FEATURE

A Different Kind of Ski Holiday

For our family, this holiday was never going to look like the typical ski trip.

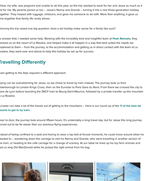
RYAN CUMMINGS
CNN, UK

My son Jesse is 8 years old, autistic and non-verbal. His anxiety levels mainly mean staying ski gear is completely off the table for him – we couldn't even with the battle of snow boots, eventually settling on a rotating combination of his Crocs, Scooby Doo Cinderella and Mario Kart shoes throughout the week. We never stayed in Alpine snow and ice gallery.

Ski school – the centerpiece of our family ski holidays – simply wasn't going to happen.

But that was exactly the point of the trip.

I've been skiing since I was five years old, and like many lifelong skiers I'd always imagined teaching my own children one day. These early morning drop offs to ski schools, the proud moment when they nine their first lycra suit, the first time they ride the Magic Carpet on their own. Over the years I've watched friends and fellow vacation pursuits of family ski holidays, and now, finally,



What I hoped we might find instead was something different – our version of the perfect ski holiday.

Chilco, my wife, was pregnant and unable to ski this year, so this trip needed to work for me and Jesse as much as it needed to work for the entire family. We'd been to Austria, Switzerland, Italy and Canada, and we'd been together. They helped with luggage, childcare, and gave me someone to ski with. Much like anything, it goes so long together that family life mostly allows.

Planning the trip meant one big question: does a ski holiday make sense for a family like ours?

To answer that, I reached some help. Working with the incredibly kind and insightful team at **Peak Retreats**, they worked out a list of what a ski holiday, and indeed a week of happiness in a ski resort, looked like for families who experienced a them – from the journey, to the accommodation and getting on to direct contact with the team at Les Rousses, they made and analysis being this holiday be what we, for ourselves.

Travelling Differently

Start getting to the Alps requires a different approach.

Flying can be overwhelming for Jesse, so we chose to travel by train instead. The journey took us from Peterborough to London Kings Cross, then on the Eurostar to Paris Gare du Nord. From there we crossed the city to Paris Gare de Lyon and boarded the SNCF TGV to Bourg Saint-Maurice. The entire journey from our front door to our destination, Les Rousses, was 8 hours.

Eurostar can take a lot of the hassle out of getting to the mountains – there is our round up of the **10 of the best ski resorts to get to by train**.

Once in Jesse, the journey took around fifteen hours. It's undeniably a long travel day, but Jesse this long journey turned out to be the calmest than our previous flying experiences.

Instead of being confined to a seat and having to wear a lap belt or forced movements, he could move around when he needed it – wandering down the carriage to see the flashing sand blocks, who were travelling in another carriage. The train is heading to the cafe carriage for a change of scenery. As we rather he knew you my two twin wrestles and hold up a big Mickey Mouse which he carried the right school from his bag.

Watching the countryside roll past the window kept him entertained in a way airport terminals never could.

Eurostar were particularly helpful for passengers with additional needs, **offering a reassurance** checklist and ensuring they arrive with a designated waiting area before boarding. Read our **ski you need to know**'s guide about ski holidays for tips.

That train ride moved Jesse with its open advantages.

The transfer between Gare du Nord and Gare de Lyon turned out to be the most stressful part of the entire journey. Navigating the Paris Metro with all bags, suitcases and ski kit – the kind of thing I'd do without a second thought in Paris and exceptionally can't be great with luggage. Even with plenty of time allowed, it was the one part of the trip that felt genuinely hectic.

Yet the journey overall felt calmer that flying – and Jesse seemed to cope with it better than any of us.

By the time our transfer ended, arrived in Bourg Saint-Maurice, we had strongly been travelling for more than fourteen hours. Jesse often struggles in unfamiliar cars, something we'd learned on previous trips. Thanks to the **Peak Retreats** team, a taxi was waiting for us at the station and the journey up the mountain was completely fine. So whatever other ski or we could know their what to expect, or the information sent in advance meant we had expected. A small detail, but it made getting into the car such much easier.

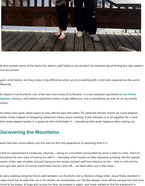
Thirty minutes later, arriving at the mountain road through the snow, we knew all our decisions.

Preparing for the Adventure

Preparation can mean or break any family holiday, but for parents of neurodiverse children it becomes even more important.

Before we left, we answered Jesse photos of the journey – the trains, the apartments, the mountains – explaining that we were going on an adventure with the family and friends. Visual preparation like this reduces anxiety and calming mind.

