

How the British invented the ski holiday

From early Swiss tours to Austrian parties and online booking, Britain has led the evolution of winter sports travel for more than a century, says Gabriella Le Breton

There is something peculiarly English about inventing a sport, introducing it to the world and then letting everyone else win at it for the next 100 years or so. And this selflessness is particularly marked when it comes to Alpine skiing, which Britons played a key role in developing as both a competitive sport and recreation.

Despite early promise from the likes of downhill champions James "Jimmy" Palmer-Tomkinson and James Riddell in the 1930s and 1940s, we have had to wait quite a while to climb back to the pinnacle of competitive skiing. Indeed, it was 100 years and one day after Sir Arnold Lunn organised the world's first modern slalom race on the slopes above Mürren in Switzerland that Great Britain finally scooped a World Cup gold medal in either, with Dave Ryding slaloming into history in Kitzbühel on January 22 2022.

Nevertheless, pioneering families such as the Palmer-Tomkinsons, Lunn and Inghams have inspired countless generations of Britons to take to Europe's ski slopes, shaping the Alpine winter holiday we know today. From early ski touring in Switzerland (arranged by the Ski Club of Great Britain in the 1930s) to Austrian mountain house parties (hosted by Erna Low in the late 1940s) and the launch of an online holiday booking system by Inghams in 1999, Great Britain has been at the forefront of the evolution of ski holidays.

From temperance to table-top après

For a getaway now often epitomised by booze-fuelled tabletop dancing, it seems ironic that the earliest incarnations of the winter package holiday were trips arranged by Thomas Cook and Sir Henry Lunn to attend religious and temperance meetings.



▲ High stakes: in 1864 the owner of Badrutt's Palace hotel in St Moritz offered British guests their money back if they did not enjoy winter there – they did

In 1952 Fanny Cradock invited Britons to 'eat and drink your leisurely fill' in Tyrol

Sir Henry, a Methodist ex-missionary then turned from promoting religion to encouraging skiing, founded the Public Schools Alpine Sports Club in 1905 to offer well-heeled young boys hotel accommodation for school trips to the Alps. Sir Henry Lunn's eponymous travel agency merged with the Polytechnic Touring Association in 1965 to form Lunn Poly – which became one of Britain's largest travel agents. His passion for skiing rubbed off on his son, Sir Arnold Lunn, who became the founding father of Alpine skiing.

In those early days Lunn and Cook faced competition from two Viennese-born entrepreneurs: Walter Ingham and Erna Low. The former placed an advert in national newspapers, including *The Daily Telegraph*, in 1934 for a "private ski party to Ski the Tyrol: 14 days for 12 guineas". The trip was a success and the rest is history, with Inghams remaining one of the UK's leading ski travel operators today.

Ingham may have been inspired to start his business by Erna Low, who had placed a similar advert in *The Morning*



NORTH LIFE COLLECTION/ANUSHU TESS/COX; MATTHIAS DEEROUX; INGHAMS

Post in 1932: "Austria, fortnight, £15 only, including rail and hotel, arranged by young Viennese Graduelle for young people, leaving Christmas". Like Ingham, Low soon discovered that Britons had a healthy appetite for accompanied ski trips and she launched the Erna Low Travel Service in 1947. Inspired by the popularity of posh house parties, Low pioneered the chalet holiday and joined forces with Ingham in the 1950s, shar-



▲ Birth of a love affair: members of the Ski Club of Great Britain on the slopes near Mürren in 1934

ing the snow trains he operated to the Alps, complete with dancing train cars that enabled skiers to party through the night on their way to the slopes.

The golden age

Ski holidays flourished in the UK throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Two years after Franz Klammer flew his way to gold medal glory at the 1976 Inns-

bruck Winter Olympics, *Ski Sunday* brought the drama of Alpine skiing to our sitting rooms, going on to become one of the BBC's longest-running TV sports programmes.

