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SKI RESORTS

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The term 'ski resort' combines two notions: on the one hand, it is a recreational practice, and on the other it is a tourism-specific concept¹. First, 'skiing' is a means of transportation consisting of gliding on snow. Historically a winter transport, skiing has become a competitive sport and a recreational activity. Usually, skiing includes different practices, among which alpine skiing – also called downhill skiing – is the most popular. Second, 'resort' is the main spatial outcome induced by tourism practices. It refers to the place where tourists go for a holiday. It includes all the facilities required to provide extended ski holidays. In 2019, 58 countries had at least one outdoor ski area. Throughout the world, there are approximately 5000 outdoor ski areas (see figure), 2000 of which are considered as ski resorts (Vanat, 2020).

The specificities of ski resorts in the ski industry

The ski resort concept captures the spatial and organizational events within the phenomenon of ski tourism. The concept is a key element in the winter sports industry and must be clearly distinguished from other types of ski offers. Ski resorts are different from ski sites, as the latter do not provide any kind of accommodation and attract only day-tripper skiers. The operation of ski sites assumes a close relationship with local or regional ski demand, while efficient means of transport and easy access to ski resorts are essential for national and international tourists. The presence of skiers on ski sites is often correlated with the weather conditions in the surrounding urban areas. Such a phenomenon is not relevant for ski resorts, as they welcome skiers with overnight stays, and ski holiday bookings begin months before the opening of the ski season. While the ski resort model is based on overnight accommodation of skiers, ski resorts are not tourist towns either. Ski resorts are strongly defined by their seasonal activities and do not provide wide urban functions (e.g., residential areas, an administration centre, industrial areas) as a tourist town can do. While a tourist town may have a ski tourism offer, its economy is more diversified and less oriented towards skiing than a ski resort. Winter Olympic Games host cities typify the tourist towns connected with several skiing venues – that is, ski resorts or ski sites that host some of the Olympic events.

Ski resorts are centred around two main aspects: their ski lift park, which shapes the ski slope areas, and the accommodation parks. Besides ski lifts and accommodation, a ski resort also includes a range of tourism services expected by tourists: restaurants, ski-related services – such as ski shops or ski schools for beginners – and a tourist information centre. Although ski lifts are a necessary component of ski tourism, the presence of accommodation and its spatial arrangement are the main characteristics of ski resorts.

Ski resorts are divided in two categories depending on the development pattern of their accommodation facilities: those built according to existing local activities and those created from scratch. In some cases, ski resorts foster the development of pre-existing local communities. While tourism-related activities change the local economy, the development of ski resorts seeks to integrate and maintain the initial urban fabric with adjacent development of tourism facilities. In other cases, ski resorts reside in non-urbanized areas, created from scratch. These differences go beyond single spatial distinctions. The development of ski resorts as a continuation of local communities is rooted in the process of gradual construction depending on opportunities, turn of events and local stakeholders involved. Resorts indeed appear more in line with the existing set-up and integrated into the existing urban system, but they must also deal with the previously existing economy and land use. A less business-oriented development of a ski resort is often the result of a negotiated compromise between stakeholders. Ski resorts created from scratch are the outcome of a planned development, with a tourism purpose clearly defined. The development of a ski resort on a greenfield site – away from existing activities – may have different motivations. Research into the best place for skiing practice often goes hand in hand with seeking land ownership. The latter is required to ease the future development of ski resorts. The mindset in urban planning is based on financial considerations. The design of these ski resorts shows some similarity with that of coastal resorts: they share the same tourism planning framework.

The operation and governance of ski resorts

The operation of ski lifts and real estate management are the two main activities of ski resorts. One depends on the sales of ski lift tickets, while the other relies on the seasonal rental and real estate development. Both are deeply intertwined, with the success of one often depending on the success of the other. Both activities may be owned by a single organization or operated by third parties. In a competitive market, the development of the offer of ski lifts and real estate requires a high-level of investment that makes the operation of ski resorts one of the most capital-intensive tourism industries (Berard-Chenu et al., 2020).

Both the private and public sectors are part of the development of ski resorts. The absence or presence of one of them depends on the local and political contexts. For example, several provincial authorities in China foster the development of ski resorts. After World War II, European public bodies began to facilitate the ski industry in the Alps where private initiatives were the norm. Although the private sector is more present in the history of ski resorts in the United States, the New Deal policy during the 1930s helped to launch the ski industry there. Public authorities have often supported tourism development by building essential facilities or ensuring land use. The varying intensities of public and private involvement in the management of ski resorts have been studied through the concept of governance (see the entry on Governance in this *Encyclopedia*). This concept has become relevant as the winter sport industry has shifted from the construction of ski resorts to their management, a change that has led to an evolution in the stakeholders involved and the management process (George-Marcelpoil & François, 2012). The governance of ski resorts oscillates between two archetypal models: the 'corporate model' and the 'community model' (Flagestad & Hope, 2001). In the first case, only one operator manages the ski resort (e.g., the US company Vail Resorts), while in the second, a range of specialized but independent service providers (e.g., the French Compagnie des Alpes specialized in the operation of ski lifts) participate in the operation of the ski resort. The corporate model is more frequently

observed in North American ski resorts while European ski resorts are more similar to the so-called community model.

