

Travel

'These days, the merest whiff of a cockpoo has hotels rushing into VIP guest mode'
Emily Dean picks her favourite dog-friendly hotels

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Val Thorens in France

Ski special



Time to get back on the slopes!

Ski breaks are back and the mountains are beckoning. You'd better book soon, says **Sean Newsom**

Skiers, get your skates on. You may have only just adjusted to the fact that, fingers crossed, skiing is back on the menu this winter, but if you want to celebrate by whisking your family off to a catered chalet as part of an Atol-bonded package holiday, time has almost run out. Book now or make alternative plans.

It's not hard to understand why. Some chalet companies went bust during the lockdowns. Others have stopped offering flights or have shed stock, and they are wrestling with increased staffing costs and/or red tape. As a result, skiers are facing an acute chalet shortage. "I'd say that the

remaining supply of chalets protected by some kind of bond — whether it's Atol or (for those without flights) Abta or Abtot — is about 20 per cent of pre-Brexit/Covid levels," says Nick Edwards of the specialist travel agency Snowfinders.

That's not to say that all is doom and gloom in the ski industry. How could it be when bookings are suddenly flooding in and everyone is buzzing at the thought of the snow. But when programmes are already clogged with holidays deferred from the past two winters, availability is tight, especially over new year and February half-term. The chalet specialist



A Ski Beat chalet in Val-d'Isère, France

Le Ski reports that its entire season is 85 per cent sold.

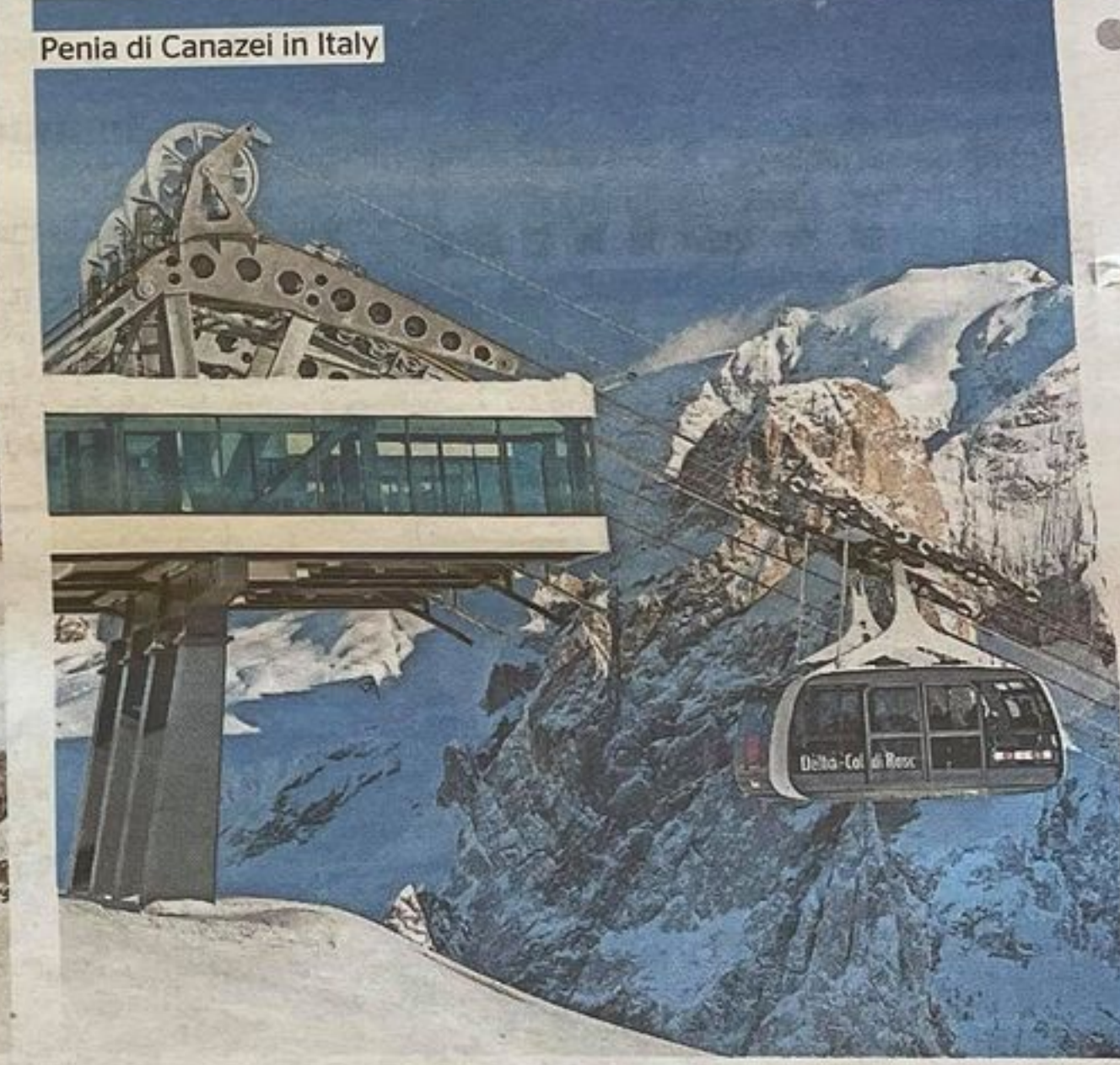
Here I've picked some plums that remain. I've suggested alternatives too, because the mountains are still full of hotels and self-catering apartments. There are signs too that some operators will try to increase their stock if the surge in bookings continues. That said, whatever your taste in accommodation, don't wait too long if the school holidays are your target. Every skier in Europe is gagging for the slopes.

