

# Travel

Travel 23

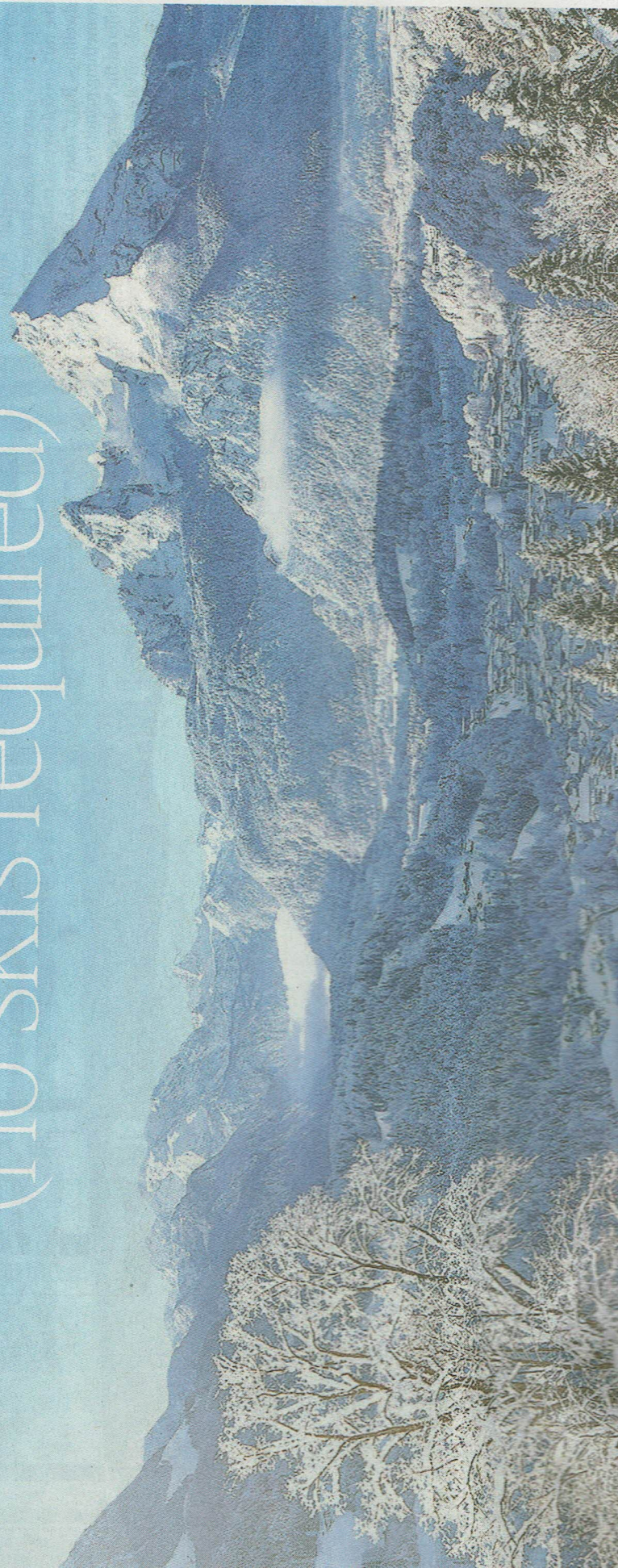
**'In January the narrow streets  
were mine alone with only  
locals in the restaurants'**

Julia Buckley visits Tuscany in the off-season

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20 great winter escapes  
(no skis required)







...a polar-bear  
...ing in Svalbard  
...biking in the  
**Richard Mellor**  
...the best snowy  
...ways — with  
...piste in sight

### 1 Snowshoe in Catalonia

Snowshoeing is the focus of Exodus's small-group trips to the Catalan Pyrenees, which, though just as majestic, are quieter than those over the border in France. Based in a village of slate-roof houses and winding streets in the Pallars Sobira region, you'll amble through ancient forests and across valleys up to scenic passes. You can try regional cheese and sausages too, and a wine-tasting course is thrown in.

