

Snowed under

A family skiing trip to Saas-Fee in Switzerland proves that even when the weather outside is frightful, a visit to the 'Pearl of the Alps' is still delightful

BY BEN ROSS

A family skiing holiday is all about balance – and not just in the obvious ways. But let's start with them anyway. Obviously, everyone should be trying to stay upright on the slopes. For that there's ski school. In Saas-Fee, the exquisitely sculpted resort at the heart of Switzerland's narrow Saas Valley, there are three to choose from: Optimum (swanky green gear), Eskimo (powder blue) and the Swiss Ski School (red and white, naturally). Given the destination, the Swiss version seemed most appropriate, although my instructor, Robert Fuller, later turned out to be from Essex. As I say, there's a balance to be struck. His homespun acumen would come in very handy. Meanwhile, my two sons, aged nine and six, were assigned a local who would have them carving neat turns on the nursery slopes in no time.

Obviously, you need the right balance of terrain. In our case that meant plenty of not-too-challenging skiing, which Saas-Fee offers in abundance. Here the pisted slopes supply swooping reds and blues, but only the occasional black – and off-piste skiing is limited. For that reason it might mildly disappoint experts, but expertise was something I'd shown few signs of on my hard-fought journey from beginner to intermediate skier, and the boys were still mastering the "pizza slice" position.

We would be amply served. Saas-Fee claims a choice of 48 different slopes once those of the adjacent villages of Saas-Grund, Saas-Balen and Saas-Almagell have been factored in. (The villages are united by an "all areas" lift pass, which grants access to a total of 145km of pistes. There are no lift links between them, but the local post bus provides free transport every half hour.)

Less obviously, perhaps, there's a balance to be struck between utility and beauty. Anyone thinking of skiing at the limits of the ski season should aim high, I'd been told. Saas-Fee lies at a chunky 1,800m, with the slopes rising to a snow-sure 3,500m and glacier skiing thrown in for good measure. It therefore made perfect sense for those, like us, who were keen to ski during the first week of the Christmas school holidays.

Even so, as November turned to December and the Alpine resorts reported the warmest, driest end to a year in recent memory, it was easy to become prone to doubt. The snow reports on the Ski Club of Great Britain's website became a minor obsession: 4cm here, a dusting there. Then, wallop! Just before we were due to travel the heavens opened. One of the prettiest ski resorts in Switzerland – the "Pearl of the Alps" no less – would be at its white-clad best for our arrival.

Or so we thought. Abundant snow is all very well, but one of Saas-Fee's key selling points is its dramatic setting, poised beneath a pair of twinkling glaciers. Elegant bridges string the tree-lined route up

towards the village, and rising above are some properly tall bits of mountain: the Stellihorn (3,436m), the Weissmies (4,017m), the Allalinhorn (4,027m) and the Dom – which at 4,545m is the highest massif set entirely in Switzerland. (The Matterhorn is shared with Italy.)

I know this because I've seen pictures. Sadly, I never got the chance to view these Alpine behemoths in person. As our three-hour transfer from Geneva progressed through sullen grey rain, to slushy snow, to actually quite a lot of big fat flakes, to what felt like a blizzard and – crikey – the possibility of not making it up the valley at all, the majestic scenery became rather hidden from view. And so it remained for the duration of our stay, sulking behind an impenetrable white veil. It made all that anxious forecasting seem a touch naive.

Edward Tyrell, the Inghams ski rep, met us at Saas-Fee bus station and swiftly decanted us into a waiting electric bus. (Petrol vehicles are banned from the resort.) For British ski operators, he said, this was the first week of Saas-Fee's winter season. It seemed we'd brought the weather with us.



I love an aphorism in the morning. Happily, at the Ferienart Resort and Spa, one is delivered to your table with breakfast, attached to the daily snow report. "Life is like an ice cream," I was informed on day one. "Enjoy it before it melts." Frankly, the prospect of anything melting,



or even gently thawing, seemed rather unlikely. Deep snow lay piled up in the streets, the neat chalet roofs freshly laden under tons of the stuff. More fundamentally, all the resort lifts were closed, the piste-bashers having been caught off guard by the sudden influx. My first lesson with Robert from Essex would have to be postponed.

