



Forget the French Espaces and Italian Milky Way...

Patrick Thorne is over the moon - he's found the best skiing on the planet.

But which one?



Interplanetary funicular?

For many snowsports enthusiasts, the question of whether there is water anywhere in our galaxy or beyond to sustain life is secondary to the deeper question - is there water that can sustain snow?

And will we ever ski on other planets?

Excitement was raised to fever pitch in interstellar snow-hunting circles in 1986, when a University of Iowa space physicist, Louis Frank, claimed to have located giant snowballs in space. Frank reported he had discovered 20- to 40-ton cosmic snowballs, the size of houses, pelting the Earth at the rate of 30,000 a day. But hopes that some of these small comets might be persuaded to break into our atmosphere and land as instant ski hills next to unsuspecting communities were, unfortunately, wishful thinking.

A University of Washington geophysicist, studying Frank's findings, realised he had just been looking at static in his ultraviolet camera. He grew uneasy about Frank's analysis when he found that the camera had recorded the same dark spots Frank believed were giant snowballs while pointed at a light bulb in the laboratory. The fact that no spacecraft had been clobbered by a giant snowball was also considered 'a bit of a give-away.'

Despite this early setback, the search for cosmic snow continues, and there are promising signs from our own galaxy. For one thing, mountains tend to be much bigger on other planets and moons than on earth; the slopes are almost certainly less crowded, and with less gravity on planets like Mars, the chances of catching serious 'big air' are greatly increased. The package tour company Space Adventures (www.spaceadventures.com) has already taken the first space tourist, Dennis Tito, into orbit, so it's just a matter of time until the first

cosmic ski holidays are available. There may well be early booking discounts.

Just as your chances of snow diminish as you get closer you get to the equator on earth, so the closer you get to the sun, the chance of light, fluffy powder on planets like Mercury and Venus recedes. However, factors like cloud cover and planet rotation could lead to snowmaking close to then sun if boffins could take advantage of the minus 100 degrees on Mercury at 'night time' to make snow and then work out a way (giant umbrella?) of keeping the snow in good shape when the surface warms up to more than 400 degrees at daybreak.

But such plans may be considered fanciful by mainstream scientists who, instead, surmise that the best powder stashes are on planets and moons further away from the sun than we are. The following are some of the best bets this season.