

A full-page background image of a snowy mountain landscape. Two skiers in red jackets are visible on a rocky, snow-covered ridge in the lower-left foreground. The rest of the image shows vast, snow-covered mountain slopes under a blue sky with wispy white clouds.

# INTREPID SKI ADVENTURES

## THE NEPAL LESS KNOWN

The scenic alternative to  
Everest Base Camp

## DEFEAT THE ELEMENTS

Toasty toes at  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$

## FRONTLINE CONSERVATION

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BAMYAN VALLEY, AFGHANISTAN

There's no dancing on bars in your ski boots in the Bamyan Valley in the heart of Afghanistan's mountainous region. The country has a strict alcohol ban, plus there is that not so minor incident known as war that has torn the area apart, but the locals of the picturesque Bamyan Valley are hoping that ski tourism will help bring better times. The town of Bamyan is steeped in history and the archaeological remains from the 5th century AD was awarded a UNESCO World Heritage listing.

The New Zealand Government, together with the Geneva-based Aga Khan Foundation, is backing the local ecotourism program which includes a push to promote the area as a ski district. It may sound far-fetched but 1500 tourists braved the eight-hour drive from Kabul to Bamyan in 2009. Workers are flattening and surfacing the road to eventually halve that drive time.

Mountain peaks here reach 5000 m with the valley floor sitting at 2500 m above sea level. For now, intrepid skiers must bring their own gear and – optionally - their own guide to explore the first descents available on the Koh-e-Baba Mountain range - be prepared to do some serious hiking. If you're hungry then the local farmers in mud huts will provide tea and mutton served up with a tooth-gap smile.

More information: [www.bamyantourism.org](http://www.bamyantourism.org)



“Scream out here as you take off over 50° plus pitches and it will take a good six days of ocean crossing for someone to hear you.”

MT VINSON, ANTARCTICA

Former world extreme free ski champion, Australian Andrea Binning, described Antarctica as the steepest terrain she has ever skied and that's saying something from a woman who eats Alaskan sheer drops for breakfast. Scream out here as you take off over 50° plus pitches and it will take a good six days of ocean crossing for someone to hear you.

Snow in Antarctica is a given. Even in summer the temperature rarely gets above -30°C. Expect a mix of corn, powder and ice and bring crampons and ice axes to get up the hairier stuff. The good news is there are no lift queues, unless you get stuck behind a slower member of your party as you free heel your way up the mountains.

The highest peak in Antarctica, Mt

Vinson, is 5140 m so vertical descents can be long and continue down to sea level where you may find yourself competing for land mass with 4000 penguins. That is the true beauty of Antarctica, the wildlife. Killer whales mix it up with fin whales during the notoriously wild crossing from South America and penguins, seals and their friends greet skiers alighting from Zodiacs on the icy shores.

You will need at least two weeks, more like three, as the return crossing will take up to 10 days. Skiers and boarders must be fit, able to trek or ski tour and be advanced level to cope with the mix of snow conditions. Bring a camera, thermals and around US\$20,000 (A\$20,366).

More information:  
[www.adventureconsultants.com](http://www.adventureconsultants.com);  
[www.andescross.com](http://www.andescross.com)



GULMARG, KASHMIR, INDIA

It's hard to know what's more adrenaline inducing: the gun-wielding soldiers lining the Srinagar airport tarmac or the steep powder-filled pitches of the world's highest ski resort. Kashmir sits on the Pakistan-India border in a region with a long history of political unrest.

Don't expect high-speed quad chairs and fine dining in Gulmarg. Yes, there's a gondola, the world's highest, taking skiers and boarders to 3960 m, just short of the summit... when it works. From here there's a 5 km crest of ridges and gullies filled with high-altitude powder, tree runs and bowls of the good stuff. This is big mountain, lift-accessed, backcountry terrain and it's possible to clock up more than 2000 m of vertical on one run down to town where a taxi will return you to the gondola.

Like any intrepid third-world resort it can be filled with cowboys who don't know an avalanche beacon from a mobile phone. Go with a certified guide as avalanches are commonplace and many westerners have been caught out, some with fatal consequences.

If you don't want to hike for the best snow, book your next holiday in Aspen, not here. But if you're prepared to put in some hard yards the rewards will be twofold.

Accommodation is basic, electricity doesn't always work and the internet can be erratic. But the sheets are clean, most rooms come with ensuites and the local moonshine will keep you warm after dark.

More information:  
[www.billstrips.com](http://www.billstrips.com);  
[www.trekclimbski.com.au](http://www.trekclimbski.com.au)



ANGMAGSSALIK-KUSULUK, GREENLAND

Imagine skiing under sunlight at midnight in the path of polar bears from summit to sea and sleeping in traditional Inuit villages with daily home-cooked meals. This is heli-skiing in the wilds of Greenland where vertical descents can last a thigh-burning 2000 m down to iceberg-laden deep, blue waters.

