

# FIRST TRACKS

Jenny Rowe picks the best ski slopes for young families



Powder Byrne is renowned for having the best child to adult ratio on the mountain

**S**kiing holidays are the backdrop to some of my favourite childhood memories. I remember screaming with joy while skiing between the legs of my cousin in a daring but well-practised move; bobbing along in a steamed-up gondola with my dad for the last, jelly-legged run of the day; and cutting through the pristine, packed snow on the first. With adventure, endorphins and fresh air in abundance, the mountains remind you what's important in life, and family tops that list.

For first-timers, finding the right resort could make or break if you want your children to thrill-seek the slopes in the future. Don't rush the basics. Most families will only have the time – or money – for one week's skiing each year, so make it count. Consider a private lesson at an indoor slope in the UK, such as Chel-Ski in Fulham, to help them get a handle on the principles of good balance and form.

Then, choose a resort with plenty of green and blue slopes that will hone their skills nicely. Most have a dedicated nursery 'slope' over which toddlers, bundled into colourful Michelin Man-esque outfits, happily shuffle in snake formation all day long. One of my favourites is La Piste des Animaux in Meribel, where little ones are enticed downwards with strategically-placed models of wild animals. Once your child is taking this in their stride, a range of well-connected blues – wide slopes for practising their turns and winding tracks through the woods for building their confidence (and speed) – will help to maintain their interest. Don't forget to note the lifts. Pommels take a bit of getting used to but chairs and cable cars are both beginner friendly. T-bars are tricky, so don't rely on these.

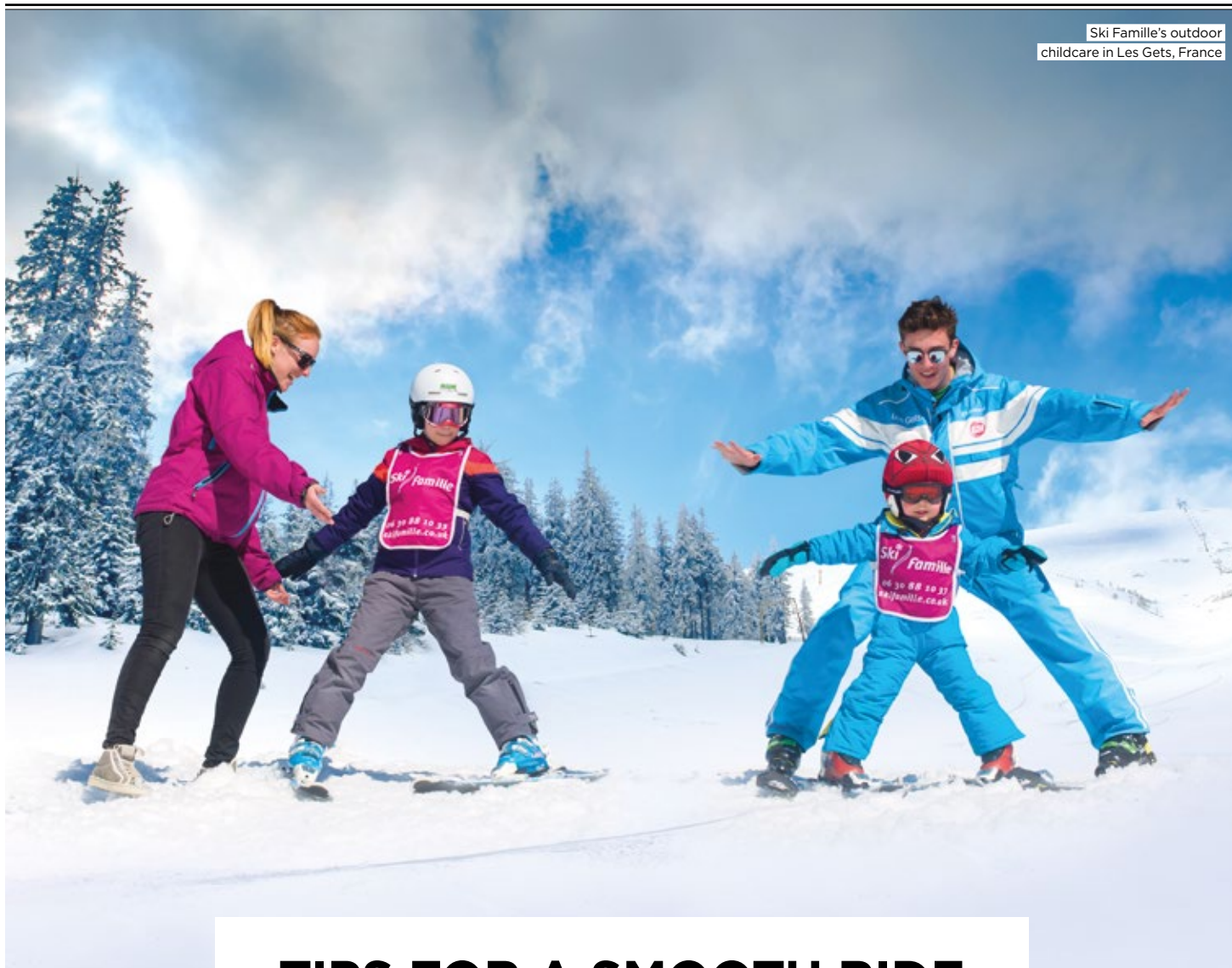
Half-term is always busiest so try to start with a small resort like Klosters in Switzerland, which is less crowded with safer spaces for learning. PT Ski, a boutique ski holiday provider, knows this resort in such detail that it seamlessly satiates the diverse appetites of every family member, including adventurous teenagers. Its ski tuition programmes cater for all ages and skill levels, so everyone can improve at their preferred pace. For the more confident teen or unfulfilled parent, PT Ski hosts off-piste ski weekends accompanied by the founder, James Palmer-Tomkinson. The bigger resorts, like Tignes and Val d'Isère, are not to be sniffed at but they're better suited to university students, who will be able to fully appreciate La Folie Deuce, a swanky bar at 2,600m.

