

Early season treasures

Unstable snow packs, boulders disguised under light dustings of powder, crevasses masked by early drifts – there are plenty of good reasons for not donning a pair of skins until spring. But choose carefully and there are amazing fresh tracks out there. Here, five British Mountain Guides suggest their favourite early season ski tours...

1 THE COL DU TOUR NOIR AND THE COL D'ARGENTIERE

MAP: IGN 3630 OT Chamonix, Massif du Mont Blanc

The Col du Tour Noir and the Col d'Argentiere, above the Argentiere glacier, are both great day tours starting from the Grands Montets lift. In March and April they're busy with tourers training for the Haute Route, but in January that lot are still at home eating leftover turkey and Christmas cake.

The effort of making the track will be rewarded too, because unlike the springtime, when the midday sun turns the snow enough to get a mixture of good firm stuff and the odd bit of hideous crust, in the cold winter temperatures you just get the powder. All day long.

I reckon the map maker got the names mixed up though – the Col du Tour Noir is at the top of the Glacier d'Amethystes, and the Col d'Argentiere is at the top of the

Glacier du Tour Noir. Confused? Don't worry - they're both great viewpoints and both great descents.

Another important factor is the magic formula of more down than up. Either tour starts with a great ski down to warm up the legs before the climb. Once the hard work is over, you ski all the way down to Argentiere. In total, for 1000m of climbing, you enjoy 3000m of descent. That's got to mean big grins all round.

Surrounded by the great peaks of the Mont Blanc massif, they are also both unquestionably spectacular. They aren't lesser known esoteric tours that nobody's ever heard of, but in the depths of winter they don't need to be – there's a good chance you'll be on your own. Just make sure to watch out for crevasses!

“ For 1000m of climbing, you enjoy 3000m of descent. That's got to mean big grins all round ”



RECOMMENDED BY RIC POTTER

Ric lives in the Chamonix valley with his family. He runs alpine based RPM Guiding (www.rpmguiding.com) and is a co-director of Llanberis Guides Limited, in North Wales

2 LYNGEN ALPS OF NORWAY

MAP: Lyngen Norway 50k
 Topographic survey maps
 Sheet 1634-111

The Lyngen Alps, located deep inside the Arctic Circle of northern Norway, are one of Europe's best kept, snow sure, early ski locations with a difference.

Imagine skiing under the permanent pink glow of the Arctic Polar night when jaw-dropping sunsets and sunrises merge into one single phase, all giving way to the dance of the Northern Lights overhead, which reflect beautifully off the white snow under your skis.

This unique Arctic experience begins in November and starts from the adventure base of Lyngen Lodge. First up, there is a 15-minute speed boat journey across the Lyngen Fjord to the isolated beach of Uløya, home to the 1142m summit of Blaatinden. Disembarking from the boat, directly on the shoreline, you begin to skin through birch trees that fade into a gigantic sweeping slope that provides you with a rare



“A sweeping slope that provides you with a rare ski view of fjords, mountains and the unique polar light of early winter”

RECOMMENDED BY GRAHAM AUSTICK
 Graham is the owner of Lyngen Lodge, Norway (www.lyngenlodge.com), and Piste To Powder (www.pistetopowder.com), off-piste guides in St. Anton, Austria

ski view combination of fjords, mountains and the unique polar light of early winter. There is nothing quite so spectacular anywhere else in the world. You're then all alone for the wonderful ski descent, as there is not a single movement from nature in this frozen arctic world,

only the sea lapping against the shore. Then, as you get back to the beach and the finish of your route, you'll find the boat waiting for you off shore. It's ready to transport you back to the comfortable environs of Lyngen Lodge. As you make the return journey across the water, you get

to savour what you have just done and stare admiringly at the Northern Lights that blaze across the night's sky. Then it is back to the lodge to hop into the outdoor hot tub as you sit back, relax your weary muscles and contemplate what beauty awaits you on tomorrow's ski touring schedule.



3 LE COL D'ENCRENAZ

MAP: IGN 3430 ET
 Grand Bornand

The spectacular Aravis chain of limestone mountains, just 45 minutes drive from Chamonix, is a mecca for ski tourers with only a few smaller ski resorts like La Clusaz and Le Grand-Bornand. An abundance of open grassy mountainsides needing minimal snow cover, mean there are plenty of opportunities for early season touring action.

The tour starts from a couple of

kilometres up the road from the village of Le Reposoir, home to the Chartreuse Monastery founded way back in 1151. An easy trail takes you through open forests as your legs slowly wake up. On the way you have a good chance of stumbling across wild chamois and bouquetins, which are abundant in this region. If you're really lucky you may even catch sight of a lammergeier (bearded vulture), which were

re-introduced in 1987. These old world birds can have a massive 2.5 metre wingspan.

Soon the wide open valley comes into view and it's a steady one-hour climb to the top. The view from the col is simply breathtaking with a panorama across the entire Aravis, Faucigny, Chablais and Mont Blanc massifs. It's possible to carry on to the summit of the Petit Bargy (2098m) but the best

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RECOMMENDED BY JON BRACCEY
 Jon lives in Passy, near Chamonix, where he runs Vertigo Guides with Matt Helliker (www.vertigo-guides.com). He also has competed for the UK at the Ski Mountaineering World Championships

skiing is down from the col.