Greenland is filled with fjordlands and the 2500 sq. km region of Ammassalik in East Greenland supports a population of only 2500 where locals still use traditional dog sled transport and ancient hunting techniques.

The heli-ski season goes from March to June when glaciers are covered with snow that has settled, reducing avalanche danger, and when the sun never sets. Most skiing in the eastern region is on islands broken by pack ice that the spring conditions have melted, providing spectacular vistas of floating ice.

Kiwi Kevin Boekholt has been guiding in Greenland for six years. The founder of Methven Heli Ski in New Zealand, Kevin guides for Canadian Mountain Holidays. He heli-skis out of Revelstoke each northern winter before taking small groups of cashed-up ski tourists to the arctic region of Greenland.

You will need to be a competent skier and comfortable on off-piste terrain, though pitches chosen for skiing are catered to the group level. Be warned: if you want to enjoy a post-ski beverage, bring your wallet. It would appear beer is equivalent to gold in Scandinavian countries.

More information:  
[www.greenlandheli.com](http://www.greenlandheli.com)





LYNGEN ALPS, NORWAY

People have been skiing for more than 4000 years in Norway with primitive carvings revealing Norwegians on one ski in 5000 BC. The mountainous regions of north-east Norway serve up the impressive Lyngen Alps, a mecca for hardy skiers who don't mind working up a sweat with ski-touring ascents.

The 90 km range is surrounded by fjords meaning skiers can summit, then ski to the waterline where waiting boats pick them up before taking them to the next best-looking line. Ski here in February for powder snow, March for Northern Lights and April to July for midnight skiing under daylight on corn snow.

Most skiers and boarders choose to bed down on a comfortable yacht by night with direct water access each morning to the mountains, as well as a captain, a cook, a hostess and a mountain guide with a Saturday-to-Saturday schedule.

Others choose the comfort of Lyngen Lodge, a famed backcountry ski-touring lodge favoured by the likes of the Warren Miller ski film crew and big mountain skiers such as Chris Davenport. Eighteen guests bed down in full comfort with gourmet meals and a hot tub on the deck after a full day of guiding from the lodge's customised boat. It's all very Scandinavian with roaring fires, log cabins and waterfront views miles from nowhere.

More information:

[www.arctic-destination.com](http://www.arctic-destination.com);  
[www.lyngenlodge.com](http://www.lyngenlodge.com)

“La Grave is only for experts . . . There are no groomers or avalanche control so don't even consider it without an experienced guide.”

LA GRAVE, FRANCE

Technically, La Grave is not remote. The towns of Grenoble and Lyon are nearby. But the name, which translates literally as “the grave”, instils fear in the hardest skiers.

La Grave is only for experts who know how to use crampons, ice axes and rappels. There are no groomers or avalanche control so don't even consider it without an experienced guide. This is where one of the world's best extreme skiers, Doug Coombs, died trying to save a friend in 2006.

Still interested? Then watch out for crevasses on the glacier and be prepared to exit some couloirs by rope. Did we mention the 45-55° pitch on the steeper slopes?

The multiple peaks of La Meije reach 3983 m and are truly breathtaking. . . not that you'll notice. You'll be too busy focusing on each turn of the 2150 m descent to the French village below. A two-stage gondola and T-bars will help you to the top but most of the work is done under your own steam.

Fear mongering aside, La Grave is a true adventure destination and talking up the experience would score major brownie points at your next ski gathering. The expertise required means it's rarely crowded – which is rare in European ski resorts.

Whistler's Extremely Canadian company guide small groups with fully certified English speaking guides for CAD\$3795 (A\$4136).

More information:

[www.extremelycanadian.com](http://www.extremelycanadian.com)



DENALI, ALASKA

Mt McKinley is North America's highest peak, with a summit of 6194 m. The locals call it Denali, which is indigenous for “The Great One”, an apt title considering few people know that Denali has a larger bulk and rise than Mt Everest with a vertical rise of 5500 m. Even fewer people try to ski it.

The first successful ski descent of Mt McKinley was in 1970 down the South Peak and the first full descent of the gnarly Wickersham Wall was in 1995. Put simply, if you don't like camping out for days, climbing at altitude with little oxygen and negotiating variable conditions exposed to the elements, then stay home.

Most guiding companies require climbers to do a six-day preparation training course for Denali prior to attempting the climb and all participants must be in peak physical condition. Endurance is key as most expeditions will take 16-26 days so you'd want to like your fellow climbers.

