

Bundles of fun

Give the kids a taste of life on the slopes with a first-time family ski holiday, says Lee Hayhurst

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It's a pretty safe bet no one has ever gone on holiday looking forward to being cold, or fearing exhaustion and even injury. But it was just such concerns I had to allay when persuading my family that we should go on our first ski trip together with ski specialist Neilson

To be fair, my three kids - aged 12, 10 and nine - never doubted it for a minute; it was mum who needed to be won over that this would actually be a holiday.

I was not in a unique situation. Many lapsed skiers like myself, who caught the mountain bug

on school trips in the 1980s, have introduced their families to the thrill of skiing. Now, with school ski trips falling out of favour, the sector has seen the supply of a new generation of skiers dry up, and travel agents have a vital role convincing families with at least one parent who skis to show their loved ones the slopes.

▶ TOP OF THE WORLD

Les Deux Alpes may not be the stereotypical 'chocolate box' Alpine ski resort, but it offers plenty of fantastic skiing and facilities for all abilities.

Often referred to as the upside-down ski resort, it contrasts with many others in that some of the easiest skiing is at the highest altitudes. At about 3,500ft, there is year-round intermediate skiing on Glacier de Mantel, accessible by an underground funicular or two drag lifts.

Beginners' slopes are in Les Cretes, at the top of the Oeufs Blancs gondola that goes from the centre of the village. This may seem intimidating to the uninitiated - the higher the slopes, the more challenging

HOW TO SELL

Neilson's Mountain Collection range includes a Mountain Expert ski-guiding and coaching service, with two skills sessions for small groups – around five or six skiers – to take an intensive three-hour lesson with a European Ski School-qualified instructor. Sessions are a great way to meet fellow skiers, explore the slopes, learn new skills and identify a few bad habits. The service, aimed at more experienced skiers following a change in French law that outlawed ski guiding by holiday reps, shows there's always room for improvement.

→ you'd think they would be. However, by the end of the week I was able to take my children to the top of the glacier and ski the blue run down to the Jandri Express II cable car station.

As well as escaping the late-season lack of snow in the village, these high altitudes offer the best winter wilderness experiences. Standing 2,100ft high at Les Cretes lift station, there's no mistaking you're now an Alpine mountaineer, and there's nothing quite like the 'top of the world' feeling high up in the Alps. But venture further, away from evidence of significant human settlement, and the views from Dome de Puy Salie – a dizzying 3,421ft – are simply spectacular, with Mont Blanc clearly visible to the north and a death-defying lookout facing south.

ICE AS NICE

Easily the best reason to venture up the mountain is an inconspicuous little visitor attraction within the glacier itself. A short walk from the Jandri Express II is an ice cave, containing a collection of beautifully lit ice sculptures at the end of a long tunnel, and a set of steps carved out of ice.

It was one of those magical moments we shared, maybe because it was so unexpected, and because it was something mum, our least confident skier, could access on foot and enjoy with us.

So what was the verdict? There's no getting away from it, this was a



There's no getting away from it, this was a physically exhausting family holiday, but also mentally reinvigorating

physically exhausting family holiday, but it was also mentally reinvigorating. The kids loved every minute – including Neilson's daily afternoon tea, with cake

and hot chocolate, no less – and ended the week confident using chair lifts and skiing down some fairly steep blue runs.

And mum? She's not about to make a late run for the British downhill team at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics next year, but bar a few short-lived crises of confidence, she really enjoyed her first experience of being in the mountains.

Most of all, she loved the adventure of doing something out of her comfort zone and sharing the excitement with the whole family. That, after all, is what any family holiday is all about, and this is one we'll never forget. **TW**

Where to stay

Neilson offers a number of Mountain Collection chalets in Les Deux Alpes for agents to sell.

Neilson Chalet Ruby: The 15-person Chalet Ruby was a farm cottage in a previous life. Centrally located, it has been renovated to a high standard with a modern, contemporary feel. It offers eight en suite rooms and a small outdoor hot tub. From £599 flying from Stansted on December 16.