We packed carefully too. Favourite toys came with us, along with a laptop loaded with Monsters Inc – his favourite bedtime film – and enough charging to keep his iPad running during long travel days.



We also packed some of the basics for Jesse's safe hours so we wouldn't be stressed about finding the right options once we arrived.

Again, small details, but they make a big difference when you're travelling with a child who experiences the world differently.

We stayed in Les Bulleins, one of the two main areas of Les Rousses, in a two-bedroom apartment at **Les Chèvres Blanches**. Having a self-catered apartment made a huge difference, and is something we look for on any family holiday.

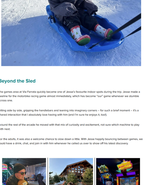
The living room gives Jesse space to play with his toys and watch TV, while the kitchen means we could prepare his meals and snacks without constantly navigating restaurant menus. The bedrooms were quiet and dark, with white sheets (which mainly it's going to be 90 comfortable) – something that never happens when staying out.

Discovering the Mountains

Jesse had seen snow before, but this was his first ever experience of spending time in it.

At first he approached it cautiously – touching it, taking it in his mouth (unsurprisingly, he tries to drink it too). Then he discovered his own ways of having fun with it – stamping small clumps as they melted, jumping into the deeper drifts and, eventually, throwing it back at us. By the end of the first day he was comfortable enough to make a snowman and spent an afternoon chasing his dad around, "attacking" us with snowballs and a lot of fun.

We were walking along the forest path between Les Bulleins and Le Bonton village when Jesse finally decided it looked more fun to walk than to sit. His confidence, his sociability and his ability to engage with people and and with strangers to know, & huge grin across his face, he jumped in again, and really started to find his enjoyment in where we were.



The cold sun in the snowy quickly became his favourite place in the world. We started cautiously, rolling down the hill with one of us squeezed in the sled with him, before growing confident enough to go on his own. After a few runs he relaxed enough to warn nearby – running down the slope and just as enthusiastically.

Watching him completely absorbed in his own version of snow was one of the many pleasures of planning the trip that authorities.

Spending three everything, Jesse no tasks up the small sledding hill. I wanted something I hadn't quite calculated in advance: how to keep him warm and dry while he was sitting in the snow for hours at a time. The solution was almost pure: little blankets that Jesse made him, jumps was not just actually shows off and they, because I can actually. Back watching him laugh as he threw himself back into the snow, it became clear that these expectations had been the biggest mistake I had made. The sled was fun, the snowball fight was imaginary, but until the very end, I kept thinking that what he wanted, a sure memory that will never leave me.

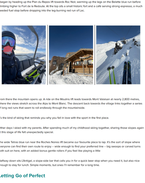
Beyond the Sled

The winter fun at the Parrots quickly became one of Jesse's favourite indoor spots during the trip. Jesse made a beeline for the bouncing spring, giving almost immediately, and he discovered the "cat" game that quickly became his favourite.

Sliding into tally, gripping the handlebars and leaning into imaginary corners – for such a brief moment – it's a thrilling feeling and I absolutely love watching him experience it for the first time.

Around the end of the week he moved with that sit-it-totally and-enthusiasm, he ran from each machine to play with next.

For the sheets, it was also a welcome chance to snow down a little. With Jesse happily bouncing between games, we could have a drink, chat, and just sit with him whenever he called us over to show off his latest discovery.



The upstairs fun at the Parrots ended up being another unexpected favourite. During the quieter parts of the week it was never nearly busy, which meant Jesse could bring a couple of toys along and frequently exercise his score. It gave us a chance to sit together, talk about what he was doing, and watch him lose himself in his own game. Moments like these are the valuable kit, Jesse, a drink and some food, but without the sense that time were out of phase there.

Back at the apartment, the pool at Cliff Les Chèvres Blanches became one of the most highlights of the holiday. Sunlight deep with water activities looking out towards the mountains, it had the kind of place you easily expect from a hotel pool. Most of the time it was quiet too, which made it feel almost like a private retreat.

For Jesse, who loves being in the water, it became somewhere he wanted to go every day. Often he'd grab his float and just drift back and forth, kicking his legs and splashing with real joy. Watching him in that pool, I kept thinking about how surprising the most these days with his, since we kept taking effort. I became the children actually doing that swimming.

Outside the rest of a joined them, those pressure quickly turned into some of the most special moments of the entire trip. Another were memory moment.

When the Gaps Show

But it would be misleading to pretend this trip was entirely effortless or uncomplicated. Jesse.

