



Snow hunter and gatherer

For comprehensive information about ski resorts there's only one guide. By **Stephen Wood**

You don't have to struggle to find information about the mainstream ski resorts of Europe. Take the French resort of Val d'Isère. The annual *Good Skiing and Snowboarding Guide*, established since 1985 as the skiers' bible, devotes nine-and-a-half pages to it and Tignes, the linked resort in the Espace Killy ski area. The more user-friendly *Where to Ski and Snowboard* spreads the two resorts over more than 12 pages. Only the *World Ski & Snowboarding Guide* seems to sell them a bit short, allowing each resort merely a single column.

For those with a taste for the obscure, however, the *World Ski & Snowboarding Guide*, published by Columbus Press, comes into its own. Take the Slovak Republic resort of Jasná, the largest ski area in Eastern Europe. The two well-known guides don't mention it; but *World Ski* gives Jasná – which has offered skiing since the Thirties – as much space as each of the French resorts, detailing such statistics as resort height (2,005m), vertical drop (978m, paltry in contrast to Val d'Isère's 1900m), number of mountain restaurants (nine), nearest station (Liptovsky

Mikulas, 17km away) and contact number (00 42 849 91505, if you're interested).

The *World Ski* guide, now in its second (and possibly last) edition, is a reference work aimed at the travel trade. Its data is provided by the Inverness-based company, Snow-Hunter, run by Patrick Thorne.

THE MOST NIGHTCLUBS

- 1: Whistler/Blackcomb, Canada; 19.
- 2: Spindleruv Mlyn, Czech Republic; 17.
- 3: Davos, Switzerland; 6.
- 4=: Killington, Vermont, USA; 15.
- 4=: Pas de la Casa/Grau Roig, Andorra; 15.
- 4=: Saalbach Hinterglemm, Austria; 15.
- 4=: Steamboat, Colorado, USA; 15.
- 8: Diamond Peak, Nevada; 14.
- 9: Montreux, Switzerland; 13.
- 10=: Lookout Pass, Idaho, USA; 12.
- 10=: Salen, Sweden; 12.

Source: Snow-Hunter

If you are the kind of person who is intrigued by the idea of a resort – such as Vanadzor/Mymex in Armenia – which has a single lift, or one where (as at Neve Ativ in Israel) the off-piste possibilities are restricted by minefields, it's the guide that has the right stuff.

But the material in *World Ski* is only the visible tip of Thorne's mountain of data. The book details 600 ski areas, whereas the Snow-Hunter database contains information on 5,000, in 73 countries, from Antarctica to Iran. And Thorne, who has an MSc in computer systems design, can manipulate it to throw up all sorts of useful lists, such as the best resort for launderettes (Ischgl in Austria comes top, with nine), or Catholic churches (Innsbruck is an easy winner with 37).

With all that information at his fingertips, Thorne is uniquely qualified to select the optimum resort for any skier: to demonstrate Snow-Hunter's capability, he created a dysfunctional family (mum an advanced skier and a devout Catholic, dad a beginner devoted to Lebanese food, their adopted son, Hans, a German-speaker) and, after a few minutes at his keyboard, came up with Crans-Montana as their ideal destination. Thorne's magnificent ob-

session began about 10 years ago when, while a student in London, he contributed to a couple of skiing magazines. "They just seemed to be doing endless articles on Chamonix and Zermatt, and that got me interested in the lesser-known resorts," he says. "I started doing a list, with the idea of producing a book: a world guide featuring the obscure resorts."

Merely the address and contact number of a couple of thousand resorts proved a saleable commodity: Doppelmayer, the ski-lift company, and Burton Snowboards bought the data as a mailing list. After studying for his MSc – Thorne persuaded his university to let him work on the database as his thesis project – he got a commission in 1995 from BBC Books to produce the appendix for a publication, called *The Complete Skier*.

Now, maintaining the Snow-Hunter database is a full-time job, and Thorne has couple of staff working with him. Apart from the *World Ski* guide, the main outlet is nearly a dozen websites, for clients including America On-Line, the BBC, CompuServe, and the magazine publisher, EMAP. Occasionally, ski operators call him for a consultation, too: three weeks ago, on these pages, I expressed some scepticism about whether

Crystal actually intended to send customers to the Gudauri resort in its 97/98 brochure, but Thorne told me that the company rang him to ask if he could recommend a source in Georgia for snow reports.

How does he get his information? Much, Thorne admits, comes from the resorts: "But

THE HIGHEST SKI LIFTS

- 1: Chacaltaya, Bolivia; 5,421m.
- 2: Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, China; 4,516m.
- 3: Merida, Venezuela; 4,200m.
- 4: Gulmarg, Kashmir, India; 4,138m.
- 5: Tochal, Iran; 3,965m.
- 6: Valle Manantiales, Argentina; 3,900m.
- 7: Zermatt, Switzerland; 3,899m.
- 8: Loveland, Colorado, USA; 3,871m.
- 9: Chamonix, France; 3,842m.
- 10: Snowmass, Colorado, USA; 3,813m.

The altitude quoted is the height at the top of the lift. Source: Snow-Hunter

it's mainly hard-fact statistical stuff, so unless people blatantly lie, it should be accurate."

At the last count, a couple of years ago, he had visited 200 resorts himself – less to ski, more to check them out. "I'm a bit of a train-spotter: if you want a really sad example of that, I did once go to Iceland in mid-summer to look at the ski-lifts in a place called Blafjöll."

To help research the less familiar parts of the skiing world, Thorne uses foreign contacts, among them a Russian former ski-instructor. He regularly exchanges information with his alter ego in Germany, Christoph Schrage, who wrote the kind of guide (called *Ski Weltweit*) that Thorne envisaged a decade ago. Schrage has skied extensively in South America, Australasia and Asia, and supplied the *World Ski* guide's statistics for those areas. So the stuff about the Vallée Blanche should be accurate. No, not the Vallée Blanche, above Chamonix, but the one in Japan – which has a 350m vertical drop, three drag lifts, a longest piste of 3km, two blacks, two blues...

The 'World Ski & Snowboarding Guide' is published by Columbus Press (0171-417 0700); promotional price £19.50. Snow-Hunter 01463 741489