The Palmer-Tomkinson family may have spawned four British champions in two generations, skiing for Britain in four Winter Olympics between 1936 and 1968, but their highly decorated skiing heroics went largely unnoticed

by the majority of the country. It was ski racers such as Konrad Bartelski and brothers Martin and Graham Bell, then ski-jumper Eddie "Eddie the Eagle" Edwards - beamed directly into our sitting rooms in the 1980s and 1990s - who inspired fans and future generations of snow-sports athletes onto the slopes.

The 1980s saw the explosion of the chalet holiday, that peculiarly Anglo-Saxon phenomenon that sees normally strait-laced Britons become entirely content to share bathrooms and breakfasts in thermals with friends, or even strangers. Donning neon onesies and woollen headbands, we warmly welcomed the arrival of Crystal Holidays, Scott Dunn and Bladon Lines, as well as smaller operators such as John Morgan Travel, Ski Miquel and Le Ski.

After riding the wave of the 1980s-90s boom, ski companies tumbled like dominos following the 2008 global recession, with many businesses folding or scaling back their operations. But being a big fish in a small pond benefited James Palmer-Tomkinson, who founded the Klosters specialist operator PT Ski in 2012. The son of Charles Palmer-Tomkinson - who, in addition to being a former British ski champion and Olympian, introduced the then-Prince Charles to skiing in Klosters - James PT boasts an enviable ski heritage, as well as vital knowledge of

the discrete Swiss resort. Following in his father and grandfather's footsteps, he also heads up the 500-member Mardens Club, a social ski club founded in Klosters in 1929 with a focus on amateur ski-racing and junior training, continuing the family tradition of nurturing British ski passion and talent.

High-altitude favourites

Certain Alpine destinations will always remain part of the DNA of British skiers. Mürren, the tiny village that clings to the flanks of the Schilthorn and is encircled by some of Switzerland's most majestic peaks, holds its place in British ski heritage as Sir Arnold Lunn's home from home. This is where he founded the Kandahar Ski Club, hosted the world's first Alpine races and helped launch the notorious Inferno - now the world's oldest, longest and largest amateur downhill ski race.

Another Swiss resort rooted in British history is St Moritz, where, legend has it, local hotelier Johannes Badrutt spawned winter mountain holidays in 1864 by betting his loyal British summer guests that they would love spending a winter in his hotel, or he would reimburse their travel costs and accommodation. The gamble paid off handsomely: St Moritz is now one of the

world's most popular ski destinations and today's Badrutt's Palace Hotel company registers annual revenues of over £64-million.

Another firm French favourite with British skiers is Méribel. Together with its neighbouring Trois Vallées resorts, Courchevel and Val Thorens, it is a purpose-built ski destination. However, unlike its neighbours, Méribel was largely conceived and financed by a Briton: the charismatic Scot Colonel Peter Lindsay. It is thought that Lindsay, a passionate skier and successful businessman, was tipped off by Sir Arnold Lunn about the ski area's potential in 1936. Securing financial backing from a French Count, Jean Gaillard de la Valdenne, Lindsay managed to open a lift and some accommodation in 1938 before joining up to fight in the Second World War. After forging a distinguished career in the Special Operations Executive, Lindsay returned to Méribel in 1946 as a Colonel and remained there until his death in November 1971.

The Scotsman enforced what turned out to be a prescient building code in order to meet his organic vision for Méribel, insisting that low-rise chalets be constructed from local materials in traditional Savoie style. The fledgling resort attracted a mix of wealthy English families, French worthies and

GREAT BRITISH SKI PIONEERS

ARNOLD LUNN

Known as the patron saint of modern skiing, Lunn, *right*, was knighted in 1952 for his "services to British skiing and Anglo-Swiss relations". The founder of several prestigious British ski clubs, he helped run his family's travel company, Lunn Poly, while spearheading the development of competitive and recreational alpine skiing. He also refereed the slalom in the 1936 Winter Olympics, in which his son, Peter, captained the British ski team.



ERNA LOW

Born in Vienna, Erna Low *above*, moved to England in 1931, settling there nine years later. In 1932, Low sought to supplement her



income as a language tutor and finance a trip back home by advertising for young people to join her on a Christmas winter sports trip. She went on to work in

the travel industry for more than 60 years, pioneering the British ski chalet and package holiday with her company, the Erna Low Travel Service.