Then there's the skiing. If you're supremely fit in a mountain-marathon kind of way and able to ski with a super heavy pack, or just plain mad, then yes, you can be guided on a ski descent from the summit. Otherwise, ski mountaineering trips include skiing the terrain above the Genet Basin and on the Ruth Glacier at a lower elevation for all levels of skiers who want to be able to say “I skied Denali” because, technically, they did.

Local company, Mountain Trip, was the first to offer guiding on Denali, as well as private climbing and ski touring expeditions and a range of pre-trip training courses. Safety comes first, which is just as well because this is one hell of a mountain to conquer.

More information: [www.mountaintrip.com](http://www.mountaintrip.com)



KAMCHATKA, RUSSIA

The Kamchatka Peninsula of Russia is hot. Very hot. Twenty nine of the region's 200-odd volcanoes are still active which bodes well for heli-skiers wanting to soak in thermal tubs at the end of an adventurous day.

This is the Wild West of heli-skiing with low-flying helicopters transporting pumped-up skiers and boarders deep into the 1250 km peninsula that juts out between the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Okhotsk in far eastern Russia.

Mighty brown bears share the slopes, sea eagles circle overhead and sea lions and seals play in the fjords below. Many of the active volcanoes are UNESCO World Heritage listed and heli-skiers can ski down to open craters and to the ocean shore. Runs range from 1300 m to 3000 m of vertical descent through open bowls,

mellow cruisers, volcanic faces and steeper couloirs.

Heli-skiing in Kamchatka is a swarthy, mysterious and remote experience reminiscent of James Bond in his early days. Some operators use old war helicopters so it's best checking out the machinery before signing up.

Book with international offshore companies such as Elemental Adventures, who use certified guides and sturdy Russian M18 choppers that are regularly serviced, because once you're on the ground it is very difficult to organise what you need. Most packages are inclusive of accommodation, meals, guiding and chopper time. Vodka is optional but highly recommended.

More information:

[www.eaheliskiing.com](http://www.eaheliskiing.com)







### SHEMSHAK AND DIZIN, IRAN

The carefree attitude of traditional ski resorts, where patrons ski hard and play harder after dark, does not lend itself to the teetotaling countries of the Middle East. Yet Iran serves up some seriously impressive ski resorts for those who don't mind their bar as dry as the snow.

Skiing was first introduced to Iran in the 1930s by the Germans, who were there to build railroads and spent their days off ski touring the Alborz Range. In 1947 the Iranian Ski Federation was born followed by Iran's first ski lifts in 1951.

Today, the two main resorts of Shemshak and Dizin are easily accessible from Tehran. Shemshak sports some impressive faux Austrian lodge design - minus the schnapps - and some equally impressive advanced terrain up to 3000 m. Cashed-up Iranians mix it up on the slopes with the occasional woman in full burqa. Chairlifts are as modern as the 1970s though in full working order.

The more beginner to intermediate resort of Dizin sits at 2650 m above sea level with a top lift of 3600 m. The resort still practises some male and female segregation so don't be surprised if you end up in a single-sex gondola but, like most of the growing cosmopolitan society of Iran, rules are flexible so just go with the flow - and if offered home-brew then take it in good faith.

Iran is also home to another 18 ski slopes including Tochal, also north of Tehran. Tochal features modern facilities and a gondola that takes skiers from the Velenjak valley to the main ridge line at 3740 m.

The true beauty of skiing in Iran is the cost - or lack of it. A decent 4-star hotel will set you back \$50 a night, lift passes are under \$20 and ski guides can be hired for \$20 a day. The off-piste terrain is pristine, but not avalanche patrolled, so take your avalanche gear and go with a friend.

**More information:** [www.skifed.ir/ski.htm](http://www.skifed.ir/ski.htm)

"Cashed-up Iranians mix it up on the slopes with the occasional woman in full burqa to remind you this isn't Austria."



### ALGERIA, AFRICA

The Algerian ski resort of Chrea has had a chequered history. The once-vibrant ski town lay barren for a decade from 1992, overtaken by the armed Islamic group GIA which forced locals to flee before soldiers returned to protect the area.

Not much is known about the current state of Chrea resort.

Marketing is not uppermost in the minds of people living in an area recovering from conflict. But we do know it sits in the majestic Chrea National Park just south of the city of Algiers. Chrea is part of the Tell Atlas Mountain Range, a 1500 km spine of peaks that runs through Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

Don't expect mammoth terrain or hundreds of runs. The resort itself is small, but all the snow is natural and in an alpine setting so there's fun tree runs to negotiate. Facilities are basic. There is on-mountain accommodation, though many buildings are dilapidated or deserted so take your own skis and day trip from nearby Blida which has decent hotels to lay your head.

The novelty of skiing in Africa is enough to tick this one off your ski to-do list.

#### More information:

[www.algeria.com](http://www.algeria.com)