Accept that you won't ski together most of the time and find a company that caters for everyone's needs individually. Age is by no means an obstacle. Powder Byrne has a specialist crèche for children aged three and under, providing the perfect balance of time on and off skis.

Part of the magic of a family skiing holiday are the other winter sports on offer. Ski Famille champion Les Gets in France for beginners, not least for its snowmobiling, sledging and dog sledging. For maximum adventure and minimum effort, book one of Artisan Travel's many taster weeks to try multiple activities all at once, such as a reindeer safari followed by cross-country skiing. Just don't forget the après, whether it involves one too many glühweins or luxuriating in a hot tub.

With a glass of wine in hand and the rosy, wind-chapped cheeks of your children around you, even a flashback to a horrific wipeout earlier in the week won't tarnish the happiest of holidays.



Ski Famille's outdoor  
childcare in Les Gets, France

## TIPS FOR A SMOOTH RIDE

*Read before letting rip*

### 1 COMFORT FIRST

Spend some quality time in the ski hire shop. Boots should fit snugly so need to be tried on. If they rub or your ankle isn't secure, exchange them. If children don't feel comfortable, they won't want to ski.

### 2 GOOD HABITS LAST

Parents may be good skiers but not the best teachers, so invest in lessons, whether with ski school or privately. One-to-one is more expensive but always best, as mismatched groups risk children being challenged too much or getting cold and bored.

### 3 TAKE THE SCENIC ROUTE

For competent skiers, a mountain guide is a must. It takes away the stress of navigation and the risk of skiing down the wrong side of the valley, only to find you've missed the last lift up. They'll know

the most beautiful runs, sunniest slopes and be able to seamlessly incorporate a few hot chocolates en route.

### 4 SPLIT UP

Keep ski groups small, especially when everyone is at different abilities. There's nothing more frustrating than trying to keep a big group of friends and family together on the slopes. Arrange to meet for lunch and après-ski events only.

### 5 BALANCING ACT

Confidence is the most important factor when it comes to learning to ski. Starting young has its advantages here – children are often brave and teens more anxious. Arrogance, on the other hand, is dangerous. If your young son or daughter is totally fearless, it's time to remind them that they're on a mountain and that some pistes end in precipitous drops.

### 6 SAY NO

Knowing your limits is the key to skiing safely. This goes for adults too – don't be too proud to turn down the ski jumps, even if your kids are somersaulting with ease.

### 7 PREP AHEAD

Poor visibility or bad snow conditions can be lethal. Things can change quickly on the mountains too, so be prepared for both extremes: goggles and sunglasses; balaclavas and suncream.

