

A look at some of the best hot and cold breaks on

Holidays in the winter snow

Skiing into the crater of a Japanese volcano

With their pristine powder snow, glorious views, excellent restaurants and hot-spring baths, Japan's ski resorts are a tempting prospect. But those seeking a non-standard experience might choose to try something more challenging, says Louise Healy in *The Guardian*: skiing into the crater of an active volcano. Mount Yotei, on the northern island of Hokkaido, last erupted 3,000 years ago and is very similar to Mount Fuji with its perfect conical profile.

At 1,898m, it is the highest mountain in the region, and towers majestically on the horizon for miles around, often with plumes of cloud floating at its top. For skiers, it offers the longest vertical descent on the island. But much planning is needed to make a successful ascent. Bad weather comes in quickly here, and visitors must wait for conditions to be "near perfect". Some won't be lucky. Only about 100 people aim to climb the volcano each



winter, and of them, only about 20 succeed. The hike up is testing: it can take up to eight hours, and the wind is "biting". Chances are, you'll end up "scrambling on all fours and cursing the heavens", but it's worth it just for the view – not only of the surrounding landscape, but also into the crater, an empty bowl about 400 metres deep that is "breathtakingly white" from top to bottom. This is untouched powder – soft, light and deep.

The thought of plunging off the edge is exhilarating and terrifying; the reality is thrilling, and slightly surreal. But what makes it exceptional is that you are alone: there is no one coming down behind you, leaving you with all the time and space to carve out your own beautiful lines on bottomless powder. *KLM (www.klm.com) flies to Sapporo in Hokkaido from £688 rtn. Niseko Xtreme Tours has a Yotei day tour from £350 (www.nisekoxtremetours.com).*

Northern Lights hotels



Aurora Safari Camp, Sweden

The Northern Lights are predicted to be unusually spectacular this winter, and this new camp in the remote reaches of Swedish Lapland is a great place from which to view them, says Laura Holt in *The Independent*. Guests spend the days on snowshoe treks, photography courses and wildlife drives in the beautiful, snowy Rane River Valley, and nights in the five tepee-like rooms, which have "roaring wood-burning stoves". *Four nights from £1,975pp, half board with excursions. 00 46 70 655 7966, www.aurorasafaricamp.com.*

Aurora Bubble, Finland (above)

Set in the grounds of the Nellim Wilderness Hotel in northern Finland, these new glass-topped, heated pods have been designed for viewing the lights, says John O'Ceallaigh in *The Daily Telegraph*. Each has a double bed and toilet so guests can await the spectacle in comfort, after days of husky-sledding, snowmobiling or cross-country skiing. *Four nights from £1,710pp, incl. flights. 01670-785012, www.theaurorazone.com.*

Sea-skating in Sweden

It might sound like madness to even try it, but skating on the frozen wastes of the Baltic Sea is an astonishing experience, says Lizzie Enfield in *The Sunday Times*. Around Sweden's Stockholm archipelago, the ice often stretches for miles out from the coast, creating a magical Nordic landscape – a silent white plain dotted with "dark, fir-clad islands", where the tracks of elk and otters are the only signs of life. Skating across it is rather like cross-country skiing, and experienced practitioners can cover 50 or more miles a day. You use spiked poles to propel yourself, and boots with detachable blades, so you can stop for picnics and explore on land. Guides monitor the ice daily, picking the best areas to skate, and there are special hooks attached to your rucksack with which to haul yourself out should you fall through. That is, unfortunately, a real risk – but perhaps

not too huge a price to pay for an experience as sublime as this. *Nature Travels (01929-503080, www.naturetravels.co.uk) has a four-day tour from £834pp, excluding flights.*

A rustic Rockies retreat

Canada's Banff National Park harbours one of the world's most "awesome" mountainscapes – and there's no better base from which to explore it than the legendary Skoki Lodge (pictured), says Leslie Woit in *The Independent*. A "pretty" log cabin built in 1931, it was the country's first commercial ski lodge, but remains as isolated today as it was then, a demanding 11km trek from Lake Louise (now a bustling ski area). It is still as simple, too, with no electricity or running water and only outhouse privies. But that's a kind of luxury in itself, and there's no doubting its "aristo-cred": the

first paying guest was Lady Jean Rankin, lady-in-waiting to the Queen Mother, and Wills and Kate spent a night of their honeymoon here in 2011. It helps that the food is superb; the atmosphere, convivial; and the skiing, superb – across no fewer than five valleys festooned in "sugary shin-deep powder", a day's journey "from a road, a ski lift, another human".

Inghams (01483-791114, www.ingham.co.uk) has a week in Lake Louise for £1,360pp, incl. flights, with two days in Skoki for an additional £149pp.

