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The best ski resorts in Eastern Europe

From beginner skiers to freeriders, visitors to Eastern Europe are in for a few surprises: well-maintained slopes, challenging terrain and good tuition at affordable resorts



Kopaonik in Serbia has some of the best beginner terrain in Eastern Europe

By Peter Hardy

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Bulgarian ski resort [Bansko](#) and Eastern Europe in general offer the best value for skiers and snowboarders this season, according to an annual TripAdvisor cost comparison study of 42 selected resorts.

Conducted by independent research firm Ipsos MORI, the report reveals that Eastern Europe is home to three of the six cheapest destinations: Bansko, [Sochi in Russia](#) and Kranjska Gora in Slovenia.

A week on the slopes of Bansko, including accommodation, lift passes, equipment hire, lessons, evening meals and drinks for a family of four costs around £1,279 –

nearly four times less than the price of a comparable break in the most expensive destination, Switzerland's [Zermatt](#) (around £4,809).

Bansko has retained its position as Europe's least expensive resort since last year's study, plus overall costs for a holiday there have actually fallen by £352 since 2014/15.

The study compares the cost of one week's hotel accommodation, lessons, lift passes, basic equipment hire and evening meals and drinks for a family of four across a range of European resorts this ski season (from December 15 2015 to April 15 2016).

Fancy cashing in on the affordability of the East? We round up 10 of the best ski resorts in Eastern Europe, which offer much more than just great value.

Unless otherwise stated, prices are per person for two people sharing a room for a week half-board and include flights and transfers.

1. Poiana Brasov, Romania

Best for: Easy slopes, vibrant nightlife and cultural excursions

The only resort in Romania with international appeal is in the Carpathian Mountains, a three-hour drive north of the closest airport, which is in Bucharest, and 12km by bus from the medieval town of Brasov. Dracula's Castle is a 23km drive from the resort and well worth a visit.

The country suffered appallingly at the hands of Nicolae Ceaușescu, its leader from 1965 to 1989, when he was deposed and executed. In the post-Communist era, winter sports were hampered by lack of investment but now they're thriving. In 2011 alone, €25m was spent on revamping Poiana Brasov with a major increase in the size of the ski area and the introduction of new, modern lifts.



Poiana Brasov boasts modern lifts thanks to millions of euros of investment

There's a good choice of hotels at the base of the slopes and the standard of accommodation and quality of cuisine is high. However, vegetarians should avoid the weekly resort-organised barbecue, where flaming bear steaks are served up while you watch folk dancing. Brasov has a good range of low-cost shops, a fine 15th-century church and lively nightlife.

The 25km of pistes doesn't sound much, but it's nearly double what it used to be five years ago. The ski area is strictly for beginners and low intermediates – the 12 pistes are sufficient for novices for a week. Strong intermediates and experts will run out of slopes in a day. Lessons are cheap and the standard of tuition (usually in fluent English) in all three ski schools is high.

The biggest worry is snow cover, which rarely exceeds half a metre, and in a dry winter it can suffer badly at the start of a season that doesn't extend beyond March. But a large chunk of the recent investment has been in snowmaking, and given low enough temperatures the main runs are now secure.

Where to stay

The four-star Hotel Sport & Spa at the foot of the slopes has a pool, gym, sauna and outdoor hot tub as well as its own ski school and rental shop. Balkan Holidays (balkanholidays.co.uk) has packages from £688.

More info: poianabrasov.com

2. Pamporovo, Bulgaria

Best for: Small and friendly with a charming village

Just about every photo of Pamporovo features the ugly TV mast that dominates Snežanka, the high point of the ski area. But the village below has real rural charm and traditional ski resort appeal for anyone wanting to take their first or second winter-sports holiday without breaking the bank.

