

# HOW TO HIT THE SLOPES

FROM BAGGING ONE OF EUROPE'S FEW BARGAINS TO WHAT NOT TO PACK, GET YOUR FIRST FAMILY SKIING TRIP OFF TO A FLYING START WITH OUR EXPERT GUIDE.  
WORDS: SEAN NEWSOM

WITH KIDS!



Christmas week is a surprisingly reasonable time of year to go on a family ski trip to Europe

**F**or many parents the idea of whisking your family off to the mountains one winter and learning to ski is a potent daydream. But it's also strewn with both potential pitfalls and actual physical falls — and eye-watering costs. But there's a good reason why millions love it and return to the slopes year after year. One good day, skiing together in the sunshine, can light up a whole winter. Here's how to improve your chances of a successful first trip.

## When to start

Don't rush into it. The mountains may be brimming with people whose skiing careers began when they were two, but that's usually because they had ski instructors for parents, or lived in the Alps and spent every winter on snow. To them, it was as natural as boarding a bus is to an urban child.

Everyone else should wait until their kids are in Reception or Year One. They'll be more excited about the white stuff and better adapted to learning with strangers, so less easily freaked out by ski school. You can, of course, leave it later — but ideally, children should be skiing by the time they're eight. That way, they'll learn quickly and start to love it while you've still got a few years left to reap the reward, whizzing

about in a blaze of family glory before things turn awkward in their teen years.

## How to learn

YouTube and TikTok are brimming with 'how to ski' videos, but the best way is to learn is with someone who can correct your mistakes and boost your confidence as you hit bumps, literal and otherwise.

Every beginner in your party should commit to five mornings of lessons with a qualified instructor, either privately or in a group. Book them at the same time as your holiday, as in busy weeks they sell out. Everyone else should consider a ski school, too.

Ski schools are dab hands at teaching younger children. The resort's gentlest slope is usually set aside for them, equipped with easy-to-use 'magic carpet' lifts and staffed with their more patient instructors. By the end of the week, most kids aged five and up will have progressed beyond these ski playgrounds to the next level of nursery slope and maybe even their first blue-rated, early-intermediate piste.

## When to go

Avoid February half term and the week of New Year's Eve, the busiest and most expensive

ski weeks in Europe. Ski school classes are packed, lift queues are commonplace and package holiday prices can be double what you'll pay for a week in low season. Christmas week is a canner time to go — not only is it cheaper than the peak dates, until 26 December resorts remain blissfully quiet. The same applies in the Easter holidays, though in both cases you'll need to aim for higher-altitude ski resorts to be sure of snow cover.

Even so, it's no wonder some parents risk the wrath of head teachers — as well as rapidly escalating fines — by taking their families away in January, when prices are low and the snow is cold and soft.

## Where to go

Forget the famous names: Val d'Isère, Courchevel, Verbier and the like. Unless you're joining a more experienced group who are insisting on somewhere vast, target one of the minnows instead. Somewhere small, quiet and unhurried with plenty of beginner-friendly slopes, such as Galtür in Austria, Puy-St-Vincent or La Rosière in France, Gausta in Norway and Passo Tonale in Italy. And if you're already a good skier and roll your eyes at the thought — too bad. Parenting duties





Chalet Hotel l'Ecrin is a family-friendly spot offered by Mark Warner in the snow-sure French resort of Tignes

will cut your skiing time by half, so you won't need as much terrain. To find the feistiest bits quickly, you should hire a guide or join an advanced ski class.

### Where to stay

Anyone on a budget should book a self-catering apartment. Extended or multi-family groups will enjoy a chalet — either catered or self-catered — so they can share parenting duties and turn their ski holiday into a house party. And grown-ups who crave a bit of pampering should aim for a hotel — but not a conventional four- or five-star. On a ski holiday, the luxury that counts comes from all-inclusive catering, a swimming pool, an on-site spa and a kids' club to keep your brood busy once ski school is over.

In Austria, look out for Kinderhotels. In France, Club Med is the gold standard, while Belambra Clubs offer many of the same services at lower prices. UK tour operators Neilson, Ski Famille, the Family Ski Company, Mark Warner, Powder Byrne and Crystal also offer ski holidays with childcare.

Wherever you stay, make sure it's close to the nursery slopes or a ski lift that will whisk you there. It's tough enough getting everyone

suiting and booted for the skiing day; having to walk or piggy-back them to their lessons afterwards — or squish into a crowded shuttle bus — is a drag.

### What to pack

You'll hire skis, boots, poles and helmets once you get to the resort. Book ahead, direct from a rental centre close to your digs, and you'll get an early bird discount, too. But you'll need to pack base layers, ski jackets and ski trousers, fleeces, ski gloves and ski goggles. You may be able to borrow some items from family or friends, but you can also rent them from the likes of Ecoski and Ski Togs. TK Maxx is also a good place to buy cheap ski jackets, which are good for cold and wet winter days back home, too.

Other must-packs include high-factor sunscreen; a first-aid kit, plus a thermometer and any other medications used at home; bobble hats and hiking or snow boots for walks and snowball fights; and everyone's swimmers, in case there's a pool. You will, however, need fewer ordinary clothes as everyone will be in their ski gear for at least half of every day. One more essential: a power bank for your phones. You will, after all, be taking lots of photos. ☐

## Three of the best family-friendly resorts

### GALTÜR, AUSTRIA

Though the village is a three-minute bus ride from its ski area, most parents are happy to overlook this for the chance to ski this spectacular end-of-the-line resort. A mix of mini-obstacle courses, timed descents and terrain parks add variety for all levels of junior skiers, and ski lessons run both morning and afternoon, with lift passes free for under-eights. Heidi Ski Holidays has one week in a family apartment in the three-star Galturerhof Hotel from £1,381 per person, including flights. Lessons from £249 for five days. [schischule-galtuer.at](mailto:schischule-galtuer.at) [heidi.com](http://heidi.com)

### AUSOIS, FRANCE

For a low-cost break in February half term, try this Maurienne Valley resort. It has spacious nursery slopes at the mountain base and an École du Ski Français (ESF) English-speaking ski school, where lessons are more than 60% cheaper than those in nearby Val d'Isère. Book one of the no-frills Les Flocons d'Argent apartments next to the slopes. Peak Retreats offers seven nights self-catering in a two-bedroom flat from £549 per person, including Eurotunnel crossing. Six morning lessons from £125. [ski-school-aussois.co.uk](http://ski-school-aussois.co.uk) [peakretreats.co.uk](http://peakretreats.co.uk)

### GAUSTA, NORWAY

A canny spot for an Easter trip, this resort may be small but its mix of easy slopes, reliable snow and low-key Scandi vibes have made it a hit with British families — its four-star Fjellresort hotel is comfy, stylish and sits right by the nursery slopes. Ski school lasts only 90 minutes but is reasonably priced, and under-eights get free use of the lifts. Crystal Ski offers seven nights' B&B from £973 per person, including flights. Lessons from £109 for five sessions. [gausta.com](http://gausta.com) [crystalski.co.uk](http://crystalski.co.uk)