**Details** Seven nights' B&B from £1,429pp, including flights, transfers, 11 other meals and equipment (exodus.co.uk). There are five departures between January 19 and March 8, in groups no larger than 14

### 2 Beautiful Bavaria

It might be a mouthful, but Ramsau bei Berchtesgaden, above, ranks among the Bavarian Alps' most picturesque villages. Near the Watzmann, Germany's third-highest mountain, it is in the Berchtesgaden National Park, where visitors can ride chairlifts, sail on electric boats on Königssee lake or enjoy horse-drawn sleigh rides in the forests. Inntravel guests stay at the Berghotel Rehlegg, a blend of spa and village tavern.

**Details** Seven nights' full board from £1,165pp, including flights and transfers (inntravel.co.uk)



### 1

Snowshoe hiking

### 3 Relax in Swiss luxury

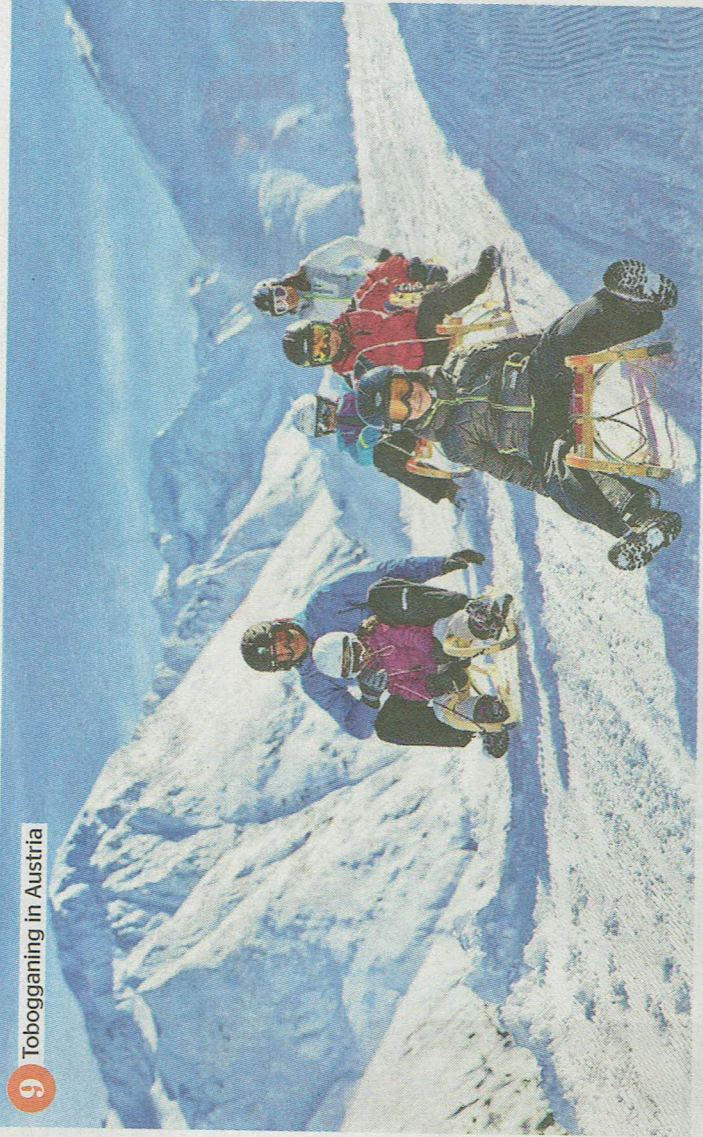
Hidden in Switzerland's Alps are some of the world's most prestigious wellness hotels. At the Grand Resort Bad Ragaz, the options include a two-night Pure Relaxation package, promising a herbal-compress massage, daily yoga, meditation and access to a thermal-water spa. In between, ride mountain railways, snowshoe or visit what is believed to be Europe's largest living Christmas tree.

**Details** Two nights' B&B from £1,080pp, including transfers from Bad Ragaz station (resortragaz.ch). Fly to Zurich with Swiss or EasyJet ▶



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9 Tobogganing in Austria



the festival, including a return FlexiPlus Eurotunnel crossing (peakretreats.co.uk)

## 17 Svalbard polar bears

Desperate to follow Lyra to the Kingdom of the Ice Bears? Real-life Svalbard might disappoint fans of the BBC's *His Dark Materials* — the bears are armour-free and refuse to speak English — but the island's regular polar bears and near-total wilderness are ample compensation. Targeted at solo travellers, G Adventures' expedition cruises depart in summer (there's snow all year) and have a good chance of bear sightings. Even more likely are close-up encounters with icebergs from small Zodiac boats and hikes among seals and reindeer.