On the face of it, then, the balance of our ski holiday had tilted in the wrong direction. However, it turns out that Saas-Fee still delivers for families *in extremis*. Sledges were borrowed for the children and we used them to explore the village, which lived up to its picture-postcard reputation. A collection of narrow streets lined with glamorous boutiques, bars and ski shops gave way almost immediately to sleepy private chalets, submerged in white. Residents patiently shovelled snow from their driveways as we slid onwards. The occasional whiff of farm animals – hidden inside creaky-looking wooden barns – was a reminder that the countryside around here is about much more than just winter sports.

The lack of cars, too, gave everything a quiet, snow-blanketed feel. A few electro-taxis nosed their way around almost silently, the frozen Alpine air disturbed only by the squeals of parents (ie us) being pelted by their children's snowballs. It was like walking through a town re-imagined by Playmobil, but with more opportunities to drink *glühwein* and *jägertee*.

It also emerged that there can be few better places on the planet in which to be marooned than the Ferienart Resort and Spa. Walk through the door and you're confronted with a five-star jumble of objects – a vast geode here, an idiosyncratic sculpture there, a set of seats built from flightcases round the corner – which lends the lobby a friendly, chaotic feel. Our family room had the happy knack of combining plenty of warm wood panelling with a slick, modern finish. Rich brocade curtains gave everything a lustrous hue and a gracious balcony afforded us a splendid view of ... the falling snow.

Which continued to fall, in picturesque if slightly frustrating fashion, throughout the day. The Ferienart's owner, Beat Anthamatten, tried to take my mind off things by ushering me into the hotel's schoolroom and lecturing me about climate change – which, given the ongoing weather, seemed mildly paradoxical. It's not many hotels that have a schoolroom on site, but this is where Herr Anthamatten, a passionate advocate of energy efficiency, teaches the importance of environmental awareness to his staff. (He confessed to draping himself in a green version of the Swiss flag to get his point across.)

"I live in a place where I see every day that something is changing," he told me. "The glacier here has gone back 400m in 20 years." His employees, he said, were encouraged to think up innovative ways to save energy; each week they had "Green days" to emphasise their achievements – from recycling to carbon offsetting. His is a worthy mission statement, and the hotel has won a host of environmental awards, now proudly displayed on the wall.

The Ferienart is good at other things too: cake, for example, which is served in the lobby every day from 3.30pm. Indeed, the notion of "half-board" is stretched to scrumptious proportions here. Breakfast is substantial enough to stop you in your snowy tracks. At what you and I would call lunchtime, the Del Ponte restaurant serves what the hotel describes as "snacks", but which you and I would call "lunch".

For dinner, guests on half-board tariffs have a choice of three restaurants: Asian, Italian and the slightly more formal Cäsar Ritz dining room, which delivers an ecstatic array of salad, fondue and other tasty dishes, including a wonderful sea bass risotto. In the interests of balance we ate a lot of sea bass

risotto. And cake. And plenty of lunchtime "snacks".

There's even a fine-dining option, should you have made the sensible decision to travel without excitable youngsters, or you wish

to make use of the hotel's extensive child-care facilities.



The snow showed no sign of relenting the next day, but a limited number of lifts were now open, which finally gave ski instructor Robert (from Essex, did I mention?) the chance to put me through my paces on the mountain. The Alpine Express gondola runs from the village to the station at Morenia and then onwards to the 3,000m mark at Felskin. However, for most people the "daily commute", as Robert called it, is via the bright red Felskin cable car. That morning it was packed with skiers, lots of them British, many of them family groups, and all of them anxious to make up for lost time. We bundled out at Felskin's subterranean concrete terminus, where tunnels guide skiers out on to the slopes or on to the extraordinary underground funicular which runs up the final 500m to the Allalin glacier; its rasping white-blue surface just visible beyond the billowing snow. Climbing the stairs at the top, the air is noticeably thin: you gasp for breath.

