

Chairways to heaven

Bolivia tops the world when it comes to the highest ski lift. By **Patrick Thorne**

Skiers are obsessed with numbers – the length of trails, number of pistes, does a chair lift seat two, three, four or six. Then there's altitude and vertical drop – the distance between the top of a ski area's top lift and the bottom of its bottom one. This is most marked in North America, where the skilled marketing people seek to make creative use of these vital statistics. They have a lot to brag about.

Four of the world's 10 highest lifts are in Colorado and resorts in the state have an ongoing battle to take 'top honours' in North America. For many years it was Arapahoe Basin, with Colorado's highest lift. Then, in 1997, Aspen's off-shoot Snowmass opened a surface lift to claim the 'highest lift' title (and simultaneously the biggest vertical-drop title in the US from Big Sky in Montana).

Last week, Loveland Ski Areas – which, like Arapahoe, sits on the continental divide – opened the world's highest quad chair lift ('Chair

9') to take advantage of this season's 4m of snow; Telluride plans a higher lift by the Millennium.

But Loveland still trails in our list of the world's highest ski lifts. Here is the top 10. There are some gondolas that reach as high, but the key qualification for inclusion is that there should be some skiing at the top.

1. CHACALTAYA (Bolivia, South America, Andes)

Top lift: 5,421m (17,785ft)
The world's highest ski lift – a fast and 'extremely difficult to ride' tow (you chuck a hook over a speeding cable). The base is reached by an unpaved road, built in the 1930s. This is the closest ski area to the equator and the oldest and fastest lift in South America. Chacaltaya only operates at weekends in the 'warm season' – our winter.

Getting there: Chacaltaya is 22 miles from the Bolivian capital La Paz. BA flies daily to La Paz from Heathrow (0345 222 111). Weekend bus

service to the ski area by the Club Andino Boliviano (00 591 2 324 682).

2. MÉRIDA (Venezuela, South America, Andes)

Top lift: 4,200m (13,780ft)
Mérida's four-stage cable-car takes nearly an hour to ascend 3,200m (10,499ft). Not much skiing at the top and take a guide because the nearest run ends in a cliff. Queueing can take up to two hours: on busy days, they start at 6am, 90 minutes before it opens. **Book ahead.**
Getting there: Three BA flights a week to Caracas, then find your way 400 miles inland. Good luck.

3. GULMARG (Kashmir, India, Himalayas)

Top lift: 4,138m (13,576ft)
Politically unstable Kashmir has led to Gulmarg's isolation, yet it is the highest sizeable ski area in the world. Great low-cost heli-skiing. **Getting there:** Probably best not to travel at present. Information from Services



Colorado's Copper Mountain and (above right) Bolivia's Chacaltaya. Main picture: Bill Thomas

International's Mansfield office (01623 480 171/2). E-mail: india@ndirect.co.uk

4. ZERMATT (Switzerland, Alps)

Top lift: 3,899m (12,792ft)
Magnificent views of the Matterhorn, huge ski area linked to Italy's Cervinia, and the world's second-biggest

ier. Picturesque Zermatt is relatively peaceful thanks to the banning of the motor car. Oh, and some of Europe's most expensive lift tickets.

Getting there: Featured by more than 20 tour operators, including Inghams (0181 780 4444).

5. LOVELAND (Colorado, 6. CHAMONIX (France,

orado, 'highest lift in North America', and 'a bigger mountain than Aspen and more snow than Steamboat'. **Getting there:** BA flies daily to Denver, then it's 56 miles to the resort. Information on 00 1 303 569 3203 (or www.skiloveland.com).