The resort is set in delightful Bulgarian countryside, just 100km from the border with Greece and one hour and 45 minutes from the nearest airport, at Plovdiv – this ancient city is a must-visit Unesco World Heritage site. The base of the slopes is a 10-minute ride from the main resort hotels, but there is an efficient free bus service. Most runs are green and blue. A handful of reds and obligatory blacks provide a goal for aspiring intermediates, but none of these present much of a challenge. The longest run of 4km, suitable for intermediates but not for beginners, goes down to the old village and alternative bed base of Stoykite, located in blissfully tranquil surroundings. Overall, tumbledown stone cottages, rolling meadows and forest form a pastoral symphony so sweet and enduring that the hamlet of Gela (6km away) is said to be the mythical birthplace of Orpheus. The local ski school has a solid reputation with lessons in English.



Pamporovo has a charming village and good beginner runs

Pamporovo itself is lively at peak times, a party place with a couple of good restaurants and plenty of bars fuelled by some of the cheapest booze prices in Europe. As in other Eastern Europe resorts, snow cover can be uncertain, especially before Christmas and after mid-March, but snowmaking now covers 90 per cent of the slopes. The best but busiest time to visit Pamporovo is in February.

Where to stay

Hotel Orlovetz (five stars locally, four by international standards) has comfortable rooms, a pool and a spa area with steam room, sauna, and treatment rooms. Two-for-one lift passes on certain dates. Crystal Ski (crystalski.co.uk) has full-board packages from £640.

More info: pamporovo.me

3. Rosa Khutor, Russia

Best for: The most challenging terrain in Eastern Europe

Rosa Khutor is the largest of the four resorts that were built almost from scratch around the small mountain town of Krasnaya Polyana in southern Russia for the [2014 Sochi Winter Olympics](#). Rosa Khutor was the venue for the alpine events and offers the best developed and most challenging slopes to be found in Eastern Europe.

The nearest airport is Sochi, 25 minutes away by high-speed rail link, but Sochi itself is a long way from anywhere and best reached, at considerable expense and inconvenience flying via Istanbul or Moscow. Plus there's the laborious Russian visa application process.

Rosa Khutor is conveniently situated right on the slopes. The pastel-painted clutch of handsome buildings around a clocktower along the river bank is vaguely reminiscent of a mix of [Arc 1950](#) in France and [Whistler](#) and [Tremblant](#) in Canada. This is no surprise because the French Compagnie des Alpes, the world's largest lift company, was given the task of developing the slopes and the village – and it had a hand in all of the others. What its French technicians have managed to create is a world-class resort with a vertical drop of 1,380m.



Rosa Khutor has a pretty village reminiscent of Arc 1950 in France Photo: Kirill Umrikhin

The slopes here best suit strong intermediates and advanced skiers and snowboarders looking for new experiences beyond the normal list of big-name resorts. However, snow cover here and in the other three resorts is notoriously variable. Despite Sochi's renowned warm, Mediterranean climate, the Russian government was prepared to spend a quite extraordinary amount of money on developing the ski resorts here to make it a year-round destination. While there is plenty of snowmaking, the 450 cannons can only operate when temperatures are low enough.

Prices in restaurants and shops in Rosa Khutor and the other three resorts are high and the standard of food overall is frankly dismal. But the terrain, given the right conditions, is truly outstanding.

All four resorts are within easy reach of each other and almost adjoining, but are as yet unlinked and don't share a common lift pass. Gazprom, president Putin's home resort, has 15 lifts and 21km of beautifully groomed and mainly easy slopes; Alpika Service has 10 lifts and 25km of mainly blues and reds with a couple of more demanding blacks; and Gornaya Karusel, with 20km of mainly intermediate pistes and 11 lifts, also offers some truly outstanding off-piste opportunities. And, having come all this way, it's worth spending a couple of nights at the bustling seaside resort of Sochi south of Rosa Khutor. It's a sort of Russian Bournemouth complete with palm trees, beaches and fin de siècle buildings.

Where to stay

In the wake of the games, tour operators abandoned it and you have to package your own holiday here. Set at the foot of the slopes, the three-star Park Inn by Radisson (parkinn.com) provides reasonable no-frills accommodation from €1,100 for two people for seven nights, excluding travel. Or, you can commute from Sochi. Turkish Airlines fly to Sochi via Istanbul and Moscow.