As an Essex man, Robert spoke my language both literally and figuratively. He was superb at explaining how to ski through deep powder (a variety of snow hitherto unknown to me), utterly undaunted at the lack of visibility, and full of enthusiasm about Saas-Fee, where he was in the process of building a house for himself and his young family. When I fell over, he told me to ski like an upside-down tree (wavy branches at the bottom; strong roots at the top). When we stopped for coffee at the huge Morenia restaurant, he drew Venn diagrams that illustrated how to hit the skiing sweet-spot. Mostly, though, he simply urged me to ski with a smile on my face. "Let's have a play!" he'd yell, before hurtling off down another slope.

Robert is right: there's plenty to smile about in Saas-Fee. ►

“There can be few

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better places to be marooned than the Ferienart Hotel”



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Weather or not: on a clear day, Saas-Fee lives up to its picture-postcard reputation PHOTOPRESS



The white stuff: high winds on Saas-Fee's Allalin slopes; the pool at the Ferienart Hotel (below) EPA

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◀ The tourist board runs weekly torch-lit walks through the forested slopes round the village, a chance for children to stay up late and for their parents to appreciate the utter darkness of an Alpine night. Or there's Inghams' "sledge and strudel" trip to the top of the Hannig gondola, where a hot dessert at the 2,336m-high restaurant is followed by a high-adrenalin toboggan run back down to the village. When the lifts closed again (high winds are the downside

of a high-altitude resort), we made use of the Ferienart's vast swimming pool instead, drank hot chocolate in the village cafés and built snowmen on the village green.

I saw too the delights that would be in store for visitors arriving later in the season, when Saas-Fee will no doubt have regained its own sense of balance: the ice rink being prepared next to the ski school and the reopening of the revolving restaurant at the top of the Allalin.

(Refurbishment was nearing completion while we were there.) The ice pavilion near the Allalin station will have arrived by now, and the ski areas of the other Saas villages will be up and running. In February half-term – the next real chance for British families to visit – Saas-Fee will be packed with options for anyone who wishes to balance skiing with other winter pursuits.

On the other hand, there's always the balance of payments to consider. The Swiss franc is a heartless currency, upscaling innocent mountain-side lasagnes to the cost of truly *haute* cuisine. But tour operators are doing their best, with two-for-one lift passes on offer and the chance of a day's skiing in neighbouring Zermatt for just Sfr30 (£22).

And, after all, what price can you put on skiing through history? According to Roland Huntford's *Planks and a Passion*, in 1849 Saas-Fee was the scene of the first recorded ski run in Switzerland, when a local priest called Josef Imseng attempted the feat "on crude skis that

he had improvised himself". But even more importantly, in 1984 the village hosted Wham! as they filmed the video for "Last Christmas". George and Andrew's visit is still spoken of with due reverence in Saas-Fee – although this year another festive anthem seemed more appropriate: let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.

Travel essentials Saas-Fee

Getting there and skiing there

- The writer travelled as a guest of Inghams (020-8780 4447; inghams.co.uk), which offers seven nights' half-board at the Ferienart Resort and Spa from £1,099 per person (based on two sharing), including charter flights from Gatwick to Geneva and resort transfers. Flights are available at a supplement from regional airports. Lessons, ski hire and lift passes can be pre-booked with Inghams.
- Swiss Ski School Saas-Fee (00 41 27 957 23 48; skischule-saas-fee.ch) offers lessons from £115 for adults and £129 for children for three days (three hours per day).
- Intersport Ferienart Sport (00 41 27 958 19 17; intersport.com) offers six days of ski and boot hire from £150 for adults and £78 for children.
- A six-day whole area lifts pass is £299 per adult (£165 per child aged 10-16), under 10s ski free. Inghams



has two-for-one lift passes for adults. A day's skiing in Zermatt costs a Sfr30 (£22) surcharge per person excluding transfers, assuming a whole-area lift pass has been purchased.

- The main scheduled airline serving Geneva is easyJet (0843 104 5000; easyJet.com). Other UK carriers with links include Bmibaby (0844 2450055; bmibaby.com), BA (0844 493 0787; ba.com), Flybe (0871 700 2000; flybe.com).

More information

- saas-fee.ch;
- myswitzerland.com

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Fast lane: the Hannig sledge run SWISS-IMAGE.CH