British skiers look to North America due to fears of another lacklustre European winter

The European Alps may again face mild temperatures in the run-up to Christmas following record-breaking autumn heat



People sled on the remaining snow at the Luchon-Superbagneres ski resort, southwestern France (Photo: AFP)

By Katy Dartford

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British skiers are looking to North America this winter amid fears of a repeat of last season in Europe, which was marred by warm weather and a lack of snow on lower slopes.

The European Alps may again face mild temperatures in the run-up to Christmas following record-breaking autumn heat, while above-average snowfall is expected in the US.

UK ski travel experts say there are signs of increasing interest in winter sports trips to the US after American resorts made headlines for breaking snow depth records at the start of the year.

Marcus Blunt, co-founder of British ski travel firm Heidi, said his company recently expanded its offerings in North America due to high demand. “The snowdumps are legendary, and finding good powder shouldn’t be a problem from November to April,” Mr Blunt said.

Club Med's 2023-24 ski report found that more than half of respondents were concerned about last season's low snowfall, leading more than half to prefer higher altitude resorts and almost one in five planning to book last-minute so they could check the weather.

Eighty-one per cent favoured operators with snow guarantees, after travellers had to venture to resorts with elevations above 2,000 metres in Europe to find adequate snow cover last season.

Fraser Henderson, founder of the UK-based blog *Snowboarding Days*, said he expected "a huge last-minute shift of travellers switching their usual alpine European destinations for the likes of the snow-capped peaks of North America this year".

Snowboarding Days reported on a huge increase in UK searches for US ski destinations, with searches for the "Breckenridge webcam" at a Colorado resort, rising by more than 5,000 per cent in the past seven days.

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Searches for “Banff ski resort” in Canada increased by 120 per cent in the same time period, and both “Skiing in America” and “Skiing in Canada” by 100 per cent. Searches for Canada’s famous Whistler resort increased by 40 per cent.

British ski holiday specialist Sno has seen a surge in inquiries for North American destinations, with Whistler being a top request.

Richard Sinclair, CEO of Sno, cited poor snow reliability in Europe and a desire to explore iconic destinations as key factors driving the trend. He suggested that the post-Covid sentiment that “life is short” has influenced travellers to opt for bucket-list resorts like Whistler and Banff.

In California, Mammoth Mountain saw 8-metre snow depth on its upper slopes by the end of March, the deepest in years. Western North American resorts kept their lifts turning well into late spring, with some offering skiing opportunities into the summer months.

Rob Stewart, from the Ski Club of Great Britain, said snow in the western USA had been “consistent” and Canada was gaining traction. California and Utah are hoping for another impressive season and bookings to Banff are showing strong demand. He said the east was expecting a good winter too.

However, he added: “It feels like we’ll get a good season in Europe this winter.”

Shannon Schiner, sales manager at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort in Wyoming, said: “UK travellers cite consistent snow quality, diverse resorts, excellent service, easy travel, and affordable lodging, après-ski, and meals as top-value factors for skiing in North America.”

One important variable is the looming El Niño, characterised by warming surface waters in the eastern Pacific Ocean. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts a “very strong El Niño winter”, potentially the most robust in 50 years, from January to March 2024.

While some North American regions, particularly on the Atlantic Coast like Quebec and New England, tend to receive more snowfall during strong El Niño seasons, others, such as California and the Pacific North-west, may see milder, wetter weather. The situation is less clear for major ski states like Colorado and Utah.

In contrast, El Niño’s influence on European ski resorts is minimal, with local weather patterns playing a more significant role.

And as winter progresses, temperatures may drop in Europe, so there’s still hope for those looking for winter sports opportunities closer to home.