More info: en.rosaski.com

4. Mariborsko Pohorje, Slovenia

Best for: Extensive floodlit slopes and World Cup runs

This is Slovenia's largest single ski area, situated in the Pohorje Mountains just outside Maribor, Slovenia's second largest city, a little more than a two-hour drive from Ljubljana airport. Folklore has it that the dense forest around the slopes is a prime location for spotting goblins, fairies and the occasional lumbering giant. British visitors are almost as rare.

The 42km of groomed runs include 10km that are illuminated for night-skiing – it claims to be the largest night-skiing area in Europe, although a couple of Scandinavian resorts might well contest this. Mariborsko Pohorje has sufficient length and gradient to host both slalom and GS women's World Cup races. But the majority of the runs in resort are short, benign, and best suited to beginners and low intermediates.



Mariborsko Pohorje's 42km of slopes suit beginners and intermediates

The main bed base is in Maribor and the ski area is reached in less than 15 minutes by taking the regular city bus service (No 6) from the main bus station at Mlinska Ulica 1. A return ticket costs around €2 and multiple-ride tickets are also available. There is also a scattering of hotels around the base of the cable car that provide access to the main mountain as well as a couple of options on the mountain.

Where to stay

Locally graded five-star Hotel Habakuk is a serviced-apartment complex and congress centre at the foot of the slopes and within easy reach of the cable car. It has a giant spa area with indoor and outdoor pools naturally heated at 29-35°C. Travel Republic (travelrepublic.co.uk) has packages from £554, travel not included. Wizzair (wizzair.com) flies from Luton to Ljubljana and easyJet (easyjet.com) flies from Stansted.

More info: mariborskopohorje.si

5. Popova Sapka, Macedonia

Best for: Great off piste accessed by snowcat

This mainly mountainous part of former Yugoslavia is bordered by Serbia, Kosovo, Bulgaria, Albania and Greece. It has an excellent snow record and good cover is virtually guaranteed from January to March. Popova Sapka is in the north-west of the country, 90 minutes from the airport at Skopje, and is the best developed and most popular of half a dozen little resorts in the region.

At 10km the groomed area is tiny by any standard but the real draw here is the off piste. Some 50sqkm of terrain above 1,700m makes this powder heaven, and it was only a question of time before some enterprising guide saw fit to exploit this.

Croatian-born Tomislav Tiska set up snowcat operation Eskimo Freeride in 2008. His fleet of five powerful machines takes visitors up to 2,700m, from where they can explore glorious, untracked powder, accessible only by snowcat, off the back of the resort. For the ultimate in first tracks, he also runs overnight snowcat safaris. Guests ski at night wearing head torches. Mountain guides from all over Europe bring parties of powder hounds here, but days can also be booked locally.



Popova Sapka has a strong snow record from January to March

A chairlift rises from the resort up to 2,510m and a choice of two easy runs comes back down or a gentle traverse heads over to a cluster of drag-lifts that form most of the uphill transport. There's a ski school and equipment rental, but Popova is little more than a base area, with restaurants mainly in the hotels.

A week on the piste would be too long for all but the wobbliest of intermediates. But combined with one or two days on the cat, it makes a fine alternative winter break.

Where to stay

Simple three-star Hotel Bora (hotel-bora.com) sits on the edge of the village and has one of the best restaurants in the area (half board €37 per person per night). Eskimo Freeride (eskimo-freeride.com) has packages including meals, guide and safety equipment from €200 per day, excluding flights. Wizzair (wizzair.com) flies from Luton to Skopje.

More info: popova-sapka.mk

6. Kranjska Gora, Slovenia

Best for: Sophisticated resort with short transfers

To local disgust, Slovenia's best known resort is habitually described as a 'poor man's Austria'. But it is appropriate. Slovenia looks westwards rather than eastwards to the Balkans. Consequently Kranjska Gora closely resembles the more familiar chalet-style architecture and cosy ambience found in its neighbouring country.

