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Bog off festivals

Two holidays in one, no thanks

Every August bank holiday weekend from 2004 to 2008, my friends and I used to arrive at a patchwork of fields in Yorkshire laden down with low-cost tents, a dozen loaves of white bread and as many crates of beer as our teenage arms could support.

Four days later we would leave the fields minus the tents, bread, beer and usually any remnants of health, hearing or dignity. Leeds Festival, now that was a do.

Festivals, music or otherwise, are now as likely to be found in the Alps as they are the muddy farms of Somerset (or fields of Leeds). From peak to peak, revellers neglect sleep to dance and drink through the early hours, rendering first tracks in the morning nigh on impossible. A stellar entertainment line-up is supposed to be the draw, featuring bands, DJs, comedians, poetry readings, interpretative dance, sausage hurling and everything in between. Oh, and there will be mountains, snow and all the rest of that too.

Herein lies the problem. My experience of festivals is mainly sitting around, chatting, perhaps having a

drink or two, stumbling from band to band or silly hat stall to silly hat stall, wherever the mood takes you. But adopt that approach in the mountains, with or without a festival, and the time you spend on the slopes enjoying the thrill you've waited a year and travelled miles for will be severely diminished.

A festival isn't something to be shoehorned into another getaway scenario just to add value or to lure in more punters. It's an event in its own right, a few days to savour, to be experienced in a way no other few days could.

And so, too, is your winter holiday. Not everything is made better by the addition of facets, by exhaustive diversification – the tireless

march of the "more is more" brigade. It just might be that a festival will dilute your break, rather than enhance it.

There are many successful and attractive festivals in resorts, enjoyed by hundreds, if not thousands, each year, and many of them do good in bringing people to the mountains who might not otherwise come. But to get the most out of both, I think I'll keep my skiing and my festivals as far apart as Yorkshire and the Alps.

“It just might be that a festival will dilute your break”

FIVE-STAR SKI TOURING?

Decadence and hiking – this moveable Italian feast comes with all the trimmings

Like me, you may agree that hell is other people – and that heaven exists beyond the well-travelled pistes, in the deep powder and forgiving corn-snow found when you attach skins to skis, walk up, and then enjoy a long, well-earned descent. In my heaven, rather than the tourer's usual rustic bunk up at the end of the day, there's a deep bath, blow-out dinner and a down-dappled bed.

Turns out it's no fantasy. For my ski-fari organised by Dolomite Mountains, criss-crossing the terrain of South Tirol, I begin in San Cassiano on the Sella Ronda circuit, at the five-star Hotel Rosa Alpina with its two-Michelin star St Hubertus restaurant, spa and the iconic Dolomiti pink spires shimmering in the near distance.

Guide Luca Gaspirini has teed up a short climb on skins under the gaze of Piz Boe (3152m) into soft powder. Easy pace, fab scenery. "We can take our time," says Luca.

Time. High among pastel peaks, we're virtually travelling through it. A million years ago, the Dolomites were water, at the bottom of the ocean. Today, Sass de Forcia is a 3000m limestone tower. We halt steps from its edge.

Below, cars on a road look like the bits rolling around the bottom of a Cheerios box.

"For many people here, their only decisions are where to ski and where to lunch," observes Agustina Lagos-Marmol, founder of Dolomite Mountains. "And not in that order."

We linger over a platter of lobster spaghetti washed down with Pinot Grigio at Rifugio Comici under photos of glamorous Italian film stars.

The second night is at the Rifugio Lavarella, in the heart of Fanes-Sennes-Braies Natural Park, near Cortina d'Ampezzo.

Like a simple hotel – shared showers, twin bunk rooms – the hearty simple cooking is a treat. We ride up in a snowcat and spend the day ski touring lost, untouched mountains.

We arrive near the top of Cima di Re di Castello (2817m) at noon, earning our turns. Although practically whispering, Luca's voice bounces like crystal off a zoom monolith that emerges like an apparition between eerie clouds. "For me, to be up here in the middle of wild nature without a sound," says Luca, "this is luxury."

Our final ski-fari destination is San

“We linger over a platter of lobster spaghetti”





Luxurious hideaway
- San Lorenzo Lodge

Lorenzo Lodge, not far from the Plan de Corones ski area. It's a 16th century hunting retreat reborn as a luxurious hideaway, complete with indoor spa and a private helipad. The effect is sumptuous functionality oozing good taste. Oh, and there's a bijou 18-hole winterised golf course with three tees connecting to one ingenious six-hole green. Overshoot it and your ball sails to the valley floor.

As my luggage is whisked away one last time, my ski tour for the discriminating reaches an existential crisis. Am I spoilt forever or is life just beginning?

NEED TO KNOW

Dolomite Mountains (dolomitemountains.com) offers eight-night backcountry ski tours from £2213, including mountain guide, half board, lift pass and luggage transfers. Four-night option from £1175



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