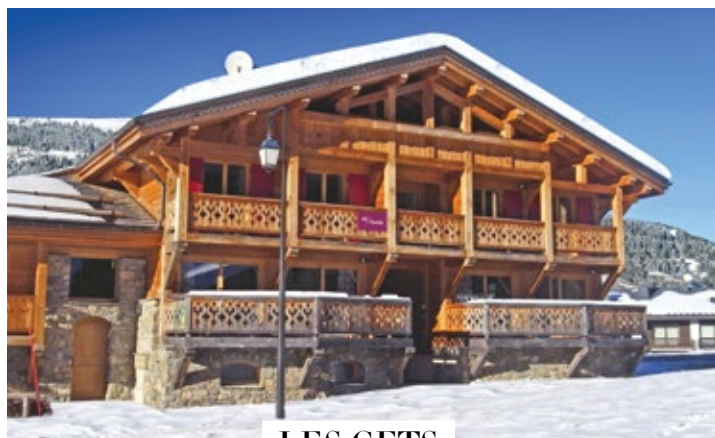
### 8 WRAP UP

No matter how many layers you have or how high-tech they are, at some point your children will be inconsolably cold and miserable. Pack hand warmers, plan for many drinks stops so they can warm up by the hand-driers in the loos and don't go too high up the mountain if you don't know what's up there – in -25°C wind chill no-one has the time or brain power for route-planning.

# A SNOWPLOUGHER'S PARADISE

*Resort recommendations from the reps*

## FRANCE



### LES GETS

For 25 years, Ski Famille has highly recommended Les Gets as the ultimate family-friendly resort. Here, all seven of its catered chalets are equipped with playrooms so private nannies can come to you, eliminating the difficulty of transporting your kids to a crèche, as well as your skis to the slopes. This is the case even for older children, who will be taken to and from ski school meeting points. This 'home from home' service continues 'après' with full-service cuisine.

*From £9,223 all-inclusive for a family of five during February half-term.*  
*skifamille.co.uk*



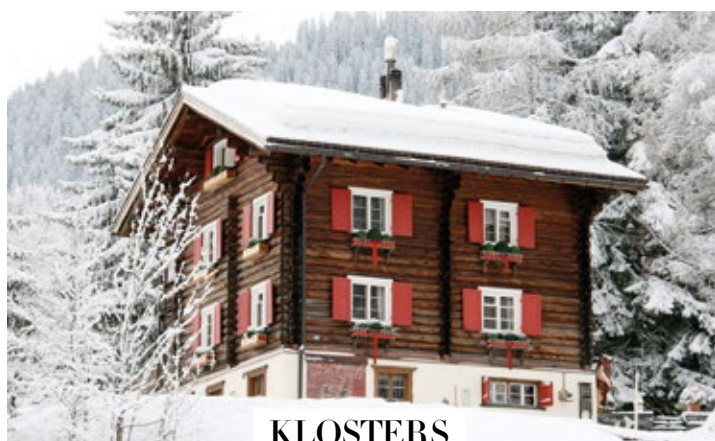
### ST MARTIN DE BELLEVILLE

This French ski resort maintains its traditional charm while also making a name for itself as an ideal destination for gastronomes, with its three Michelin-starred restaurant, La Bouitte. Recommended by The Oxford Ski Company, you can ask for a 'ski in, ski out', catered chalet for 16 rookie skiers with massages, specific drinks and baby food brands.

Try Chamois Lodge in St Martin De Belleville.

*From £21,500 fully catered chalet for a group of nine during February half-term.*  
*oxfordski.com*

## SWITZERLAND



### KLOSTERS

PT Ski is unique to Klosters, with off-piste programmes and experienced guides to enable intrepid parents and teens to make the most of Klosters' north facing slopes without going solo. They also offer group skiing and classes, plus piste hosting allows like-minded guests to mix, mingle and ski unencumbered by maps. Chalet Bear is one of the finest in the Alps, though there are other top-notch PT Ski accommodation options without the premium price tag. Prices from £25,000 half board for a group of eight during February half-term.

*ptski.com*



### LENZERHEIDE

Powder Byrne is renowned for its instruction programmes, with the best child to adult ratio on the mountain. 24/7 client concierge and in-resort teams and drivers offer hosted ski guiding and hassle-free holidays. Adult beginners will enjoy Learn to Ski in Style lessons and non-skiers, the Mountain Host programme. Hotel Schweizerhof in Lenzerheide, Switzerland offers double the runs because its linked to neighbouring resort, Arosa.

*Prices from £16,795 half board for a family of five over February half-term*  
*powderbyrne.com* ■