This is an attractive village set in a pretty, flat-bottomed valley between craggy wooded mountains in the Julian Alps, with the slopes rising above it. The nearest airport is a 60-minute drive away at Ljubljana. Kranjska has considerable charm and a level of sophistication that puts it on a par with similarly sized Austrian or Italian resorts. A big advantage is that the village is right at the foot of the slopes and it also has some steep runs. Snow permitting, the Padokoren black run regularly features as a slalom course for World Cup races.



Kranjska Gora has an Austrian feel

As in other Eastern European resorts, sufficient snow cover is sometimes questionable, although extensive snowmaking has been added here in recent years to help the problem. Kranjska's runs tend to be on the short side and one criticism is that it lacks variety. Overall, it best suits budget-conscious families with young children as the nursery slopes are central and facilities and hotels are all conveniently situated near the slopes. It also suits intermediates looking for lively après in high season and a good selection of restaurants at reasonable prices but nothing too challenging on the slopes. Most of the après action centres on the hotels at the foot of the slopes located at the edge of the village.

Where to stay

Four-star Hotel Lek is close to the village centre, 300m from the slopes. It has a pool, sauna, hot tub and gym. The standard of rooms varies; superior ones are on the lower floors. The food is of good quality and, unusually for Eastern Europe, it caters for vegans and vegetarians. Inghams (inghams.co.uk) has packages from £509.

More info: kranjska-gora.si

7. Jahorina, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Best for: Modern resort with night-skiing

Jahorina, 40 minutes from Sarajevo airport, was the main venue for the women's alpine skiing events at the 1984 Olympics and is the largest ski resort in Bosnia and Herzegovina. New high-speed chair lifts were installed a couple of years ago and a new gondola is planned.

It was hoped that this season would see the opening of a gondola from the valley town of Pale, as well as completion of a new 6km run and extensive snowmaking. But the project appears to have been shelved due to lack of funds. Locals believe the gondola would transform Jahorina into an international destination and provide some restitution for its tragic post-Olympic history.



Runs through the trees mean Jahorina offers sheltered skiing in bad weather

During the four-year siege of Sarajevo, Jahorina was the site of Bosnian-Serb gun emplacements and the mountain was heavily mined. The pistes have long since been swept clean but undetected bombs add a whole new level to the dangers of going off piste. The red skull-and-crossbones signs on the edge of the groomed runs do not refer to the risk of avalanche alone.

The majority of the slopes suit beginners and intermediates and the forested slopes offer protection during bad-weather days. On Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, night-skiing is offered on the 1.7km Poljice slope from 6pm to 9pm.

Where to stay

Visitors stay in Sarajevo, in hotels around the base area and on the slopes. Hotel Bistrica (oc-jahorina.com) was built for the Olympics and has recently been entirely refurbished. Set up the mountain at 1,650m, it's ideally placed for access to the slopes. It offers b&b accommodation from €245 per person, excluding travel. Air Serbia (airserbia.com) flies London Heathrow to Sarajevo via Belgrade. More info: oc-jahorina.com

8. Kopaonik, Serbia

Best for: Some of the best beginner terrain in Eastern Europe

In the Eighties, this resort in central Serbia had a strong following among British skiers looking for easy slopes and low prices. It saw itself as a young rival to Andorra. Then in the early Nineties came the Bosnian war, followed by Kosovo, making the resort a no-go area, and tour operators looked elsewhere. The nearest airport with direct flights is Belgrade, four hours and 15 minutes away.

The resort has no real hub, it's more a collection of individual hotels, some of them pleasantly imposing, set in extensive woodland with shops, restaurants and bars scattered around the hotels. These days, the clientele is made up mostly of visitors from other Balkan countries. It's a shame because Kopaonik has attracted substantial post-war investment and now has some of the best beginner and lower-intermediate terrain in the whole of Eastern Europe.



The four-star Hotel Angella in Kopaonik is ski-in/ski-out and has a spa

Modern chairs and drag-lifts take you up through a landscape of frozen, stunted pine trees to twin 2,000m peaks. From here, 57km of well-maintained slopes meander back down the mountain to provide wide, tree-lined novice slopes where turning is mostly an option rather than a necessity for controlling speed.

