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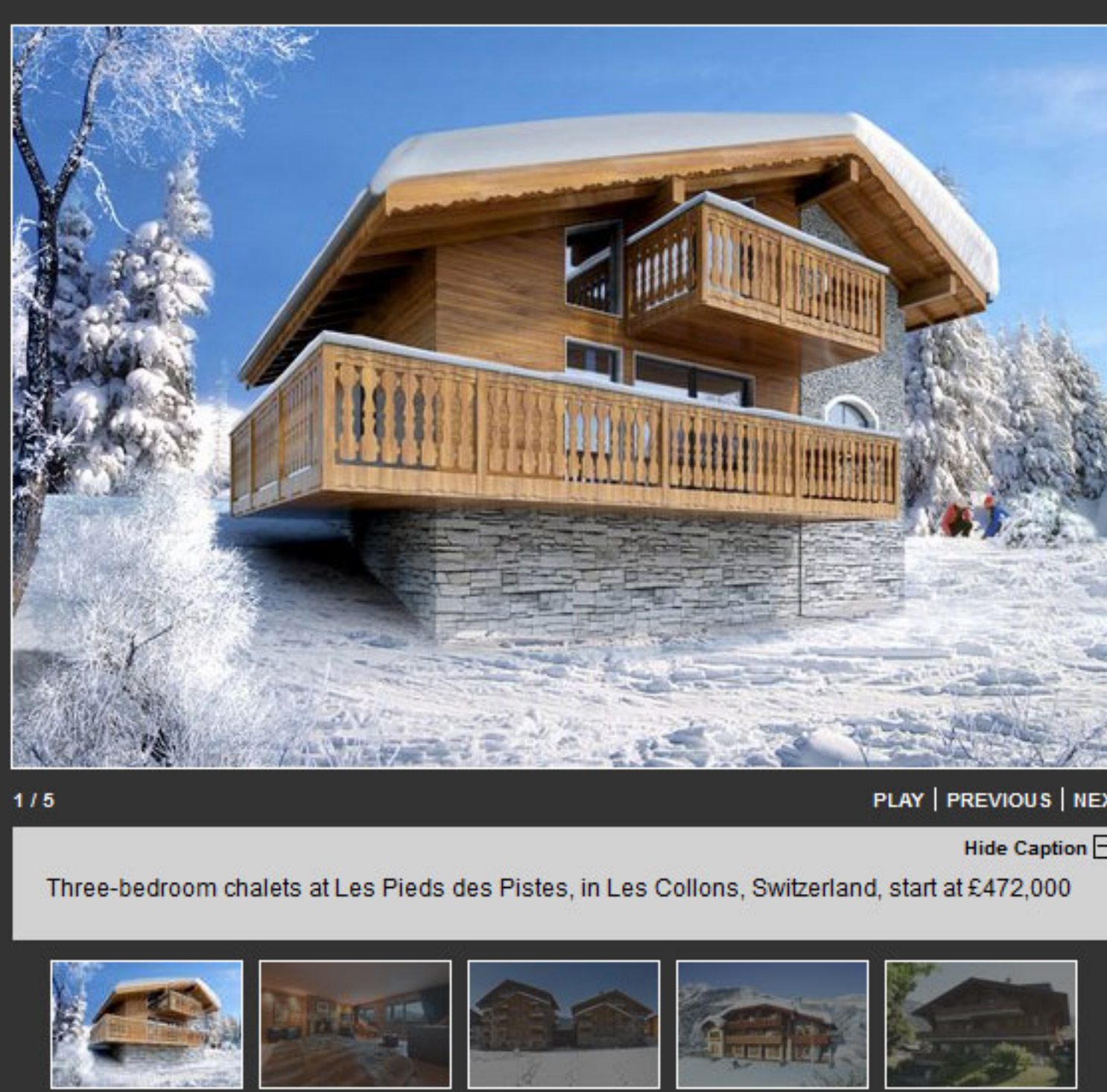
Nursery slopes: Family ski homes

