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Skiing: Avoiding the half-term hikes

British and French schoolchildren share the same spring holiday week. With France being a bad idea, Peter Hardy selects some alternative resorts.

By Peter Hardy

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If you are planning to take your family skiing over the February school break and have yet to book, my advice is simple: don't. The week in the Alps that begins on St Valentine's Day (February 14) is likely to be the half term from hell. For the first time in nearly a decade, almost all schools in England and Wales have chosen the same week, rather than spreading the holiday over two weeks.



'Riederalp in the Swiss Valais is a tranquil family resort almost entirely unknown in Britain' Photo: GETTY IMAGES

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Tour operators were the first to notice this. Rather than profiting from two of the busiest weeks of the season, they must now make their margins from one. As a result, prices are sky-high. Indeed, if you are unsure exactly which week is half term, just open any brochure and focus on the highest price on the page. Thomson, for example, has the three-star Haus Gurgl in Obergurgl from as low as £529 in December, but at half term it's £1,149.

Chalet companies are following suit. The child specialist Esprit Ski charges from £519 in December for its smarter chalets in Les Arcs, but in mid-February this rises to £1,099. At the top of the scale, Ski Verbier offers its 12-person chalet, Septi-Ciel, from £17,500. For the half-term week the price more than doubles at £39,000.

However, exceedingly high prices are only part of the story. The English and Welsh date coincides this winter with the busiest week of the French school holiday calendar.

Thousands of children and teenagers from Paris, Lyons and Grenoble will be jostling for turning space with their British counterparts

on the slopes of the principal French resorts. The consequence will inevitably be frustrating lift queues and a level of overcrowding that can be dangerous.

However, if you must go that week – and many of us must – there's still a reasonable amount of availability, provided you are prepared to drive: flights and weekend trains are already heavily booked up.

A word of warning: ski school and childcare spaces are extremely limited. It's no good finding an available chalet and then discovering you will be child-minding all week.

In recent years it has not been possible to book St Anton's two ski schools – you simply turn up on Monday morning. However, one consequence at half term is over-large classes.

Erna Low (0845 863 0525, www.ernalow.co.uk (<http://www.ernalow.co.uk>)) says it still has some apartments available in most resorts. The Chamonix specialist Collineige has two luxury catered chalets for 12 from £1,017pp or a self-catering apartment for six from £444pp. Travel is not included.

VIP has the luxury Chalet Grand Choucas in Val d'Isère (sleeping up to eight) for £1,879pp without travel.

Mountain Rooms & Chalets (0700 2000 456, www.mountainrooms.com (<http://www.mountainrooms.com>)) has a three-bedroom semi-catered apartment for six in Résidence Val d'Ilaz, Val d'Isère, for £751pp. The price includes breakfast and tea for seven nights as well as three dinners; travel is not included.

If the crunch hasn't affected you, Descent International (020 7384 3854, www.descent.co.uk (<http://www.descent.co.uk>)) still has Hermine in Courchevel available. This traditional chalet is on a private drive in 1850 and sleeps 10 in Muscovite comfort. The location is outstanding as is the price tag – £3,500pp (reduced from £4,600); travel is not included.

If you can't avoid half term altogether, but want to maintain your sanity, my advice is to give the mainstream French resorts as wide a berth as possible.

BEST RESORTS FOR HALF TERM

Formigal in the Spanish Pyrenees used to be popular with British skiers 30 years ago, and then fell from grace through lack of development. But now, after major investment in both the town and ski area, it's back in force with 21 lifts and 137km of skiing over four linked valleys.

The resort is trying hard to re-establish an international reputation. Last season was not good for snow, but the resort already has plenty of cover with more forecast. Importantly, the Catalan school holidays don't clash with the British half term.

Hotel Nievesol is a pleasant three-star in the centre of the resort with a free evening children's club. Neilson (0870 333 3356, www.neilson.co.uk (<http://www.neilson.co.uk>)), £665 half board; Thomson (0871 971 0578, www.thomson-ski.co.uk (<http://www.thomson-ski.co.uk>)), £685 with child reductions.

Riederalp in the Swiss Valais is a tranquil family resort almost entirely unknown in Britain, and our half term does not clash with the local dates.