Second- and third-weekers have plenty of slopes for improvement. Experts are limited to a couple of short, sharp blacks which are not always open early in the season. Piste gradings are overenthusiastic: almost every run would be classified 'easy' in an Alpine resort. There's also a 450m terrain park, the largest in Serbia, with well-maintained boxes, rails and a 12m kicker.

Where to stay

The four-star ski-in/ski-out Family Hotel Angella has undergone a complete makeover and now has a spa centre. It offers half-board packages from €546, excluding travel (konaci-kopaonik.com). Wizz Air (wizzair.com) flies from London Luton to Belgrade.

More info: kopaonik.rs

9. Bansko, Bulgaria

Best for: Ancient town with modern extensive ski area

Bansko is Bulgaria's top resort. Greeks, Russians and a large number of Brits flock to this destination— a two-and-a-half hour drive south of Sofia airport. Bansko lies in the Pirin mountains, close to the Macedonian and Greek borders – on a clear day, there are views of the Aegean Sea.

The original town below the resort village features a quaint huddle of old stone buildings, cobbled streets and gaping storm drains, and has always held considerable historical attraction for tourists. Some 15 years ago, a Sofia-based property company sought to capitalise on this by investing an initial £95 million to turn Bansko into a modern resort.

The slopes cover two mountains and the 14 lifts include a six-person chair, four quads and a modern gondola, which goes up to the main mountain from the top end of town. Nursery slopes are reached from the gondola mid-station as well as at the top of the ski area. Higher up, there's also enough to challenge intermediates for a week, provided the snow conditions are good.



Bansko is the best-value family resort according to TripAdvisor

But for many of the foreigners who built holiday homes here, the development of the resort hasn't lived up to expectations. The gondola is prone to heavy queues at peak times and the return journey is a 7km push down a blue path.

The utilitarian cafés and Dickensian shops that served the needs of the town folk before mass tourism have been replaced by boutiques, wine bars and pizzerias. Traditional pubs called mehanas (often with live music) have risen to the challenge of catering to the new breed of visitor. Prices are low and, all in all, it's a fun place, with varied intermediate slopes and wild après. But it's wise to avoid the peak period between Christmas and the end of February.

Where to stay

Four-star MPM Hotel Sport is in a ski-in/ski-out location by the gondola base. It's got a lively Irish pub and a wellness area with a large swimming pool, hot tub, sauna, steam bath and gym. Neilson (neilson.co.uk) has half-board packages from £424. More info: banskoski.com

10. Jasná, Slovakia

Best for: Challenging terrain and extensive freeriding

This is the largest and most challenging ski area in Slovakia and a destination with sufficient terrain and facilities to keep even advanced skiers and snowboarders happy for up to a week. From the nearest airport at Poprad, it's only a 45-minute

drive to the resort, which doesn't have a true centre as such and is essentially just a small village. Lifts rise from both sides of the mountain and hotels, shops, bars and restaurants have sprung up around these bases.



Jasna has challenging off-piste terrain and specific freeride zones

In recent years an investment of €130 million has resulted in the construction of four new gondolas, along with an additional 10km of pistes, as well as the development of new hotels and restaurants. The pisted area covers both the north and south sides of 2,024m Mount Chopok. Until two years ago, the north and south sides of the mountain formed two separate areas. But a new lift now links the two sides and has opened up additional terrain, giving the region a greater depth of character.

Half the runs are graded as intermediate and 27 per cent as advanced – more than in most other Eastern European resorts. There are also substantial freeride zones as well as two terrain parks. The south side is mostly blues and reds while the north side accesses more challenging slopes and freeride terrain.

Where to stay

Three-star Hotel Ostredok is situated on the north side at the foot of the slopes, with a new chairlift only 50m away. There are other smarter establishments, but the Ostredok wins on convenience and price. The hotel has a spa, offering three types of sauna and a hot tub. Its Italian restaurant, La Collina, serves good pasta and meat dishes. Mountain Paradise (mountainparadise.co.uk) has half-board packages from £949 including lift pass and equipment rental.