



Patrick Thorne

He has been writing about skiing all his adult life and most probably knows more about the world's obscure resorts than anyone else on the planet. You'll be amazed by what goes on in some of them p62

It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad world

Skiing and snowboarding – fairly straightforward, civilised sports you would think – so how do sheeps' heads, machine guns and gratuitous nakedness come into it?

Words: Patrick Thorne Illustration: David Blanco

Everyone's got the same name

Batea Mahuida Snow Park, Argentina
Batea Mahuida Snow Park was established on the Mahuida Volcano in Argentina by the indigenous Puel Tribe in July 1999, with a 300m long Poma lift. All local staff come from one of 60 families making up the community and all share the same surname – Puel.

Forget frogs' legs, have a sheep's head
Voss, Norway

Norway's lovely ski area, Voss, is back in the brochures this year and anyone dining in one of the local restaurants may be intrigued by the option of Smalahove on the menu. In fact, if you've tried frogs' legs in France this is Norway's equivalent – baked sheep's head (minus the brain). The dish dates back to harsher times when every bit of the sheep was used and is steeped in tradition (and gravy). Like haggis, it's served with turnip and mash and, also like haggis, it's under threat from EC regulations – only lamb's heads are now permitted.

Ski for free... if you get married
Loveland, Colorado, USA

Any ski bums wishing to save a few dollars on a lift pass might consider tying the knot at the world's sixth highest ski area, Loveland in Colorado, on Valentine's Day. The resort's popular "Marry Me and Ski for Free Day" – a Valentine's Day mass

wedding – is staged annually and attracts hundreds of couples. In a bid to stop mass divorce on 13 February, those already married can also take part and renew their vows. For animal safety, Loveland asks that birdseed be used in lieu of rice.

Cow-powered lift
Ping Shan, China

China is one of the few areas in the world where skiing is booming – dozens of small new ski areas are emerging and the government plans hundreds more. But the main problem is a shortage of foreign investment, which could be why the ski area of Ping Shan in the north east of the country, ripe for development, currently uses a cow-powered railway cart to pull skiers back up the slopes.

Race down the slopes... on a bed
Big Mountain, Montana, USA

Other than the slightly alarming notice as you reach the local resort town, "Let Whitefish Embrace You", Big Mountain appears a perfectly normal and very impressive Western US ski area. And indeed it is, except for one day at the end of the season when the locals are driven by a strange urge to remove items of furniture from their homes and race TVs, wardrobes, beds and the like down the mountainside. The first of the now annual furniture races was held in April 1970. "Best of

show" wins a recliner valued at \$500 (£320) from the local furniture store, Wright's. Prior to racing furniture, downhill aluminium boat races were the norm in Big Mountain, which ski filmmaker Warren Miller documented in 1961.

Lifties with machine guns
The Cedars, Lebanon

Lebanon has five great ski areas but, despite the region having been relatively stable for the best part of a decade, you never can be sure of personal security in the mountains. This is why visitors to The Cedars, the country's oldest resort, will discover lift attendants armed with machine guns on a lift operated by the Lebanese army – perhaps an idea that could be used in the Alps to stop people barging in lift queues. Over the border at Israel's one ski area, on the Golan Heights, the resort staff are equally well armed – and if you go too far off piste you'll find minefields.

Segregation on the slopes
Dizin, Iran

Iran has more than a dozen ski areas, which, after a period of complete closure following the 1979 Islamic revolution (they were deemed too decadent), were re-opened in the mid-1980s, but slopes were segregated for men and women. Today, sexual segregation is less strictly enforced, but signs requesting males and ▶