Before stepping into your bindings take a good look around and suss out all the other amazing descents across the valley. The descent back down the open, east facing, sheltered combe holds great snow and is perfect for those first powder turns of the season.

4 VALLON DE FONTENIL

MAP: IGN 'Traces du Plein Air' series, Number 6 – Ecrins and Haut Dauphine

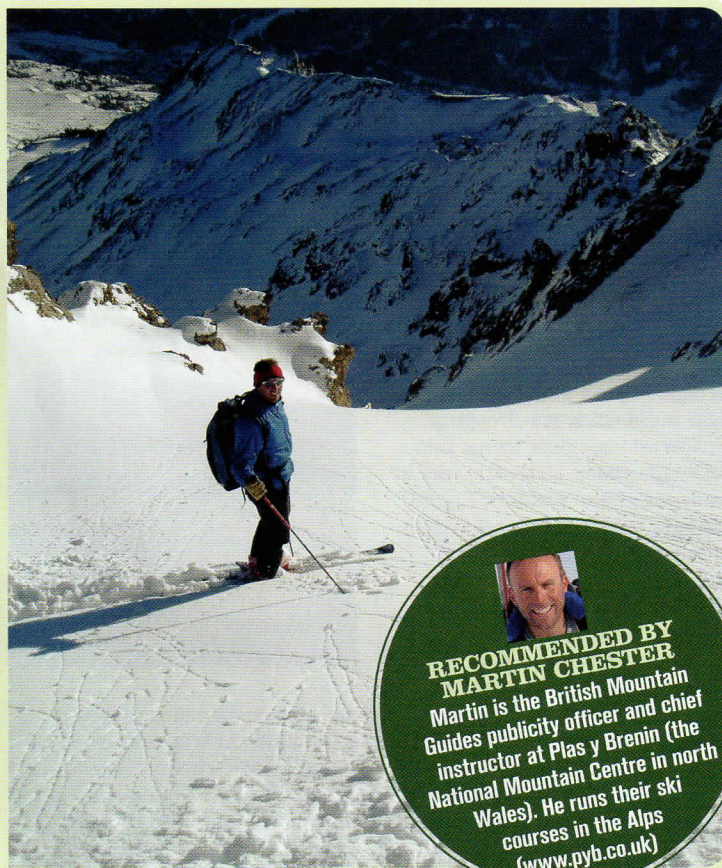
The peaks and slopes around the Col du Lautaret provide early season options for all tastes, from the lofty summit and steep descent of the Grand Area, to the reliably gentle slopes of La Gardiole. Vallon de Fontenil is the connoisseur's choice for truly devoted skiers, though. There is no summit to aim for, no boring bits to endure. Just the knowledge that, there will come a time when you get to turn round and rip up plenty of untracked powder.

One of the tour's best features is that the terrain's instantly interesting, and leave the parking at Les Boussardes and you're

“ You get to turn round and rip up plenty of untracked powder ”

quickly into the enclosed valley. As you lift check the awesome skiing that funnels down from above, you can just sense the seriousness of the place. You don't want to be here in dodgy snow conditions. Thankfully, this shady, north-east facing bowl is normally stacked full of powder, and the ascent to just below the lac de combeynot passes quickly.

At this point, the classic tour heads to the rock towers of the south 'jumelles' or twins. By now you will have spied several great looking lines but this is also the point to take extra care. It is easy to get lured in by the powder so far – and to forget that the closer you get to the ridge line, and the wind affected slopes, the greater the chance of soft slab and avalanche. Skins away, the descent is continuous at a perfect gradient, and finishes within a few metres of the car.



RECOMMENDED BY MARTIN CHESTER
 Martin is the British Mountain Guides publicity officer and chief instructor at Plas y Brenin (the National Mountain Centre in north Wales). He runs their ski courses in the Alps (www.pyb.co.uk)

5 BRUSON

MAP: SwissTopo Martigny 282-S (1:50000 Carte Nationale de La Suisse avec Itinéraires de Ski)

Everyone has heard of Verbier, most of you have probably skied there, but have you ever looked across the valley and wondered what those handful of lifts are to the south? They make up the small but perfectly formed ski village of Bruson. On a piste map, the area doesn't seem that interesting. But check a real map and you'll soon spot lots of northerly aspects and possible tree descents. With a set of skins in your rucksack, you have access to some great descents, without too much work.

The easiest skin is to take the Grand Tsai T-bar, then pole due south for a bit, before putting on your skins and heading up to the Col at Pt 2331. If there hasn't been too much sun and it's cold, the south side is a superb descent. You can ski as far as you can be



RECOMMENDED BY BRUCE GOODLAD
 Bruce lives close to Chamonix, in the Mont Blanc Massif, where he runs the Mountain Adventure Company (www.mountainadventurecompany.com)

bothered, then skin back up; or you can ski to the small hamlet of Commiere and get a taxi back. In really good conditions, you can ride powder all the way to Orsieres.

If you want more height, instead try turning west at the Col and climbing the Six Blanc. From the

summit you can ski north back to the lift, but be careful of avalanches as the top is steep. Or turn east from the Col and skin along the ridge to the Tete de La Payanne. This is my favourite descent in the area and leaving the summit, carry on along the ridge for a short distance until

you can ski east down a shallow gully. This leads toward the tree line, and you need some navigation to pick up a firebreak, which takes you to an alpage, then a summer road. Either follow this track all the way to the car, or if the snow covers poor, traverse back to the ski area.

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