One final caveat: keep a close eye on your chosen country's entry requirements and vaccine passport schemes before and after you book.

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Les Arcs in France



Penia di Canazei in Italy



Arabba in Italy

Hotel Evaldo in Arabba is standing by. On the doorstep, a church and a huddle of houses, between two soaring Dolomite massifs. Beyond the giant spaghettini hoop of intermediate skiing the Sella Ronda. Less confident skiers will love exploring Alta Badia's gentle slopes, while speed freaks will bomb down Arabba's own pistes. Back at your family-run hotel, each day ends in its charming, wood-paneled dining rooms.

Details Seven nights' half-board from £1,845pp, including flights and transfers, departing on December 27 (snow-wise.com)

FEBRUARY HALF-TERM

There are two half-term weeks in February, with state schools quite evenly divided between February 12

and February 19 starts. (Most private schools are off over the first week.) This will take some of the pressure off places, even if prices remain higher than for any other holiday period. That said, this is also the most reliable moment for snow depth and quality, so cheaper, lower-altitude resorts are good targets for a holiday.

Val Cenis France

Self-sufficient first-time skiers in search of a (relatively) cheap half-term holiday will be well served by Val Cenis. At the far end of the underrated Maurienne Valley, its mid-sized ski area faces north, keeps its snow well and includes what is probably the longest beginners' run in the French Alps, l'Escargot, which follows the course of a switchback road from Italy. Book into a new two-bedroom apartment at Les Balcons Platinum and you will be near l'Escargot's final turns and the ski-school meeting points. The residence has its own indoor pool too. **Details** Seven nights' self-catering for four from £2,671, including Eurotunnel crossings, departing on February 12 (peakretreats.co.uk)

Penia di Canazei Italy

The Chalet Hotel Dolomites Inn is a short bus ride from the lifts in little

Penia di Canazei. It's as quiet as the grave here at night, but that's a boon for families who like their sleep. Those lifts take you to either the flat, tranquil beginners' area at Ciampac or the intermediate-friendly playground of the Sella Ronda — the slab-sided Dolomite scenery is never less than mind-boggling. Spurred on by the free guiding offered by the host Neilson, a family with older children will ski their legs to jelly. **Details** Seven nights' chalet board from £1,596pp, including flights and transfers, departing on February 13 (neilson.co.uk)

Les Arcs France

Chalet Cascade was once the pride and joy of Flexiskis's programme of catered chalet holidays. Now this giant party palace, in Les Arcs' highest purpose-built village, is on offer from the self-drive, self-catering specialist Ski Collection. It sleeps 15 in considerable splendour and has its own pool and sauna: the perfect ski-in, ski-out venue for a few energetic families of mixed abilities who don't need childcare beyond ski school and want to mix restaurant nights and food deliveries (try hu.ski) with the odd communal cook-in. **Details** Seven nights' self-catering for

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► 15 from £17,195, including Eurotunnel crossings, departing on February 19 (skicollection.co.uk)

Banskoria Bulgaria

Bulgaria's biggest resort is a minnow by Alpine standards, but size doesn't matter so much when you have morning and afternoon lessons with the patient, painstaking instructors of Banskoria. Here, for £222, you can book a lift pass, ski hire and ski school for less than the price of a lift pass in an A-list resort and get roomy four-star accommodation at the Hotel Lion at a considerable saving on Alpine prices. High-mileage skiers will feel like caged animals, but beginners and intermediates will prosper. The UK is still on Bulgaria's red list but we expect that to change by February. **Details** Seven nights' half-board from £963pp, including flights and transfers, departing on February 12 (balkanholidays.co.uk)

Galtür Austria

Never mind the backdrop of soaring pyramid peaks and the relaxed, end-

of-the-line atmosphere. What your children are going to love is the way Galtür has made its small ski area into a proper winter playground, with parallel-slatom courses, a timed speed run, a ski-cross course and a terrain park. So while Mum and Dad cruise the pistes (or go on a day trip to Ischgl), the young ones will be pushing their skiing in all kinds of new directions. Meanwhile, the friendly Alpenhotel Tiro awaits at the end of the day, close to the public swimming pool and climbing wall and linked to a regular bus service.

Details Seven nights' half-board from £1,789pp, including flights and transfers, departing on February 12 (crystalski.co.uk)

Champoluc Italy

Pretty little Champoluc is the kind of low-key resort families often seek but rarely find, and the Chalet Hotel de Champoluc has the plum spot, next to its main lift station. Here Esprit offers a nanny service for babies and toddlers as well as supervised lunches



Les Deux Alpes in France

Banff National Park in Canada



You'll want to remember this view.

THAT'S WHY YOUR NEXT VISIT WILL NEVER BE YOUR LAST

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