Neilson Chalet Chartreuse: Sleeping up to 18 in nine en suite rooms, this is everything you imagine a mountain chalet to be – huge, chunky beams, deep sofas and a roaring open fire, plus a hot

tub and sauna. From £699 flying from Stansted on January 6.

Neilson Chalet Alexandre: A quaint and cosy chalet that's versatile enough to fit groups comfortably, with a large lounge-diner at its heart and a private sauna. Sleeps up to 18 in twin, double and quad rooms. From £625 flying from Stansted on January 13.

Prices are based on two adults sharing a club twin or double room with flights and transfers. Chalet board basis includes breakfast, afternoon tea and a three-course evening menu including wine.

neilson.co.uk

Tried & Tested

KUHTAI, AUSTRIA

TAKE THE PLUNGE IN THE HOME OF THE JUMP, SAYS LUCY HUXLEY ON A FAMILY SKI TRIP TO AUSTRIA

Most people had probably never heard of Austrian ski resort Kuhtai three years ago, but Channel 4 has changed all that by basing hit TV show *The Jump* in the resort, just a 40-minute transfer from Innsbruck.

Thankfully, when I went with my family this Easter, there was no sign of Caprice, Louis Smith, Spencer Matthews et al. In fact, the only evidence the show had been filmed there at all was the scaffolding of the ski jump itself being dismantled.

Anyone who's taken young children skiing knows it's an endless cycle of getting them ready in their gear (then taking it all off again when they inevitably need a wee two minutes later), carrying their skis, poles and helmets, and ensuring they're wearing their bib and carrying their lift pass at all times.

It's frankly exhausting, so ski-in, ski-out accommodation, where they can get from the boot room to their lesson in under a minute, is essential.

SKI SENSE

We travelled with Inghams and stayed in Chalet Hotel Elisabeth, a 25-room building on the slopes next



to the main ski lifts and the meeting point for the ski school. The hotel's ground-floor pizzeria and inviting first-floor lounge – right next to a massive dining room, serving extensive breakfasts and with separate kids' and adults' dinner seatings – were also huge plus points.

We found ourselves having afternoon tea in the lounge as we came in off the piste each day, and were always back there by 7pm for the delicious canapes. Then, while we joined other parents for a three-course meal with good wine, the kids settled in the lounge, after their earlier dinner, to watch a movie or play games.

Inghams' rep offered a few après-ski activities – a ribs night in a local restaurant, and a quiz night in the hotel (which we won, thanks to my correctly answering that the southern hemisphere's tallest mountain is Aconcagua in Argentina. Who knew?!).

And if clients are desperate for a pool and sauna, there is one next door in Hotel Mooshaus, for a small charge.

SMALL PACKAGES

The only downside is Kuhtai does not boast a massive ski area. It was perfect for my kids, on just their third trip to the Alps, but we'd skied every piste by the middle of day two. Though that did mean they ticked off every run on the

ABOVE: Kuhtai

BELOW LEFT: Kids Marijke and Tom on the slopes

piste map, including some blacks, which made them very happy.

When you have to be back to collect kids within two hours of dropping them off with their instructor, a vast ski area would be wasted in any case, and what runs there were, were fantastic – wide and rolling, through the trees, and the occasional gully or bit of gentle off-piste to add some interest.

The last day saw the entire ski school race in a slalom championship, with every child logging a time and winning a medal. My son even got a podium finish!

I'd recommend selling Chalet Hotel Elisabeth to families with young kids in ski school for the sheer convenience, fun and friendliness, so everyone can make the most of this stunningly beautiful, snow-sure resort.

Book it: Inghams offers seven nights with buffet breakfast, afternoon tea and four-course dinner with wine for six nights at Chalet Hotel Elisabeth, from £1,020, based on two adults and two children sharing. The price includes flights and transfers, departing March 31, 2018, with lift passes from £89 per child and ski and boot hire from £42 per child. Five-day tuition starts at £178 for children aged four to 14.

agents.inghams.co.uk



ABOVE: Zac, Seth and Millie