THE PALMER-TOMKINSON FAMILY

"Jimmy" Palmer-Tomkinson, *above*, captained the British ski team in the 1936 and 1948 Winter Olympics and married the Swiss women's ski champion, Doris Friedreich. Jimmy and Doris's three sons - Charlie, Christopher and Jeremy - each went on to become British downhill ski champions, with Charlie and Jeremy representing Great Britain at several Winter Olympics games. Today, Charlie's son, James Palmer-Tomkinson, runs the Klosters specialist ski company PT Ski.

locals. By the 1950s, property owners included the Duchess of Bedford, actress Brigitte Bardot, and Marie Blanche – who accepted Lindsay's offer of a plot of land in lieu of payment for work and built the eponymous hotel that remains popular today.

Austria, too, has long been a favourite, as reflected in a series of columns about "wintersporting in the Tyrol" written for *The Telegraph* in December 1952. Penned by the anonymous columnist "Bon Viveur" and her husband, the series set out to "test how £25 will take the strain in a country where Britain holds pride of place in affections".

Bon Viveur – later revealed to be the indomitable queen of TV cookery Fanny Cradock and husband Johnnie – explored several Tyrolean resorts that remain staunch British favourites today, including St Anton, which she deemed "fashionable, make no mistake about it", but also "principally a skiers resort of outstanding runs, ski-lifts and tuition". She was particularly smitten by the cosmopolitan nature of Kitzbühel, on whose slopes Dave Ryding secured his World Cup gold earlier this year, where she discovered "a faint aura of old Monte Carlo, an evocation of Biarritz, a whisper of Menton and the merest rustle of fans in San Remo".

Changing times

It will be 70 years ago next month since Cradock tested the strain of her £25 in Austria. Writing in a time of post-war austerity, she dined "in some alcoved recess, panelled in pine and decorated with wrought iron" and invited Britons to follow her to the Tyrol to "eat and drink your leisurely fill and happily forget for a while such rigours as those inflicted on our restaurant life by the Catering Wages Act".

These days, £25 just about gets you a goulash and a beer in a Tyrolean mountain restaurant rather than a week's holiday for two. However, there is much to be positive about when it comes to British skiing. The last British ski operators standing are expert at weathering crises and offer unparalleled levels of service, value for money and flexibility. In an echo of times gone by, we are enjoying a return to train travel and seeing ski resorts and operators adopting a more holistic approach to winter holidays.

British skiers can therefore continue to take a leaf out of Bon Viveur's book: allow "at least 10 minutes for the weighing of baggage" at the airport, take the "considerable irritation" of recently imposed airport charges on the chin, and immerse yourself in the inimitable tranquillity of the Alps, "in which the tinkling of sleigh bells and the swish of skis make gentle music".

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BRITISH SKI HOLIDAYS



◀ Viewpoint: Walter Ingham
▲ Tackle the Courchevel piste

1932

Erna Low places her advert in the *Morning Post*

1934

Walter Ingham places his advert in national newspapers, leading to the foundation of F&W Ingham

1936

Alpine skiing debuts at the Garmisch-Partenkirchen Winter Olympics

1947

Launch of the Erna Low Travel Service

1950s

Inghams operates snow trains and flies travellers to the Alps by propeller-driven DC-3 aircraft

1965

Henry Lunn Travel merges with the Polytechnic Touring Association to become Lunn Poly



▲ Trailblazer: the first edition of *Ski Inghams* (winter 1992/93)

1978

Launch of the BBC's *Ski Sunday* television programme, which brought skiing to the screens of the nation

1980/90s

A British ski boom sees the launch of countless operators, including Scott Dunn, Crystal Holidays, Le Ski and Mark Warner

1999

Inghams becomes the first travel company to offer online holiday bookings

1903

The Ski Club of Great Britain is founded

1905

Henry Lunn launches the Public Schools Alpine Sports Club, which ties in the use of major hotels

1908/09

Thomas Cook launches the first ski package holidays for the British public

1922

Arnold Lunn hosts the first modern slalom race in Mürren, Switzerland