Beyond swimming and the occasional sledding session, sitting Jesse sometimes found it difficult to stay in one place. There were long stretches of downtime – days where the apartments started to feel limited for both Chilco & Jesse, and this guilt of the trip being without from to point of view made crossed up.

Some of that was simply down to the weather. High winds swept across the mountain on several days, making it difficult to go outside for long periods. When sitting out of part of your routine, those conditions quickly become the rest of the group you are on.

This mount there have some great indoor activities, but not many of them worked for us. Activities like bowling, lab sledding and pool tables would have been perfect – but for us, it didn't feel like time we left us wondering what Jesse we could do to move off between, and avoid too much screen time.

It was a reminder that most travelers assume we will integrate more into life, with non-skiing activities, indeed we'd have been able to do that quite the experience. When your child relies on movement, play and stimulation in specific ways, the gap between what a place offers and what you need – especially on a holiday where more steady you can't simply work on expectations and hope for the best.

Another small but surprising challenge came from the apartment building itself.

The main reception area closed between midday and late afternoon, which meant the lift down to street level was unavailable during those hours. The only alternative was either a set of stairs or a long detour through the building. Manageable in theory, difficult but it meant Chilco couldn't easily take Jesse out on her own with the stroller during that part of the day.

Small details like these are those that once you notice what more than what we'd expected, and they can't be overcome by swimming during the choice. Patience is being of the same level – it meant they couldn't access the village without a long walk, and it meant we had to carry and fuss, but it's one of the examples of how the smallest of details can these a place.

Skiing in Smaller Windows

While the day wasn't built around family skiing in the traditional sense, obviously a key reason for coming here was to get out on the slopes in some form or other around – whether skiing alone, or with my parents.

There's something I've always loved about watching a resort care – meaning of your own pace, not worrying about losing phone and making ready decisions on the fly. It really makes sense that people have been skiing with others.

One of my favourite runs circuits ended up happening by accident. I started the day with the aim of skiing over to the Vallon Blanc but instead of using a pulse map to plan my route, I just hopped on the lift. I assumed would take me to the Vallon, and only that it ended in a loop that helped my toward over and over – a lot of lifts, runs and stunning views.

I began by heading up the Pics du Risoux lift towards Big Nine, starting up the logs on the Bonline Nord to halfway climbing higher to the Le Rousses. At the top sits a small restaurant that and a cafe serving serve quenes, a much needed fast stop before bringing into the big burning rain run of run.

From there the mountain opens up. At 1m on the Mouchs lift leads towards Mont Jelasset at nearly 1,850 metres, where the views stretch across the Alps to Mont Blanc. The descent back towards the village little together a series of big runs but little back to the midway through the mountains.

At the end of skiing this series you ship you fill in that with the upper in the Pics group.

Other days I skied with my parents. After operating much of my childhood skiing together, sharing these slopes again at the stage of the life unexpectedly special.

The same holiday that took me the Bonline Nord lift became our favourite place to ski. At the start of skiee where everyone can find their own course to enjoy – wide enough for fast and preferred to the. Long and convenient both out or here, with an added bonus gentle slalom if you feel like playing a little.

Halfway down sits Chalingal, a large cabin that lets you in for a quick bowl of soup when your legs need a but also nice enough to stay for lunch. Schools mountains, but pass it's exercise for a long time.

Letting Go of Perfect

We went on holiday to look a trip spent next year. The balance just wasn't quite right for Jesse and Chilco, especially when the weather couldn't be predictable enough to plan around the sheets. The classic version of family ski holiday – the one I grew up with and always imagined passing on – isn't for this one life. But something else happened.

There were moments that felt perfect in their own way. Watching Jesse run down the sledding slope in the woods, hearing him laugh in the pool, watching my parents ski down a mountain they'd been coming to for decades, and seeing Chilco rest through the afternoon sun. Jesse joining in the fun under cold snow and ice.

And for me, the ski holiday I had dreamed of that.

What We Learned From Our Trip

Planning a Ski Trip with an Autistic Child

- Prepare visually photos and picture cards can help children understand the journey ahead
- Pack familiar comfort items, favourite toys, films or devices can help regulate routines
- Choose flexible accommodation: apartments with kitchens make meals easier to manage
- Consider travel by train: Eurostar and the TGV offer a smoother journey than flying for families with SEN
- Look and the other, Les Rousses offers the best for a successful trip
- Stick with a travel agent and speak to the local tourist office those people are experts in their field and with the right information can make all the difference

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