

CONSUMER ADVICE

The expert view



Trend on travel
Unpredictable snowfall across the Alps makes it prudent to book your ski holiday later in the season

The first serious snow for more than two months has started falling across the Alps, with more forecast. Whether enough materialises to rescue one of the most topsy-turvy starts to the season in living memory remains to be seen. But what does this late reprieve mean for skiers and ski operators?

After euphoria in November when many resorts opened early to take advantage of the huge amount of snowfall at the beginning of the month, the weather settled. A seemingly endless succession of warm, sunny days left many mountainsides below about 2,000m bare of snow.

I was in the Three Valleys just before Christmas, and I have never witnessed such a bizarre scene. High up in Val Thorens, conditions were excellent, but looking down across Les Menuires a few hundred metres lower, there was nothing but a network of thin white pistes winding through the green grass and grey rocks.

The pisteurs and the snow machines had managed to maintain decent piste skiing despite the intensely difficult conditions, but they can't hide the fact that this is the third year in a row that the season has got off to a late and difficult start.

It is impossible to know whether this is a chance pattern or whether it represents a trend caused by climate change. But the lesson for skiers who want to find decent conditions is that it no longer makes sense to book very far in

advance – at least for travel in December or January. Much better to wait and see how the season pans out, and to choose your holiday a week or two before departure. Not only will you be sure of decent snow, but you might also get a late-booking discount.

This is not, of course, the sort of advice that ski tour operators want to hear being given to their customers. The poor early season snow has come at a bad time for the industry. The number of British skiers booking had only just struggled back to the level reached before the 2008/09 crash and operators are facing a host of other challenges in both the long and short term.

The weak pound is a critical problem, though the impact is probably more psychological than real. At current levels it is actually stronger against the euro than it has been in four out of the past seven years. The long-term decline against the Swiss franc has a rather more relentless feel. There are also longer-term issues caused by Brexit, including a potential threat to British gap-year students being allowed to work as saisonnaires – one way in which operators keep chalet holiday costs down.

But these operators are nothing if not resilient and adaptable. Ski holidays have never been more flexible; and there has never been a greater choice of airports, resorts and accommodation.

The one problem they can't overcome is a lack of snow. But it seems that this has now been solved – for the time being at least.



QUESTION OF THE WEEK



Kiki Deere
Kiki has travelled extensively in Italy and is an expert on the lakes

Italian Lakes base

Q We are arriving in Milan in June and would like to spend five days in the lakes area and then explore the Cinque Terre, using direct trains or buses. Can you please advise on places to stay in the north and also Cinque Terre?

DANIELLA HERSZFELD

A Lake Maggiore is a good choice and is easily accessible from Milan Malpensa airport, with buses (safduemila.com) running to a number of towns along the lake's

western shore. A good base you can check in at La Palma (telegraph.co.uk/tt-lapalma), a four-star lakefront hotel with a modish rooftop terrace with swimming pool looking out on to the Borromean Islands.

Isola Bella is the real highlight, with a Baroque palazzo and gorgeous terraced gardens (pictured, above). Isola Superiore is a pretty spot for a bite to eat – try the restaurant of Hotel Verbano. Spare a day for beautiful Lake Orta nearby (buses connect Stresa to Orta San Giulio in 1hr 10min). From Stresa

there are buses north to Pallanza, home to 16 hectares of botanical gardens at Villa Taranto. The four-star Grand Hotel Majestic has a pretty lakefront garden and small sandy beach and is another good option to stay in.

From Verbania-Pallanza railway station you can catch a direct train back to Milan, and travel on to the Cinque Terre from there. A good base for exploring the Cinque Terre might be the Grand Hotel in Portovenere (telegraph.co.uk/tt-portoveneregrand), just to the south of the national park.



On the case
Travel troubleshooter Gill Charlton steps in on your behalf

Where's my ticket?

Q Back in February 2016, I paid Omega Flight Store for tickets to travel with my family on Jet Airways from Newcastle to Delhi via Amsterdam, departing on December 11. I was duly issued with a confirmation invoice which listed the e-ticket numbers and the airline's PNR reference to access the booking online.

Last autumn, Omega contacted me to say that there was a schedule change and we could no longer fly back to the UK on December 25. It tried to get me to accept a flight on December 26 but I said I could not take this up due to work commitments. Instead I reluctantly

agreed to accept flights on December 24.

However, despite many phone calls, we have not been issued with amended flight tickets.

When I contacted Jet Airways direct to find out what was going on, it said it had no flight reservation for us. I immediately told Omega that Jet was claiming our reservation did not exist, but it said that the fault lay with the airline.

On November 11, Omega sent another email asking me to call (it won't enter email correspondence) as there's now a schedule change on the outbound flight. The email gives no details. Please can you find out what is going on?

KAMAL MAHAWAR

Always accept a schedule change rather than ask for a refund

I picked up Mr Mahawar's case in November – and since then, the problem has been resolved. But what went wrong? When a travel agent takes full payment for a flight booking, it should issue the e-ticket immediately. This contains individual numbers for each ticket and a six-character PNR code which can be used to locate the booking.

After the initial schedule change, Mr Mahawar should have been issued with a new flight schedule by Omega Flight Store within days and

his PNR code should have remained valid. The problem probably arose because the alternative return date proposed was not acceptable to him. When this happens, people, rather than machines, have to get involved to negotiate an alternative. They are often poorly trained and this is where things can go wrong.

As Omega is a member of Abta, sensibly Mr Mahawar submitted a complaint to the trade association, which it acknowledged. But as the November days ticked away, I asked Abta if it could expedite an intervention on his behalf. If an Abta member is not providing a reasonably competent service and communicating efficiently with a customer, it is in breach of the Abta

Code of Conduct. In this case, Abta worked with the agent (which claimed the disappearance of the e-tickets was the fault of Jet Airways) to get the tickets reissued. This was only achieved 10 days before Mr Mahawar's departure date, which is not acceptable, whoever is at fault.

Flight schedule changes should be communicated by agents straight away and, in the event of a significant time change, the customer has the choice of accepting the change, asking for seats on a more convenient flight (if space in a similar fare class is available) or requesting a refund.

It is always best to accept a schedule change rather than ask for a refund, especially when dealing with an

online flight broker which will have very few staff to process such requests. Readers regularly write in to complain that they have waited many months for a refund and that the flight broker is being unhelpful. Indeed, with some smaller regional airlines operating outside the EU, refunds may never arrive back in your bank account.

Questions should be sent by email to asktheexperts@telegraph.co.uk. Please provide your name and nearest town and, if your query is about a dispute with a travel company, your full address, daytime telephone number and any booking reference. We regret that we cannot answer postal or telephone queries.

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