The ideal family-friendly ski property needs easy access, a central location and childcare. We seek out the Alps' finest for sloping off with the kids

Zoe Dare Hall Published: 4 December 2011

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Slideshow: Family-friendly ski properties



• Video guides: See p3 for tutorials to perfect your skiing technique

For many parents with young children, holiday heaven is no longer a deserted tropical beach or a romantic restaurant with a sophisticated cocktail list — it's a kids' club. And, because your average holiday home doesn't come with a built-in nanny, finding a resort where you can own a property and use all the facilities, including childcare, as if you were on a package holiday would make your typical worn-out parent weep with joy.

That's the idea behind the Mark Warner resort in the pretty Austrian town of Zell am See — the tour operator's first foray into Alpine property. Owners in the development — a restored historic building with a new extension — will enjoy free access to the facilities, which include a crèche and spa (though, unlike Mark Warner guests, they will have to pay for all their meals). One-bedroom flats start at £129,000, and prices top out at £643,000 (020 7692 0786, markwarnerproperty.com).

"You can leave your kids in the crèche or toddlers' room while you go skiing," says Giles Gale, the director of Mark Warner's property arm. When owners aren't using their flats, they must adhere to Austrian tourist laws by making their property available for rental through the resort's management company, which, Gale says, "will rent it to typical Mark Warner package-holiday clients".

The project is just about to launch, so as yet there are no frazzled families to confirm its restorative appeal. To whet the appetite, however, Simon Clark, a procurement manager for Sony, and his wife, Zoe, 33, from Teddington, in southwest London, bought a two-bedroom flat in Zell am See this year for £256,000 through Mark Warner Property (which sells properties beyond its own branded resort). They say the location is utterly family friendly.

"Now we have Joe, who is 2½, and another on the way, we appreciate the fact that it's easy to get to — via Salzburg, with a one-hour transfer," says Clark, 37. "And the Austrians love kids. We invite friends and their children, and take it in turns to sit in the restaurant at the top of the mountain with the kids while the others ski down."



Club Med has a new resort in the pretty French village of Valmorel (Pierre Jacques)

Going one step further, Club Med has also made its first move into the Alpine property market — and is throwing in meals as part of an all-inclusive package for owners. The first 27 chalet-style properties at its new ski-in, ski-out resort in Valmorel, a pedestrianised village in the French Alps, two hours' drive south of Geneva, start at £659,000 for three bedrooms and come fully furnished (Erna Low Property; 020 7590 1624, www.villas-chalets.clubmed.com).

Each flat has its own entrance right next to the slopes, a private terrace, a ski locker and wi-fi. Owners can use the restaurants, bars and facilities, including kids' clubs and skiing lessons. You even get a personal butler to make breakfast in your flat.

Owners can choose between freehold ownership and a leaseback option that gives them three weeks' personal usage a year, a promised rental yield of about 3% and the chance to exchange weeks for other Club Med resorts around the world — a handy way to avoid the whines of "But Muuum, we went there laaaast year".

"This all-inclusive approach means the only big expenditure for owners will be travelling costs," says Sylvie Ernoult, sales director of Club Med Villas & Chalets, which plans to roll out the concept at its ski resort in Villars, Switzerland.

The curiously warm weather so far this autumn means a distinct lack of snow in many resorts at this early stage — which would usually send skiers scuttling to the highest peaks they can find. Yet priorities change when buying a family ski property — warm sun and low altitude are key ingredients.

"Saas-Fee is high-altitude and snow-sure, but its north-facing slopes get extremely cold in winter," says Simon Malster, director of Investors in Property, which specialises in Swiss and Austrian homes. "Villars is at a lower altitude and is more comfortable for families," he says. "It also offers easy access to the slopes, which is crucial — kids don't want to carry their own skis a long way."



Simon and Zoe Clark, with their son Joe, bought a two-bed flat in Zell am See (HO)

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The Mark Warner resort in Zell am See, in Austria, is a hit with families (HO)

Villars, which is east of Lake Geneva, 90 minutes' drive from Geneva airport, is an especially good choice if you're inviting the grandparents — or non-skiing friends — to help with childcare. They can take the funicular railway up the mountain and baby-sit from the comfort of the restaurant while you hurtle down the slopes.