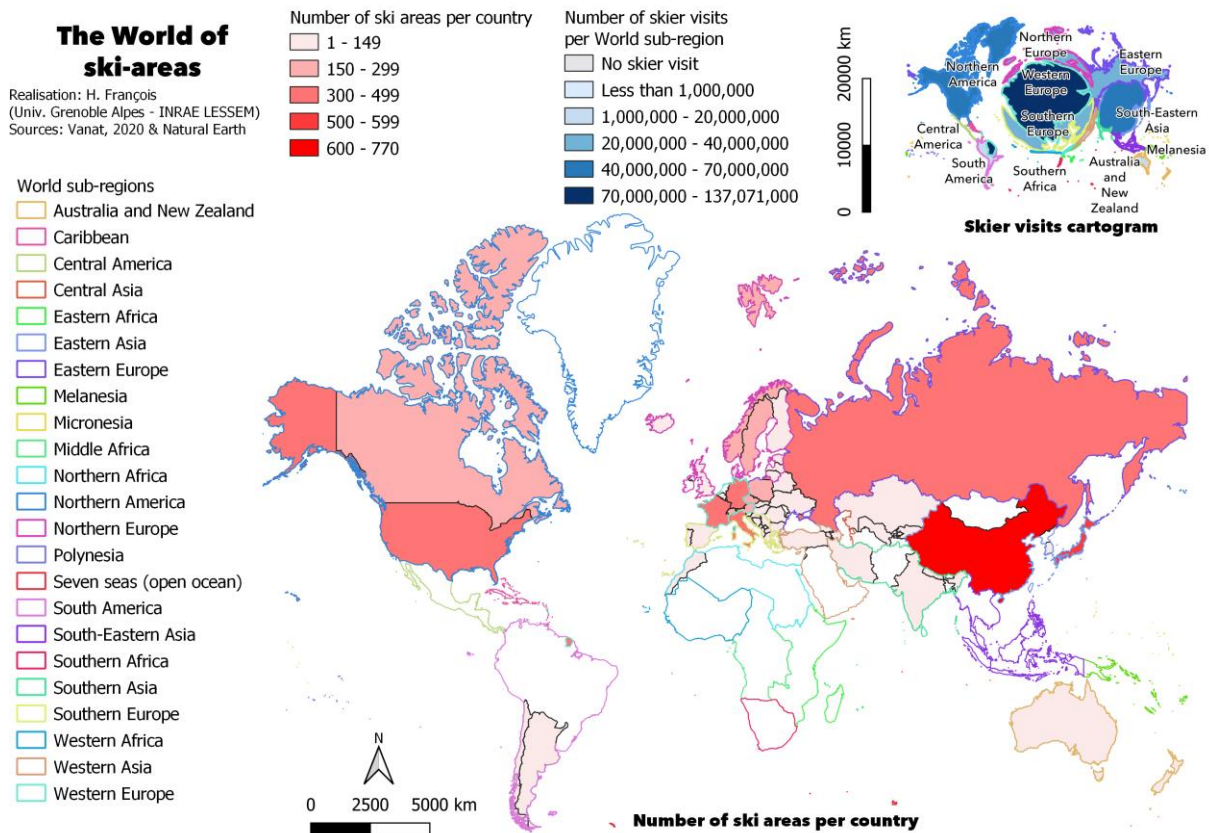


Figure: Number of ski areas per country

Source: Drawn by H. François, based on Vanat (2020) dataset, Natural Earth (base map) and ScapeToad software (cartogram).

Current issues on ski resorts

Ski resorts have not escaped criticism regarding their environmental impacts, including a growing concern over the last three decades about their sustainability in response to climate change. A commonly accepted rule is that the winter season is profitable if at least 100 days with continuous snow cover are ensured (Abegg et al., 2020). Due to the impacts of climate change, the decline of operational days is one of the main issues for the economic viability of ski lift operators. To this day, snowmaking technologies are used – that is, the production of artificial snow – to counteract the impacts of climate change (Spandre et al., 2019). With unfavourable future climate conditions, even this technical adaptation will face its own limits. The increase in the amount of artificial snow needed to offset the scarcity of natural snow is paired with the decrease in the slots for its production.

Diversification is another way to face snow scarcity and climate change. This process seeks to improve the resilience of ski resorts (Luthe et al., 2012) by making them more appealing – including the extension of the tourist season after the end of the winter season while reducing the part of the offer that is snow dependent. However, the diversification process raises concerns regarding the initial organization of ski resorts, as it questions the

role of skiing in the tourism offer and often changes its model of governance. Diversification leads to a shift from product-based attraction (i.e., skiing) toward a place-based attraction (i.e., the local anchorage of the ski resort). Thus, ski tourism appears as part of a set of tourist products. The model of governance of ski resorts must go beyond the domination of ski lifts and open up to other stakeholders, providing additional or even alternative tourist offers. The diversification process requires more coordination between stakeholders for the sake of the offer consistency (Achin & George-Marcelpoil, 2013). These changes concern the unity of the resort, especially when tourists no longer practice their activities in the resort where they stay. Diversification processes and climate change pose a challenge for the future of the inherited ski resort model and raise the question of its potential upcoming obsolescence.

Notes

¹ This note falls within the studies of mountain tourism conducted in INRAE at Grenoble (France). We thank E.George, research team lead and H.François for his participation in the writing and mapping.

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