The three areas of Riederalp, Bettmeralp and Fiescheralp have a total of 35 lifts and its pistes are suited to all standards, but particularly to intermediates. There is also some spectacular off-piste around the Aletsch Glacier, a Unesco heritage site that is the most spectacular icefield in Europe.

One of Riederalp's biggest plus points is that it is entirely car free – a huge bonus for families with small children. The resort is on the upper pastureland of the Rhône Valley and reached only by cable car in winter.

This is the kind of place where you can combine skiing, walking and tobogganing in an utterly relaxed atmosphere.

The four-star Alpenrose is centrally located and acts as the hub of the resort. Made to Measure (01243 5333 333, www.mtmhols.co.uk (<http://www.mtmhols.co.uk>)), £1,549 half board per adult, £1,234 per child in a two-room suite. Price includes flights and rail transfers.

Courmayeur has a non-ski and ski kindergarten situated up the mountain at Plan Checrouit, making it one of the Italian resorts most suited to family skiing. The pisted ski area is often unfairly criticised as being too limited. In fact, it suits beginners and wobbly intermediates as well as advanced skiers who have all the challenging off-piste opportunities of the Mont Blanc Massif at their disposal. The only category of skier it does not suit is the high-mileage intermediate cruiser.

The resort will be busy with half-termers including French families – it's only a 20-minute drive away via the Mont Blanc Tunnel – but

the locals will not be on holiday.

The Bouton d'Or is a family-run three-star hotel in a quiet position close to the centre of town. It does not have its own restaurant, but will arrange half board with a choice of local restaurants on request. Momentum Ski (020 7371 9111, www.momentumski.com (<http://www.momentumski.com>)), £509 b & b, travel not included.

Ellmau in Austria is a delightful gateway into the 90 lifts and 250km of the Ski Welt, which includes Soll Hopfgarten and Scheffau. This year, you can also reach Westendorf by a new lift across the Brixen Valley. With the right ski pass you can ski on to Kirchberg, Kitzbühel and beyond. The local school break is the previous week, but the slopes will nevertheless be busy.

The four-star Hotel Alte Post is a traditional chalet building in the centre of the village. Inghams (020 8780 4447, www.inghams.co.uk (<http://www.inghams.co.uk>)), £1,123, half board with Gatwick flights. Regional flights are also available.

Sunday River in Maine has excellent family facilities. It has 18 lifts and the quality of the skiing compares well with a medium-sized resort in the Alps.

This is President's Weekend, the busiest bank holiday of the winter in the US. However, the slopes will still be less crowded than in Europe.

This holiday involves flying out on Friday evening and spending one night in Boston. You then spend six nights at the Grand Summit Resort Hotel, which is on the edge of the piste in Sunday River. Ski Safari (01273 224 060, www.skisafari.com (<http://www.skisafari.com>)), £2,995 for a family of four, meals not included.

Nassfeld in Austria has a substantial intermediate ski area with 40 lifts. It's the stomping ground of the veteran downhill Olympic hero Franz Klammer and the ski school is the only one in the world – to my knowledge – that accepts toddlers in nappies.

School holidays in the province of Carinthia will be the week before half term, although this is very much high season and slopes will be busy.

The specialist rental agency Interhome (020 8780 6629, www.interhome.co.uk (<http://www.interhome.co.uk>)) has a nearby self-catering three-star chalet sleeping up to five in three bedrooms for £692, travel not included.

Ruka in Finland is in an area of outstanding natural beauty just below the Arctic Circle and close to the Russian border. The ski area is small (20km of piste and 20 lifts) but you don't come here just to slide downhill. It has 600km of snowmobiling and 200km of cross-country trails. Other activities include dog- and reindeer-sledding. One third of Finnish children will be on holiday, but a lift queue here in high season is a rarity.

Thomson Ski (0871 971 0578, www.thomsonski.co.uk (<http://www.thomsonski.co.uk>)) offers the three-star self-catering Rukariutta apartments, with their own saunas, for £639 per adult and £399 per child with Gatwick or Manchester flights.

The four-star Rukasuites Aparthotel is a brand new complex with a kindergarten and a supermarket in the same building. Inghams (020 8780 4447, www.inghams.co.uk (<http://www.inghams.co.uk>)), from £722 per person.

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