"In many resorts, you can't get up the mountain if you're not on skis," says Malster, who is selling two-bedroom chalet flats in the town from £385,000 (020 8905 5511, investorsinproperty.com). He describes them as "ideal second homes for family winter holidays, as they're south-facing and right in the centre of the resort, near the cable car and a grocery store".

With similar family appeal, though more eye-watering prices, is chic Verbier — part of the Four Valleys, the biggest ski area in Switzerland — where the rustic-style Cordée des Alpes development is 100yd from the children's ski club and beginners' piste. There will also be a baby-sitting service, ski school and "general family assistance" to give parents a break, promises the developer, Marcus Bratter, a local hotel and restaurant entrepreneur. The remaining penthouses start at £4.6m (00 41 27 771 3971, cdaverbier.com).

At a slightly more realistic price, Savills' Swiss associate, Alpine Homes (020 7016 3740, alpinehomesintl.com), has various resale flats in Verbier from £633,000.

All-year appeal — which also means better year-round rental potential — is important to buyers at all budgets these days, and the Four Valleys region has it in abundance, says Charles Weston Baker, the director of Savills Residential International. "You will get a Mediterranean climate in summer in many of these Alpine areas, with vineyards in some of the valleys and a summer season that lasts well into September."

Yet, as Jeremy Rollason, managing director of Alpine Homes, points out: "Young buyers want nightlife, but families want a different flavour of resort, and places where they can ski inexpensively with growing children." He points to the Four Valleys resorts of Nendaz and Veysonnaz — he is selling flats at Mer de Glace, in the former, two minutes' walk from the main ski lift and linked to a four-star boutique hotel and spa, from £434,000.



Another great bonus of this region, particularly for those who live near Stansted, are Snowjet flights to Sion airport, which run three times a week. "That makes it the fastest transfer in the Alps — perfect for kids who don't like long car journeys," Malster says.

He is marketing 23 three-bedroom chalets at Les Pieds des Pistes, in south-facing Les Collons, just 20 minutes from Sion. At 103 sq metres, they are compact versions of larger designer chalets — so they still come with Poggenpohl kitchens, but are priced more affordably, from £472,000. "They sit at the foot of the slopes and they offer, I think, the best value in Switzerland," Malster says.

The purpose-built, big-name French mega-resorts may be meccas for winter action both on and off piste, but out of season they can feel like ghost towns. For families who want to maximise use of their Alpine property all year, and to feel part of the community, new developments in less familiar French working villages with a permanent population offer an appealing alternative — and properties there are often a lot cheaper than in the famous destinations.

"Most resorts try to be child-friendly now, but the skiing is disjointed in Chamonix, which can be a pain with children, and resorts such as Méribel and Courchevel 1850 are so expensive that, with a family, it's crazy," says Richard Deans, UK sales consultant for the French developer MGM. "The most important factors for family ski properties are childcare facilities, good kids' ski instructors, lots of slopes for beginners and intermediate skiers, and plenty of other activities if the weather is bad. You also want a range of reasonably priced restaurants and easy access to an airport."

So where do you go for all of that? In Samoëns, the archetypal French Alpine village, set around a central square, a gondola lifts skiers from the village to the slopes in eight minutes. One-bedders here, at Les Chardons Argentés, start at £215,000. In nearby Les Carroz d'Arâches, a farming village popular with French skiers wanting to explore the Grand Massif, one-bedroom leaseback flats at Le Chalet des Belles Pistes start at £202,000. Both villages are less than an hour's drive from Geneva airport; properties are available with MGM (020 7494 0706, www.mgmfranchproperties.com).

For those who have reached the point where happiness in a ski property is more likely to mean crèches and on-call baby-sitters than crazy après-ski and on-tap schnapps, a world of Alpine options awaits.

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