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Why 70 is the best age to be a skier – and how to do it for a fraction of the price

As Franz Klammer marks his milestone birthday this winter, here's why you shouldn't think of hanging up your ski boots just yet

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2 January 2024 • 5:00pm



Skiing behind Franz Klammer - the all-time Austrian sporting hero - is what anyone who has been lucky enough to share a slope with him does. Revered as perhaps the greatest downhill racer in history, first place is his territory. Would you overtake Emerson Fittipaldi or James Hunt?

Unfortunately, that's what I did. It wasn't, of course, on purpose. Intent on excitement and survival, I'd skied 20 metres past Franz before realising he had briefly stopped for a couple of the younger – well, middle-aged – members of our group to catch up. Focus, Peter. Age is no excuse for a momentary lapse in concentration in the maestro's presence.



Klammer won Olympic Gold at Innsbruck in 1976 | CREDIT: Getty

Younger Millennials and members of Gen Z may be struggling to understand who – and what – I'm talking about. The 1970s, when Franz Klammer ruled the world of snow, is now a distant decade, but to me, it seems like yesterday.

“You can’t beat the clock of life, but at my age, I can still enjoy skiing as much as ever,” Franz said, as we rode the gondola together during three days of celebrations for his milestone 70th birthday, in his home Austrian resort of Badkleinkirchheim, close to the frontier with Slovenia.



Kärnten - It's my life

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An important endorsement for those of us who are happily skiing into our 70s and hopefully way beyond. No, you can’t mess with time. But 50 years ago Franz had a good go at it.

His illustrious career depended on dramatically carving hundredths of a second off his rivals at speeds of up to 80mph.

How to ski into your seventies and the 10 best places to go

Thinking of hanging up your boots after a lifetime of [ski holidays](#)? Think again. Thanks to improvements in both health and equipment technology, there could be another 20 years left in your legs and your wallet.

Several resorts around the world are so keen to see you (and your children and grandchildren), that you can ski entirely for free – or at least at a reduced rate if you choose your destination with care. On the slopes, 80 is the new 65.

The idea of luring silver skiers to the slopes with serious financial incentives began around 40 years ago in Vail, Colorado. The resort's owners at the time gambled that if they gave free lift passes to 65-year-olds, this would encourage still-fit grandparents to holiday there and bring along their tribe.

Great idea, but as Vail and the other resorts around the world soon discovered, these piste-bashing grandpas and grandmas – no doubt spurred on by the carrot of freebies – had too many years left in them to make the scheme financially viable.

Today Vail no longer offers any free lift passes, but it does provide some discounts for older skiers on the exorbitant cost of the daily lift ticket. What's more, the trend spread to Europe, where there are plenty of bargain opportunities for more mature skiers closer to home.

Here's where to go to age gracefully on the slopes – for a fraction of the price. All that's left to do, in the words of Franz Klammer, is: "Breathe, let your skis run. Keep remembering that age is only another word."

France

Val d'Isere

Nearly all French resorts give discounts if you are aged 65 and over. Val d'Isère leads the way with free passes from 75 with proof of age. Skiers aged 65-74 pay a reduced cost of €360 (full price €396).

Les Arcs

The Paradiski ski area (Les Arcs and La Plagne) charges €369 full price for a week's skiing. But skiers aged 65 to 74 pay €296, while those aged 75 and over pay only €10 for their pass.

Austria

Ski Amade

The Ski Amade region (Salzburger Sportwelt, Schladming-Dachstein, Gastein, Großarl and Hochkönig) gives access to 760km of pistes and offers its Best Ager weeks for the over 60s. Book a week's accommodation in participating accommodation and you get a free six-day lift pass and other benefits.

Obergurgl

Obergurgl and neighbouring Hochgurgl are ideal resorts for grandparents wanting to take

the whole family, with gentle slopes for all ages. The full adult lift pass price is €404, but seniors born in 1949 or earlier pay just €222.

Switzerland

Verbier

Swiss resorts give few concessions to pensioners. Verbier's six-day ticket price costs 320CHF, with no discount for anyone over the age of 65. However, those born in 1946 or earlier ski entirely for free.

Wengen

The Jungfrau region (Wengen, Grindelwald, and Mürren) charges 385CHF for a week's skiing – with a modest reduction to 347CHF for over 64's.

Italy

Cortina d'Ampezzo

Cortina d'Ampezzo is included in the massive Dolomiti Superski pass, which costs from €345 at full price. Seniors born in 1958 or before pay from €311 and the same discount applies to all 12 ski areas serving 1,246km of piste.

America

Alta

A reasonable number of other North American resorts give age-related discounts, but to ski free in a major international resort here you have to head to Alta in Utah (free from 80) or Red Mountain and Panorama in British Columbia (free from 75).

Spain

Baqueira Beret

The Spanish have multi-generational households and cater well for older generations. Baqueira Beret in the Pyrenees is best reached from Toulouse airport and is still relatively undiscovered by mass tourism. A full-price lift pass costs €222, but is free from your 70th birthday onwards.

Andorra

Pas de La Casa

In the social spirit of both Spain and France, the principality is concession-friendly.

