

Where the ski experts HIT THE SLOPES

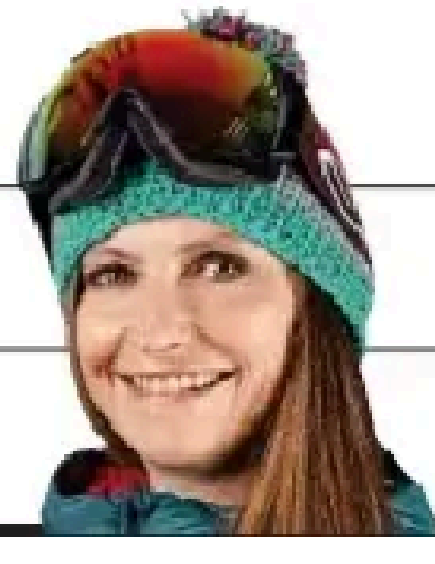
Industry insiders reveal their favourite spots



Family time: Neal Collins and daughter Réaltín hit the slopes in St Johann

PEAK SEASON

CATHERINE MURPHY



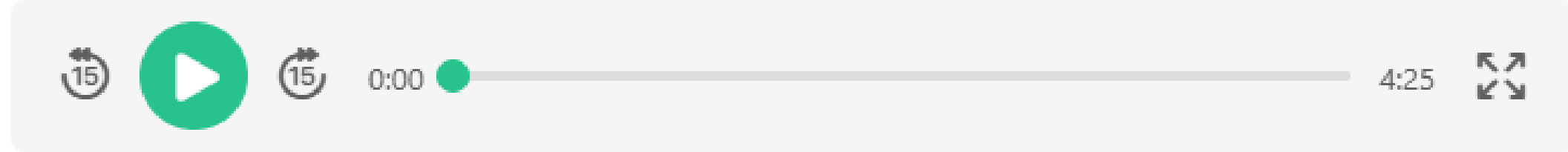
Family time: Neal Collins and daughter Réaltín hit the slopes in St Johann

Irish Daily Mail

CATHERINE MURPHY TRAVEL EXTRA
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EACH season, I bring you tips on how to plan and make the most of your family ski holiday. This time round, I've been asking industry experts about where they ski with their own families.

Neal Collins, managing director of Topflight Holidays, enthuses about the enduring appeal of St Johann in Tirol and why he and his wife have returned to this little Austrian village every year since their daughter Réaltín was a toddler.

Travelling with friends who also have children, Neal explains why St Johann works for them.

'It's a one hour 15 minute transfer from Salzburg airport which is perfect for children. The price point is good which is important as we want to keep the cost reasonable,' he says.

'There's a familiarity to the village after years of going there and of course, there's the ease of not having to navigate a new resort each year. The ski school, lifts and town are a three minute walk away – again, all ideal for families.

'St Johann is quite low but during our last visit in February the snow was fantastic, as you can see in our holiday snaps. The ski area isn't that big but 60-70km of terrain is perfect for us as. Réaltín did her first black slope in February and next winter we'll take the train to Kitzbuhel to ski part of the Hahnenhamm downhill course.

'We stay at the Sporthotel Austria which has become a home-from-home for us – and for many other Irish families. We stay in the same interconnecting family room every year and have such an amazing time that we book for the following year as we're checking out.

'Everyone skis down to the village to have lunch at Maxis then goes back up the mountain to ski for the afternoon. My wife Sorcha doesn't ski so she'll take the train into Innsbruck for a day and find other things to do around the resort.'

While Neal and his family return to St Johann every winter, Zell Am See in Salzburgerland is Topflight Holidays' most searched for and most booked ski resort.

For families on the hunt for offers, Neal says there are some great Christmas deals, possibly due to the fact that St Stephens' Day falls on a Saturday and some holiday-makers are reluctant to travel early on that day. [Directski.com](#) (part of the Topflight Holidays group) has a four star half board stay at the wellknown Daxer hotel in Zell Am See for €1,058 per person.

Safety is another major concern for families with young children. As Chemmy Alcott, ski racer and presenter of the recently axed BBC Ski Sunday programme, says; 'Skiing a downhill race course at high speed isn't scary – taking your kids skiing is scary!'

Parents need to be sure that their children are safe both in resort and on the slopes. For this reason, according to operator Peak Retreats ([peakretreats.co.uk](#)) families should opt for smaller resorts with gentle slopes.

I'd add that compact carfree mountain resorts like Wengen, Avoriaz and Arc 1950 are also ideal for families – in Avoriaz, children get brought to ski school on horse-drawn sleighs! When researching, parents should also look for fun/kid zones on the slopes and safe beginner areas away from busy pistes. Nicola Moss from Peak Retreats, who skis with her family each year, recommends that families check out tourist board entertainment programmes for free activities like sledging, games on the slopes and crepe parties.

To help stick to a budget, Nicola says that many resorts (Serre Chevalier in France is one example) have indoor and outdoor picnic areas. Enjoy a tasty picnic lunch then treat the family to hot chocolates in a café afterwards.

When waving the kids off to ski school, Nicola makes sure to pack some snacks and places contact details on a piece of paper in her childrens' jackets or backpacks.

'Skiing all day is too much for young children' she says. 'So a different activity in the afternoon can be a good idea. One of the best things you can do is book accommodation with a swimming pool – it's included in the price and is easy for everyone.'

There are so many more useful tips for families booking their first ski holiday – for example, avoid travelling on busy Saturdays if you can manage it, look to Italy for affordable February half term prices and opt for resorts where some beginner slopes are free (Flaine is an example).

Finally, when researching, check out websites like

[heidi.com](#) which have family and childcare filters to help you pick the perfect resort.