**Details** Seven nights' full board from £2,499pp, including transfers, some activities and winter clothing (gadventures.co.uk). There are four departures during June and July. Fly to Longyearbyen with SAS

## 18 Stay at the Ice Hotel

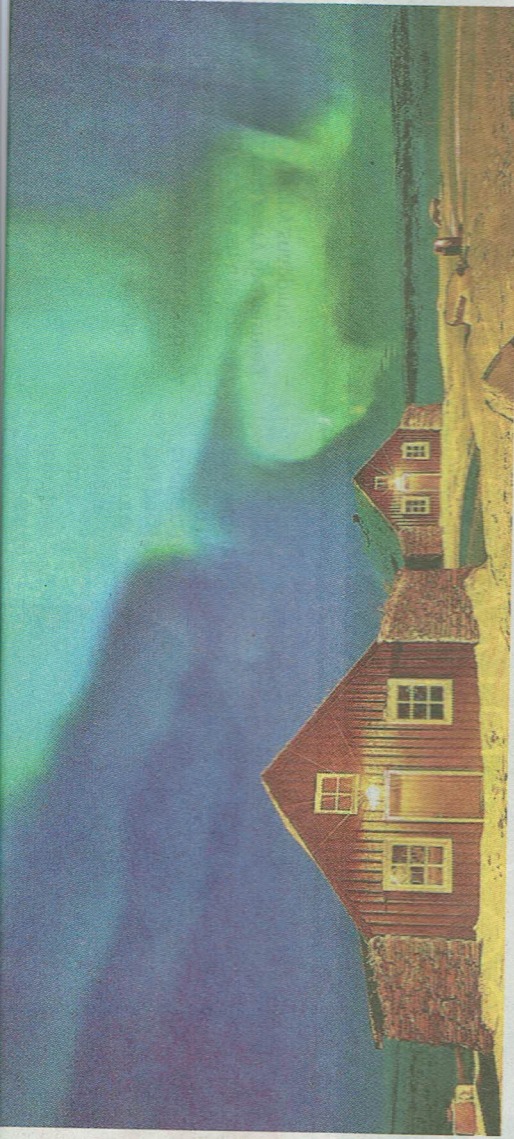
UTracks' private tours of Swedish Lapland are great for bucket-listers. If all the frozen lakes and snow-dusted forests aren't fairytale enough, you also have great odds of seeing the northern lights. The Abisko area's microclimate makes for such reliably clear skies that a monitoring Aurora Sky Station is based there, and you'll get to visit it. There's a final, giddy, aurora borealis "hunt" aboard snowmobiles and two nights at the original, annually erected Ice Hotel.

**Details** Six nights' B&B from £1,950pp, including Stockholm-to-Kiruna transfers, equipment and one dinner (utracks.com). Departures until March 31. Fly to Stockholm and from Kiruna with SAS

5 Torfhus Retreat in Iceland







Emmental and cider tasting, hearty dinner and bed in main inn. Another saunter the morning, past meadows and as you finishing at the ski Malbun, where toboggan are available.

One-night treks from £255pp, all meals (lama-alpaka.lf), two on request, or in groups £100. B&B doubles at Malbun's Prory Jufa Hotel, with sauna, 2 (jufa.eu). Fly to Zurich with Easyjet

### Alpine fondue fun

fun enough in its own right, better when it's served in an igloo below a Swiss glacier. Deal on Much Better's weekend trips to Trient; five to eight people also go on treks to summits for views of unspoilt valleys, z down a 3km sledging route powder fields. You'll spend day in front of open fires in hut.

Two nights' full board pp, including transfers, t and activities (eradventures.com). Departures until April 10. Fly with Swiss or British Airways

### Ice in Morzine

ampers You is a dedicated rent in the French Alps t of the Portes du Soleil March 9 to 13. Forget king pistes; instead, visitors

### 8 Husky trekking in the Yukon



can rest and recharge via expert-led health workshops and guided moonlit snowshoe walks. As well as helping yourself by attending, help the environment by booking AliKats Mountain Holidays' new Eco Package, which encourages customers to reduce their carbon footprint. If you travel from the UK to Geneva or Cluses by train and settle for meat-free menus during your stay, AliKats gives you 10 per cent off your chosen chalet, a free return transfer and discounts on low-impact mountain activities.

