2023; sellarondabikeday.com), when the passes around the Sella massif are closed to traffic.

Alternatively, utilise the world's highest e-bike sharing scheme, using the extensive trail network, cable cars and battery power to ride at more than 6,500ft. Stay at biker-friendly Melodia del Bosco, run by one of Alta Badia's top cycling guides.

Insider tip

Book a hotel participating in the "Stop, yet with pleasure" scheme, leave your car keys at reception for at least two days (for three-night stays) or four days (for six) and receive benefits including free guided hikes and excursions, and taxi discounts.

Nearest airport

Innsbruck (2hr), Venice (3hr)

How to do it

Double rooms at Melodia del Bosco (0039 0471 839620; melodiadelbosco.it) cost from £239pp, for three nights half-board.