

10 BEST SNOW SPOTS

From ice fishing to star spotting, **Catherine Murphy** raises a mitten to a blizzard of winter activities.



1 MIDI-PYRÉNÉES FRANCE

Those in search of pure, unadulterated dark skies, free of light pollution, should consider staying at Pic du Midi (picdumidi.com), an observatory hotel at an ascent of 2,877 metres. From there - France's first International Dark Sky Reserve - soak up views of the Milky Way and then some; if the time is right, you may even see the Northern Lights. Test your head for heights a little more on the impressive 12-metre-long glass "pontoon in the sky" and ski the off-piste route down to La Mongie. darksky.org

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to **Toulouse** three times per week.



2 MINNEAPOLIS-ST PAUL USA

If you're charmed by the fact that a "Loppet" is a gathering of cross-country skiers embarking on a long distance race, you might want to check out the Great Northern Festival (thegreatnorthernfestival.com) in Minneapolis-St Paul this January 23 to February 2, 2020, which incorporates the St Paul Winter Carnival, the City of Lakes Loppet and US Pond Hockey Championships. An all-ages-inclusive celebration of winter, it features skjoring, ice carving, curling, snow art, and food and drinks sideshows.

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to **Minneapolis-St Paul** up to seven times per week.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK LEIFERMAN, COURTESY OF MEET MINNEAPOLIS



3 ST GERVAIS-LES-BAINS FRANCE

The tiny village of St Nicolas de Véroce is perched above St Gervais and has enviable access to the Évasion Mont-Blanc ski area. After hitting the slopes, hunker down at L'Armancette (armancette.com), a five-star hotel with romantic views of Mont Blanc and the Dômes de Miage from its luxurious spa. Dining at La Table d'Armante restaurant is also mighty fine. Rooms from €270.

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to **Geneva** up to ten times per week.

4 BIG BEAR USA

Ski or snowboard at Big Bear Mountain Resort in the morning and go surfing in Santa Monica in the afternoon ... No wonder they call it the "California Double". A 2.5-hour drive from LAX - well, infamous Los Angeles traffic permitting - with Santa Monica around the same, Big Bear, in the San Bernardino Mountains, is a hot favourite for adrenaline junkies with a penchant for both powder and Pacific Ocean swell. It's a big hit with families, too. bigbearmountainresort.com

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to **Los Angeles** six times per week.



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5 LAKE BRIENZ SWITZERLAND

With the snow-capped peaks of the Bernese Oberland and crisp, clear skies as a backdrop, kayaking on Lake Brienz provides a dramatic pause worth savouring. Put on a dry suit, start paddling and enter a world of glistening water and silence with Hightide Kayak School (hightide.ch), who offer guided trips. Then, on dry land, access some of the most special skiing in Switzerland via Interlaken to Murren, Wengen and Grindelwald. madeinbern.com

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to **Zürich** up to 11 times per week.

6 VIENNA AUSTRIA

If donning salopettes would cramp your style, succumb to the lower-altitude magic of ice-skating on the Wiener Eistraum (Vienna Ice World) on Rathausplatz. There are 9,000 square metres of ice, including a terrace for paying adults and a free area for beginners and children. Afterwards, reward yourself with *eismarillknödel* – apricot dumplings – at Tichy, the café which invented the dish, or walk through the city for hot chocolate in the famous Café Demel. wien.info

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to **Vienna** daily.



7 MELCHSEE-FRUTT SWITZERLAND

Located 2,000 metres above sea level, in the mountain- and lakes-locked Melchsee-Frutt valley, tell friends you've "gone fishing" instead of "gone skiing". Local fisherman Gusti Berchtold takes great pleasure in sharing the experience of ice fishing at altitude, where native trout and char are there for the angling (CHF 50 pp). Wrap up warm, drill a hole in the ice and patiently wait; meanwhile guests of the Hotel Frutt Lodge and Spa (fruttlodge.ch) can have their fresh catch cooked by the chef (CHF 20). melchsee-frutt.ch

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to **Zürich** up to 11 times per week.



8 ZELL AM SEE AUSTRIA

This winter, Zell am See's appeal rises with a new lift link to the Saalbach area, creating the largest ski region in Austria, with 408 kilometres of slopes accessible with the ALPIN lift pass. Other diversions include skiing off-piste on the Kitzsteinhorn glacier above Kaprun, horse-drawn sleigh rides through Zell am See's Medieval centre and hot-air balloon rides above magical frozen lakes. zellamsee-kaprun.com

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to **Vienna** daily.



10 VAL D'ARAN SPAIN

Catalonia's Val d'Aran is home to 33 villages, where unique cultural histories and spectacular scenery await. For tasty tapas – and a chocolate-box, 12th-century church – stay in Arties, while Baqueira-Beret is a great option for parents and children thanks to its 160 kilometres of family-friendly ski slopes: stay at the contemporary Hotel Himàlaia (himalaiabaqueira.com). For livelier nights, stay in Vielha and take the ski bus up to Baqueira-Beret each morning.

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to **Toulouse** three times per week.

9 ABRUZZO ITALY

From the beautiful old village of Pescasseroli, embark on a three-day tour of Abruzzo National Park in central Italy, tracking wolves during sunrise and sunset hikes (wildlifeadventures.it). Around eight packs roam the Apennines and as well as learning about their system of living on these guided trails, you might get lucky and hear them howling beneath crystal clear, star-lit skies. Three-night half-board packages start at €220 and why not combine this unique wilderness experience with some piste action at Roccaraso ski resort? skiabruzzo.com

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to **Rome** daily.