**Details** Five nights' self-catering, beginning on March 8, from £788pp, including transfers, champagne on arrival and use of a hot tub (alikats.eu). Book trains to Geneva or Cluses with Rail Europe (raileurope.co.uk)

### 15 Ice skating in Finland

Finland's lake district becomes a paradise for ice skating in winter

with trails marked out across the frozen bodies of water so that "Nordic skaters" can use long poles to perform long-distance glides between islands. Ideal for families, Magnetic North's private short break can have you joining in, with a guide showing you ospreys and rare ringed seals on jaunts around Linnansaari National Park. Your base throughout is the cosy lakeside hotel Jarvisydän, with a spa and — because this is Finland — a sauna.

**Details** Four nights' B&B from £820pp, including transfers from Savonlinna station, guided skating, equipment and park fees (magneticnorthtravel.com). Fly to Helsinki with Finnair or Norwegian, then take the train (four hours) to Savonlinna

### 16 Scallops in France

Villard de Lans, in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region of southeastern France, makes an unlikely venue for a festival celebrating scallops from St Brieuc in Brittany. Yet a 12th edition of the Fête de la Coquille St Jacques — borne of the two towns' friendship, and promising tastings, demos, cooking courses, Breton dances and live music, much of it free — will run on March 28 and 29. Villard de Lans also lays on bobsleighb, snow-groomer rides and 30 miles of snowshoeing trails. Stay in Le Splendid's recently transformed superior apartments in a former grand hotel.

**Details** Seven nights' self-catering in a

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**Details** Six nights' B&B from £1,950pp, including Stockholm-to-Kiruna transfers, equipment and one dinner (utracks.com). Departures until March 31. Fly to Stockholm and from Kiruna with SAS

### 19 Fatbike in Courchevel

The French resort of Courchevel and its mountain-scattered villages aren't purely the preserve of skiers. Perfect for energy-to-burn teenagers is fatbiking — the tyres are oversized, not the teenagers — on the new route from 1850 to Le Praz. The many non-ski family options also include escape games and sledging routes. Stay over in the quieter Courchevel Moriond at Portetta, effectively an Alpine reprise of its cool sister hotels Lime Wood and the Pigs, and you can try Italian and Savoyard fusion food courtesy of the chef Angela Hartnett's lone overseas restaurant Cucina Angelina.

**Details** B&B family rooms from £690 a night (portetta.com). Fly to Geneva or Lyon with British Airways

### 20 Muscovite culture

Pack in the Russian capitals classic winter rituals on TravelLocal's short break, available privately. You'll watch a figure-skating performance before taking to the ice — with a tutor if needed — in the fabled Gorky Park. You'll press your skin with damp birch brooms, just as the Muscovites do, inside a traditional steam sauna. And you'll go vodka tasting, cruise on the Moskva River, and visit museums, mausoleums and grand department stores on a walking tour. And you will take off with huskies, learning how to operate a sleigh. Somehow, amid all that, there's time for lunch at a local family's home.

**Details** Four nights' B&B from £1,490pp, including flights, transfers, excursions



## 4 Travel

### Horse around in Tyrol

Kitzbühel in western Austria promises snow, world-class gastronomy and rich Tyrolean cultural scene. It also home to the Snow Polo World Cup Kitzbühel from January 16 to 19, and entrance is free. On a hillside overlooking the town, the Tennerhof Gourmet & Spa de Charme Hotel has white, wood-accented rooms, formal dining and a focus on wellness.

**tails** B&B doubles from £364 (including the Snow Polo World Cup dinner/hof.com). Get the Eurostar to Amsterdam, then the Alpen Express sleeper train (alpen.express)

### Iceland's cool new hotel

Close to the Golden Circle's spurling Geysers and Gullfoss waterfall, Torfhús treat has luxury lodges that recreate the turf-roofed style of traditional dwellings. But if you're picturing something primitive, think again; also offered there are geothermally heated pools, private balconies and high-speed wifi, and the property runs off sustainable energy. Staff can arrange ice-climbing trips or guided trots ride Icelandic horses. The rural setting also means that it may be possible to see the northern lights.

