

Tacky slebs are thronging the slopes — so where's a resort with real class? Züri is, says **Nick Rufford**

The Russians have invaded Courchevel, Britney Spears is in Aspen, Victoria Beckham is parading the latest look-at-me designer ski outfit: where did it all go wrong? When did skiing become just another item in the social calendar of the more-money-than-sense set? It seems just the other day that it was the call of the wild that drew us to the mountains. We went in search of exercise, adventure and an eyeful of natural beauty. And the only white powder on offer was the freshly fallen snow on the slopes.

Not any more. Last month, French police waded into the midst of the now-traditional January junket held by the Russians in the French resort of Courchevel, and arrested Mikhail Prokhorov, a 41-year-old mining tycoon, on suspicion of running a ring of high-class prostitutes for his plutocrat friends. He was later released without charge. But all the same, in the light of the orgy of conspicuous consumption taking place there each winter, the episode didn't seem out of place. What next — pole dancing on the piste markers? Stretch limos outside the ski bars?

If, like me, you find all this tacky and, more to the point, a distraction from the serious

business of having a blast on the slopes, you might well wonder where you can safely holiday these days. Well, can I suggest Züri? Set 1,720 metres up in the Austrian Vorarlberg, it's the very opposite of the "Blingshevik" resort. And that's not because it's a bargain-basement, multi-storey ski town, either. Züri is one of the prettiest villages in the Alps and, together with its near neighbour Lech, has for years been a magnet for the rich and famous. It's just that both the resort and the clientele like to do things a little differently from the latest breed of moneyed show-offs. This is a place with — dare I say it — class.

"DO YOU have many wealthy or famous people staying?" I asked casually at the reception of the Zürserhof when I checked in recently.

The Zürserhof is a picturesque five-star hotel that combines traditional Austrian styling with plasma screens in the bedrooms — and exquisitely polite staff.

"We treat all our guests as though they were famous," she

THE BLING-FREE



What next — pole dancing on the piste markers? ↴

said, sweetly. Admittedly, her smile cracked slightly when I presented my credit card: from her puzzled look I guessed she didn't

often see one that wasn't gold or platinum.

The whole town is geared towards old money. Once I'd settled in, I called up Horst Fritz, a local racing driver turned ski guide, who runs a chauffeur service that ferries the various royals, aristos and magnates in from the airport.

"There are two types of wealthy," he said, sipping a schnapps on a terrace beside the slopes. "First, there are people who want to be seen because they make their money

from being in the public eye. We don't encourage those.

"Second, there are the people who want to stay out of the limelight, and Lech and Züri suit them perfectly. For example, when King Hussein and Queen Noor of Jordan used to stay in the Zürserhof, they took over most of the hotel for their entourage. That wasn't because they wanted to show the world how much money they had, it was because they wanted the privacy. During their stay they were almost invisible."

SKI

Zürs, where you won't find Posh (left), but will find posh, in the form of Princess Caroline of Monaco and Prince Ernst of Hanover (below)

Reinhard Schmidt/Alcorners Images; Big Pictures

Three more resorts that haven't gone downhill

San Cassiano, Italy
This cute, understated village is a world away from the showy glitz of nearby Cortina d'Ampezzo. Nevertheless, the scenery is just as stunning, and there's lots of good intermediate skiing on offer on well-maintained pistes. The Rosa Alpina is the place to stay – home to the St Hubertus restaurant, which has recently been awarded its second Michelin star. George Clooney, king of cool, was a recent guest.

The tailor-made specialist Momentum (020 7371 9111, www.momentumski.com) offers three nights there from £578pp, B&B, in March, including flights and hire car.

Ste-Foy-Tarentaise, France
The profile of this tiny, four-lift resort may be rising, but it's still a welcome refuge from the crowds at the larger French ski stations. People love it for its sense of calm and complete lack of flash. Première Neige (0870



Verbier: reassuringly steep

383 1000, www.premiere-neige.com) offers high-grade chalets here from £495pp a week in mid-March, half-board, excluding flights. Airport transfers start from £60pp. Flybe (0871 700 0535, www.flybe.com) goes to nearby Chambéry.

Verbier, Switzerland
Most of the bling brigade are hopeless skiers, so anywhere with steep slopes is a pretty safe bet. Verbier may have its fair share of

luxury chalets, but the people staying in them are here for the slopes, not the showing off. Ski Verbier (020 7385 8050, www.skiverbier.com) has catered chalets from £875pp in March, excluding flights; airlines flying to Geneva include EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) and BMI Baby (0871 224 0224, www.bmibaby.com). Return fares from Geneva to Verbier with Swiss Railways (www.sbb.ch) start from £48pp return.



Goff Int

Fritz then reeled off a roster of habitués who choose Zürs because of its privacy and its refusal to modernise. "Beatrix of the Netherlands stays in the Post. Caroline of Monaco stays in the Lorünser. Rainier, her father, stayed in the Zürserhof, as did Omar Sharif. Diana favoured the Arlberg. She was a lovely lady," he said, sounding wistful.

ALL VERY impressive, but that's not to say the place is off limits if you don't have a title. Yes, the five-star hotels can be ruinously

Both on piste and off, there are some fantastic descents, too. The groomed runs are almost all aimed at intermediates and, given the quality of the snow, are a joy to ski. There are 276km of them in all, and they soak up the number of visitors remarkably well – especially above Zürs.

With the snow soft and squeaky and the pistes uncrowded, this is a place where you can relax and really let rip. However much money you spend, the chances are that you'll end up feeling like the king, or queen, of the mountain.

■ Nick Rufford travelled as a guest of Inghams



expensive, and I did spot a ski outfit in a shop window that retailed at €1,999. But with week-long packages for £700 (see below), mere mortals can get to enjoy it too.

And there's a lot to enjoy. The skiing is sensational: on average, Zürs gets more than seven metres of snow a year, which puts it in the very top tier of European resorts. Like the rest of the Alps, the resort had a pretty threadbare start to the 2006-7 season, but winter has reasserted its grip and the slopes are now in good condition. Last week, there was 35cm on the lower slopes and a whopping 140cm higher up.

Tour operators: Inghams (020 8780 4444, www.inghams.co.uk) offers a week at the five-star Zürserhof in Zürs, arriving on March 17, for £1,628pp, full-board; or the same week at the four-star Panorama in Lech for £706pp, B&B, including flights and transfers. Or try Made to Measure (01243 533333, www.mtmhols.co.uk) or Total (0870 163 3633, www.skital.com).

Go independent: Zürs is 120km from Innsbruck airport; fly from Gatwick with British Airways (0870 850 9850, www.ba.com). The Pension Angerhof (00 43-5583 2418, www.lech-zuers.at/angerhof), an exquisite five-bedroom place in Lech, has doubles for £100 per night, B&B, as does the Pension Roggal (5583 2274, www.roggal.com).

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