

Tucked away in Lebanon, there are snowfields where the crowds are small, and the attractions - both on and off-piste - are plentiful. Frank Coles reveals skiing's big secret

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- Frank Coles
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Slopes down to the door ... Faraya Mzaar is Lebanon's biggest resort.

Lawrence of Arabia, that most illustrious of British business travellers, never skied and thanks to his adventurous legacy, Bedouin, belly dancers, camels, and vast empty deserts are what most visitors have come to expect from the Middle East. You could be forgiven for thinking that an indoor slope in humid Dubai is the only wintry option available, but as the area opens up to development and reform, mountains and slopes that were once the preserve of a few savvy locals are welcoming tourists with winter holidays that have little to do with sunshine or souks.

Flying into Beirut, Lebanon's capital, it is a surprise to see not just a sunny Mediterranean shoreline but also a glistening white mountain range towering stoically over the thin strip of land that houses the capital. Historically, Lebanon is synonymous with snow; even its name derives from the ancient Semitic word for white, "laban", and its frosted peaks are referred to in the earliest of texts from Gilgamesh to the Old Testament.

Unlike the Norwegians who have skied for thousands of years, the Lebanese initially showed little interest in the untapped potential of their slopes. That is until the early 20th century when a few enthusiastic mountain men and some

French expatriates scaled the Lebanese mountains by donkey, skied down, and then kept going back for more. The locals probably thought they were crazy, but, by the 1940s, the Lebanese had established competitions, clubs and ski schools throughout the country, and were competing on the international stage. The country's progress towards skiing modernity was then interrupted in the 1970s by a lengthy civil war and only really got going again during the 1990s. Today, this combination of circumstances has created an attractive skiing destination, relatively unspoilt by bumper-to-bumper commercialism.

Lebanon itself is a surprisingly small country, about the size of Yorkshire, and you can drive from one end to the other in around three hours. Separated by the fertile Bekaa Valley, two parallel mountain ranges dominate the country. The most skiable slopes are on the western Lebanon mountain range, with many runs less than an hour away from the fashionable capital. As British skier David Reed informed me, "It's like having a ski resort just outside Paris." With its historic ruins, ancient grottoes and the nearby Mediterranean, there are more than enough local distractions to occupy mixed interest couples as well, so you should be able to ski all week, while significant others will be happy not to.

Twenty-eight miles (42km) from Lebanon, Faraya Mzaar is the biggest and best-equipped resort, with 42 slopes and 50 miles (80km) of ski track. Faraya itself, once the starting point, is now just a small town that you pass through on the way to the resort, which is actually situated in the tongue-twisting Ouyoun El Simane, Kfardebian. The skiable ranges of the resort's three peaks begin at 1,850 metres and reach 2,465 metres at the highest point of the Mzaar Mountain. The treeless slopes create a landscape of rolling white dunes that visually have more in common with the desert than the pine-clad Alps we are familiar with.

The metre-and-a-half of fresh snow that fell on the Mzaar in mid-March was firm underneath with a dry, powdery top, despite a blazing Middle Eastern sun. This provided a controllable surface for beginners and intermediates to get the best out of the longer runs. These usually take two to four days to master depending on your skill level and attention span.

When hurtling down the Mzaar's steeper pistes, advanced skiers should try to remember to save some breath for the spectacular views out over the Mediterranean. However, you will probably exhaust the trickier descents in a couple of days; at this point it is worth paying for a guide to show you what is not on the official maps.

The queues at most of the Mzaar's 18 ski lifts are refreshingly short. Combined with the absence of vitriolic hordes elbowing their way through, this makes turnaround times of 20-30 seconds normal, which compares well with the 20-30 minutes of some European resorts. The plentiful lifts close by 4pm at the latest

and you will almost certainly be grateful for the opportunity to rest. It is a shock to the sinews how much ground you can cover when queues are almost non-existent.

Après-ski activities are based around the Intercontinental Resort and Spa, Mzaar, which sits at the foot of several steep runs that drop straight down from the panoramic peak of the mountain, directly onto the terrace of the popular, Le Refuge restaurant, and the only five-star ski resort in the whole of Lebanon. At weekends the hotel and private apartments are packed to their Alpine-lodge-style rafters with the great, the good and the good-looking of Lebanese society. According to socialite Ditta Comair, the hotel and village is the centre of "Lebanon's la dolce vita" during winter months. Thankfully, only a small percentage of these social high-flyers ski, so the slopes remain unexpectedly accessible.

Adding to the weekend buzz are busloads of school children and those who, oblivious to the cold, have made the long trip to see snow for the first time, smoke shisha on the slopes, toboggan, picnic on the piste and party to makeshift sound systems, turning the narrow mountain roads into four lanes of incredibly friendly traffic jam.

By 8pm on Sunday night it's all over, as Beirutis take their hangovers back to the city and the cosy, relaxed mountain lodge ambiance returns. When the weather makes skiing impossible, a wallow in Les Therme du Mzaar's heated pool watching snow swirl around the glass canopy overhead is a highly recommended change of pace to soothe aching thighs.

Further downhill there are several slopes on the smaller private resorts of Faqra and Zaarour to explore, along with Qanat Bakish, one of Lebanon's better preserved towns.

Upcountry, Laqlouq, known as Lucky Luke, favours families and beginners with its unspoilt countryside and tree-lined ridges. Beyond that is the Cedars, Lebanon's northernmost resort and home to its highest slope, at 3,088 metres. The runs here are more limited than on the Mzaar but there are still a few off-piste thrills to be had, and thanks to a natural amphitheatre-like setting, it also plays host to international competitions run by the Lebanese Ski Federation.

The resort is being modernised in time for the 2009 Asian Ski Championship to be held in Lebanon, but that's not the only development on the horizon. The Sannine Zenith resort, with a projected cost of \$1.2 billion (£690 million), plans to cater for 22,000 skiers on the Sannine Mountain, overlooking the picturesque Bekaa Valley. Its designers are working on Whistler's current Olympic bid and Lebanon hopes to one day make its own pitch for the Winter Games.

Anything could happen, but this season or next, for snow-loving Europeans keen to carve powder on pastures new, a trip to Lebanon could make a refreshing break from the uber-resort, especially when the crowds are long gone and you can make-believe you are all alone on your own private mountain range.

Way to go

The season starts in December and runs into April. Visit www.skileb.com to book your ski holidays in Lebanon. Guardian readers can take advantage of 5% to 20% discounts by entering GUARDIAN as the promotional code when booking.

Flights can be booked separately. Direct flights from London with [British Airways](#) and [Middle East Airlines](#) take four to five hours.

Intercontinental Resort & Spa, Mzaar www.intercontinental.com; reservations 0870 400 9650; hotel front desk +961-9-340000. Les Therme du Mzaar www.lesthermesdumzaar.com