**tails** Four nights' B&B, one of them in Reykjavik, from £1,773pp, including flights and car rental (discover-the-world.com)

### Ice sculptures in Japan

Along with hundreds of snow statues and snow slides across three sites, the annual Sapporo Snow Festival from February 4 to 11 hosts an international ice-sculpture contest. At its Susukino location, international teams chisel their efforts as visitors watch. Catch them during Game & Marshall's Hokkaido hot-spots itinerary, a circuit of Japan's largely wild northern island. Along with



15 Hotel Jarvisdyan in Finland

4



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## 7 Sculptures in Japan

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Eleven nights' B&B from £630pp, including rail passes, entrance fees and some meals ([ganeandmarshall.com](http://ganeandmarshall.com)). Tokyo with Finnair or Air France

## 7 Cairngorms wildlife

Although the white stuff is far from guaranteed, the Cairngorms National Park is one of Scotland's safest bets, with an average of 76 days of snow a year. A guided wildlife-watching break with Responsible Travel should deliver reindeer, roe and red deer, red squirrels, otters, hares and golden eagles. Base camp, deep inside the park, is a tepee-style tent big enough for a living area, wood-burning stove, and comfy beds. Phones can be charged via solar power, so you can take photos galore.

Details Four nights' full board from £630pp, including transfers and guiding (responsibletravel.com). Departures on Mondays; maximum group size six. Take a train to Kingussie or Aviemore

## 8 Huskies in the Yukon

Call of the Wild, starring Harrison Ford and due for release in February, is Disney's adaptation of Jack London's 1903 novel about Buck, a dog stolen from California and sold to sleigh racers in gold-rush-era Yukon. On Windows on the Wild's Husky Adventure follow Buck to the Canadian territory to be whisked along far-flung fells or iced-up lakes. In groups of up to six, you'll spend an initial few days learning to steer and care for the animals, and there's also a sauna at the main base lodge to enjoy.

Details Seven nights' full board (except three meals) from £1,535pp, including transfers from Whitehorse and winter boots ([windowsonthewild.com](http://windowsonthewild.com)). Departures on Saturdays and Wednesdays until March 23. Fly via Vancouver with Air Canada

## 9 A licence to thrill in Austria

Austria's longest toboggan run — 12 per cent — opens this month in the Alpine resort of Sölden. It is illuminated for night runs on Wednesdays until March (from £26pp, [soelden.com](http://soelden.com)). Stay at Das Central and dine at its mountain-top restaurant Ice Q, which featured in *Spectre* and has interactive galleries devoted to James Bond. The hotel has bright rooms and a ten-sauna spa.

Details Half-board doubles from £172 (central-soelden.com). Fly to Innsbruck with EasyJet or British Airways

## 10 Photogenic Greenland

Wild Photography Holidays runs a guided group winter trip to west Greenland to take advantage of the spectacular sunsets and huge Arctic skies, which are dark enough for seeing the northern lights to be a possibility. Another highlight for snappers is the Jakobshavn Glacier, which each year calves 35 billion tonnes of spearmint-coloured icebergs into Disko Bay and Ilulissat Icefjord. You'll take boat trips and helicopter rides, and perhaps stay in some huskying, during a three-night fit in a small halibut-fishing settlement of red clapboard houses.

Details Seven nights' full board from £3,250pp, including all transport and tours ([wildphotographyholidays.com](http://wildphotographyholidays.com)). Fly to Ilulissat via Keflavik and Reykjavik with Icelandair and Air Greenland. Maximum group size is 12

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The Snow Polo World Cup Kitzbühel

## 11 Slovakia for families

Over new year — so be quick! — Families Worldwide runs an activity-packed group tour to Slovakia's dependably powder-covered Tatras Mountains. On the (busy) bill are snowboarding, snowshoeing, huskying and a horse-and-cart ride. There's time to hit the water slides and wallow in Bukovina's thermal-water hydromassage pools; you might also hop on a train to walk back from the area's highest village.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,449 per adult and £1,409 per child aged 5 to 11, including flights, transport and activities ([familiesworldwide.co.uk](http://familiesworldwide.co.uk)). Departure on December 28 for a group of up to five families

## 12 Trek in Liechtenstein

What's all the rage in Liechtenstein this year? That'll be llama and alpaca trekking. Since guided overnight jaunts were introduced to the Alpine principality in late 2018, they've been wildly successful, sometimes selling out months in advance, although availability is decent in winter. From the village of Sucka you will lead your easy-going animal along rural tracks through mountain scenery to a dairy