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Escape:

# TRULY PEAK

by **ROBERT HARDMAN**

**D**RAW up a wish-list for an ideal family skiing holiday — proximity to slopes and ski school, enough altitude for good snow at the start or end of the season (prime school holiday time), no queues — and the list soon shrinks.

So I was intrigued when a friend suggested Val Cenis. It sits in the French Alps just 20 miles over the hill from famous British enclaves such as Val d'Isere — yet I hadn't heard of it.

And that's just how many of its devoted British fans would like to keep things. There are no nightclubs, for example, and few hotels but 75 miles of marked pistes. It is actually two villages, half a mile apart, with a lot of purpose-built self-catering apartments aimed specifically at families — roomy flats with plenty of living space.

It is a particular favourite of Peak Retreats, the specialists in self-catering, self-driving family ski holidays to the French Alps.

Now, there is a lot to be said for driving to the Alps if there are more than two of you. The fixed costs mean it is not only cheaper than flying but, if you live within a few hours of the Channel, as we do, the door to door travel time is only a few hours more than flying.

Peak Retreats include a Flexiplus Eurotunnel ticket so you can turn up at Folkestone and drive straight on the next shuttle.

It all makes for a less stressful start to your holiday, especially if you break the journey en route. We stopped three hours from Calais at the Royal Champagne hotel and spa

No raucous nightclubs and with blissfully uncrowded slopes, France's Val Cenis is just perfect for beginners of all ages....

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# CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS WITH SKIING



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**Q MY FRIEND and I aim to visit St Mary's island on the Isles of Scilly. How can we get there? We live in South Yorkshire and Norfolk.**

*Judith Walls, via email.*

**A MEET** in London, then take the Paddington-Penzance train – five-and-a-half hours (about £70) – or the sleeper service in a twin cabin departing at 11.45pm and arriving at 8am; from £220 for both of you, with a wake-up call, breakfast and Paddington lounge access included. Return Penzance-St Mary's ferries are from £110, or return flights from Land's End Airport from £181 (*islesofscilly-travel.co.uk*).

**Q MY WIFE and I would like to take a cruise from the UK next summer to include St Petersburg in Russia and Tallinn in Estonia. Any suggestions?**

*Denis Micallef, via email.*

**A CUNARD** (*cunard.com*, 0344 338 8641) has a 14-night Baltic Highlights cruise departing Southampton on July 14 from £1,869 pp full-board, calling at St Petersburg for two days and Tallinn for a day, plus Helsinki and Stockholm. Russian visas not required for passengers taking official Cunard excursions in St Petersburg.

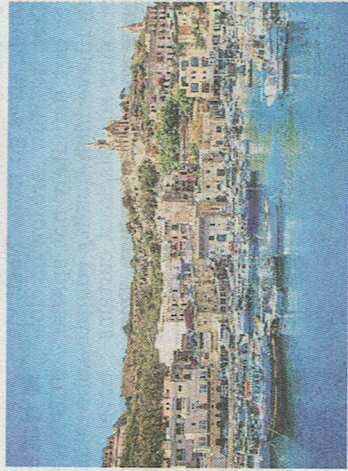


STOCK

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Picture: SHUTTERSTOCK

**Q** COULD you please advise me on good European scuba diving spots?

Mag Davenport, via email.

**A** IN the UK, try Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands, where intriguing World War I shipwrecks can be explored (but you need a thick wetsuit). Or, for somewhere warmer, try the Blue Hole and Azure Window on Gozo (above), north of the main island of Malta, which is home to interesting rock formations as well as moray eels and parrotfish. See [divem.com](http://divem.com).

**Q** WE WOULD like to visit the site of Custer's Last Stand and the Alamo attractions. What do you advise?

Janeen Talbot, via email.

**A** BON Voyage can organise a twin-centre 14-night fly-drive with four days in San Antonio in Texas to see the Alamo, where Mexican troops besieged Texan settlers in 1836, as well as Bandera, the 'Cowboy Capital of the World'.

Then fly to Rapid City, South Dakota, to see Mount Rushmore, the Crazy Horse Memorial and the site of the Battle of Little Big Horn, where Custer's troops were defeated in the Great Sioux War of 1876, venturing into Montana and Wyoming.

The price is from £2,495pp, with flights, car hire and hotels ([bon-voyage.co.uk](http://bon-voyage.co.uk), 0800 316 0194).

**WE'RE HERE TO HELP**

FOR advice, send your questions to [holidayplanner@dailytravel.co.uk](mailto:holidayplanner@dailytravel.co.uk) or write to Daily Mail Travel, Northcliffe House, 2 Derry Street, London W8 5TT. Please include your contact details.



Picture: SHUTTERSTOCK

the top of the lifts. The Dolomites have some of the deepest early snow in Europe — 165cm in Sella Ronda with sunshine this week and more snow expected on Christmas Eve. Sestriere has 160cm with maybe 60cm of snow falling in the week ahead, followed by a sunny weekend and a snowy Christmas Day.

### ANDORRA/PYRENEES

LESS snow than the Alps, but a respectable 75cm and the same again on the way in coming days.

### NORTH AMERICA

MOST Canadian resorts are off to a solid start. Whistler is the exception, with just 40cm, but hopefully there is more to come on Thursday. In the U.S., Alta/Snowbird top the charts with 130cm, while Vail has 84cm. It's been a relatively dry season here so far with no big storms predicted.

### PETER HARDY

### TRAVEL FACTS

ROBERT and his family stayed with Peak Retreats ([peakretreats.co.uk](http://peakretreats.co.uk)) in Chalets de Flambeau, Val Cenis. Seven nights self-catered from £233pp including a return Eurotunnel crossing with free upgrade to flexiplus on most dates. B&B doubles at Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa ([royalchampagne.com](http://royalchampagne.com)) from £327.

# SNOW PATROL

**SKIERS** heading off over Christmas or New Year should be in for a real treat. Copious amounts of the white stuff have fallen almost everywhere across the Alps and the Pyrenees — and there's more on the way. Unsettled weather over the next ten days will produce even more snow — up to 50cm — in the run-up to December 25 on what is already an excellent base at altitude. Christmas and beyond is going to be a feast for skiers.

### AUSTRIA

**OBERGURGL**, Sölden, Kaprun, the Stubai are all in fine shape. St Anton has a respectable 75cm. The week ahead is mixed with sunshine and clouds, but more snow is expected next weekend. Lower-lying Kitzbühel and Soll are off to a decent start. It's snowing in both resorts today on a solid 65cm base.

### FRANCE

**GREAT cover now in Val Thorens and** Brits who are not mad keen on catering at the end of a long day's skiing. From a base in Bourg St Maurice, they bring oven-ready dinners for up to a dozen people — from tartiflette to lamb tagine and sticky toffee pudding — in cold boxes to your door in dozens of French resorts (free delivery on orders over £75/£63). And when you do

the Three Valleys. Even Morzine at 1,000m has snow. This may get washed away, but there's 100cm in Avoriaz above it, and a metre expected over the next ten days.

### SWITZERLAND

**VERBIER** (140cm) and Zermatt (110cm) have the best of it, with Engelberg (190cm). Sunshine expected, but Christmas should be snowy.

### ITALY

**COURMAYEUR** records over a metre at

want to venture out to the supermarket or bars, there is an added bonus. Val Cenis is not just refreshingly devoid of honking British voices, it is also a town where there are no traffic wardens, no yellow lines and no meters.

If you are going to drive all the way to the Alps, the last thing you want to worry about is a parking ticket.