Grandvalira (Pas de La Casa and Soldeu) and Vallnord (Pal-Arinsal, Ordino Arcalis) are the two main ski areas. A week's skiing costs from €288; seniors 65 to 74 from €159. But if you are born in 1948 or earlier, you ski for free.

Unless stated otherwise, lift pass prices are for six days.

For four memorable years in the 1970s, he dominated the blue riband event of ski racing, winning Olympic Gold at Innsbruck in 1976, along with 25 individual race victories. These

included four on the notorious Streif course on the Hahnenkamm in Kitzbühel, revered as the most challenging on the World Cup circuit.

Franz told me in Kitzbühel one January as we watched the racers flying 80 metres through the air on the infamous Mausfalle jump: “There is no single winner on the Streif. Each and every competitor who gets to the finish in one piece is the winner.”



Writer Peter went skiing with Klammer in his home Austrian resort of Badkleinkirchheim

The chance to ski another run with Franz was an invitation I couldn't refuse. Some 40 of the greatest downhillers of all time – both men and women, aged from 33 to 75 felt the same. They'd gathered in Badkleinkirchheim to take part in the Race of Legends and later raise what turned out to be a considerable number of glasses to the Archduke of Austrian skiing.

Who is Franz Klammer?

The quite extraordinary event for which Franz will be best remembered took place 47 years ago on the Patscherkofel, above the little village of Igls outside Innsbruck, during the 1976 Winter Olympics.

Franz Klammer drew the highest starting number of the 15 seeded contenders. The advantage of drawing such a late bib is that you know the time to beat. The serious disadvantage is that the course will be damaged, and the snow around the gates will be ruinously rutted.

At this moment at the bottom of the course, Bernhard Russi, Franz's chief rival and best friend, was leading the field. He was within touching distance of Gold with just one racer to go.

I asked Franz what his thoughts were as he stood at the starting gate that February day. "Win – or crash. I'm not going to come second."

What happened in the following 1:45.73 min defied a combination of gravity, belief, and human ability. Franz threw himself down the mountain, taking an impossibly tight line between gates. For much of the course, he was more off-balance than on. But sheer determination, a bottomless will to win kept him standing on his skis. It's considered by many to be the greatest downhill descent of all time. The whole mountain shook with applause as the result became clear.

Ian Wooldridge, recognised as the greatest sports commentator of that era and himself a non-skier with no previous interest in the sport, described it to me at the time as "the greatest single sporting achievement I have ever been privileged to witness in my entire life."

Russi, now 75, who had already won gold four years earlier at Sapporo in Japan, said philosophically: "I wanted to win, but I didn't want him to lose. I don't want to say that I lost the gold medal, I won the silver medal. Plus, much more importantly, we created a deep friendship. As life passes. I always say it is better to have been a has-been than never to have

Among them was Konrad Bartelski, still Britain's most successful downhiller, who competed for a decade against Franz on the World Cup circuit. He beat him into fifth place at Val Gardena in 1981, missing out on gold by a mere 0.11 of a second. These days, we have the great Dave Ryding slaloming into the history books, but Konrad's remarkable run all those years ago remains Britain's best-ever downhill result.

"It's been a long and lasting friendship," said Konrad. "Mostly, I finished behind him – as I have, by a few months, in the race to reach 70. But I can tell you that after Val Gardena Franz wasn't happy about being beaten by an Englishman!"



Klammer competing in the men's downhill event at the Patscherkofel at the 1976 Winter Olympics | CREDIT: Getty

A crowd of several hundred enthusiastic local fans gathered at the finish to watch the event.

“This,” Franz explained before the start, “is the one race that I cannot win. I go down first and then all the others have to come as close to my time as they can, either faster or slower.

“For the young guy, it will be very difficult to ski as slow as I do. For the others, it will be very difficult to ski as fast as I do.”



Les Arcs is one of many ski resorts that offer discounts for older skiers | CREDIT: Getty

In the end, it was 56-year-old Patrick Ortlieb from Lech, gold medallist on the wicked La Face course in Val d'Isère at the 1992 Albertville Olympics, who managed to get within eight-hundredths of a second of Franz's time.

At the finish line, the chat between former rivals, many of them meeting for the first time in years, centred not on past wins, but numbers of grandchildren. Franz and his wife Eva have three: "Two boys and a girl. They chase me around. It's a lot of fun, they are on skis already and I am leading a very, very happy life."

But he added: "When I am going through the gates again, the thrill is coming back." At 70, the light of Franz Klammer remains undimmed.

Essentials

How to Ski with Franz Klammer

This winter expert skiers can join Klammer on [Badkleinkirchheim's Ski Before 9am](#) programme on three dates: January 9 and February 6, 13 and 20. From €195 including breakfast on the mountain.

How to get there

The nearest airport is Klagenfurt (60 minutes), served by regular [Ryanair](#) flights from Stansted. Ljubljana, across the border in Slovenia, is a 90-minute transfer. Salzburg, served by multiple airlines including [easyJet](#), is a 150-minute drive away.

Where to stay

The five-star Das Ronacher Therme & Spa Resort has indoor and outdoor swimming pools, a saltwater pool with underwater music and meditation areas, and a sauna pool. Double rooms cost from £499 per night, half board.

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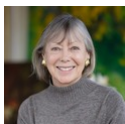
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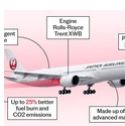
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