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‘We’d rather be fined than miss our term-time ski holiday’

Despite a record number of penalties in 2024, parents are taking risks in order to beat rising costs and crowded pistes

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06 February 2025 8:00am GMT

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Nick Robinson, who runs an online platform for booking private ski lessons, with his family

Parent WhatsApp groups have been pinged in indignation at the news that a record 443,322 [school holiday fines](#) were issued in England last year.

Figures from the Department for Education (DfE) for the 2023/24 academic year show a 24 per cent rise on the year before, and are three times higher than in 2016/17, when records began. A [petition](#) to allow parents to take their children out of school for up to 10 days during term time has more than 30,000 signatures, and the petition to ban holiday companies from rising prices during school holidays is also gaining attention.

[Fines start at £80](#) per child per parent, rising to £160 for a second offence and potentially court for a third offence within three years. But when holiday prices are significantly lower in term time – in particular for skiers when compared against February half term – there are plenty of parents [willing to take the risk](#) of a financial penalty.

“There’s a fine line between taking your kids out of school for leisure purposes and choosing to engage them in an educational holiday that will teach them a new skill and enable them to become more well-rounded, confident and independent young people,” says Nick Robinson, the chief executive of [Maison Sport](#), an online platform for booking private ski lessons across Europe.



Some parents are happy to risk a fine in order to take their children skiing Credit: Jimmy Williams

“So many parents across the UK feel as though they no longer have the resources to invest in [extracurricular sporting activities](#) that will support their children to develop a well-rounded skill set,” he continues.

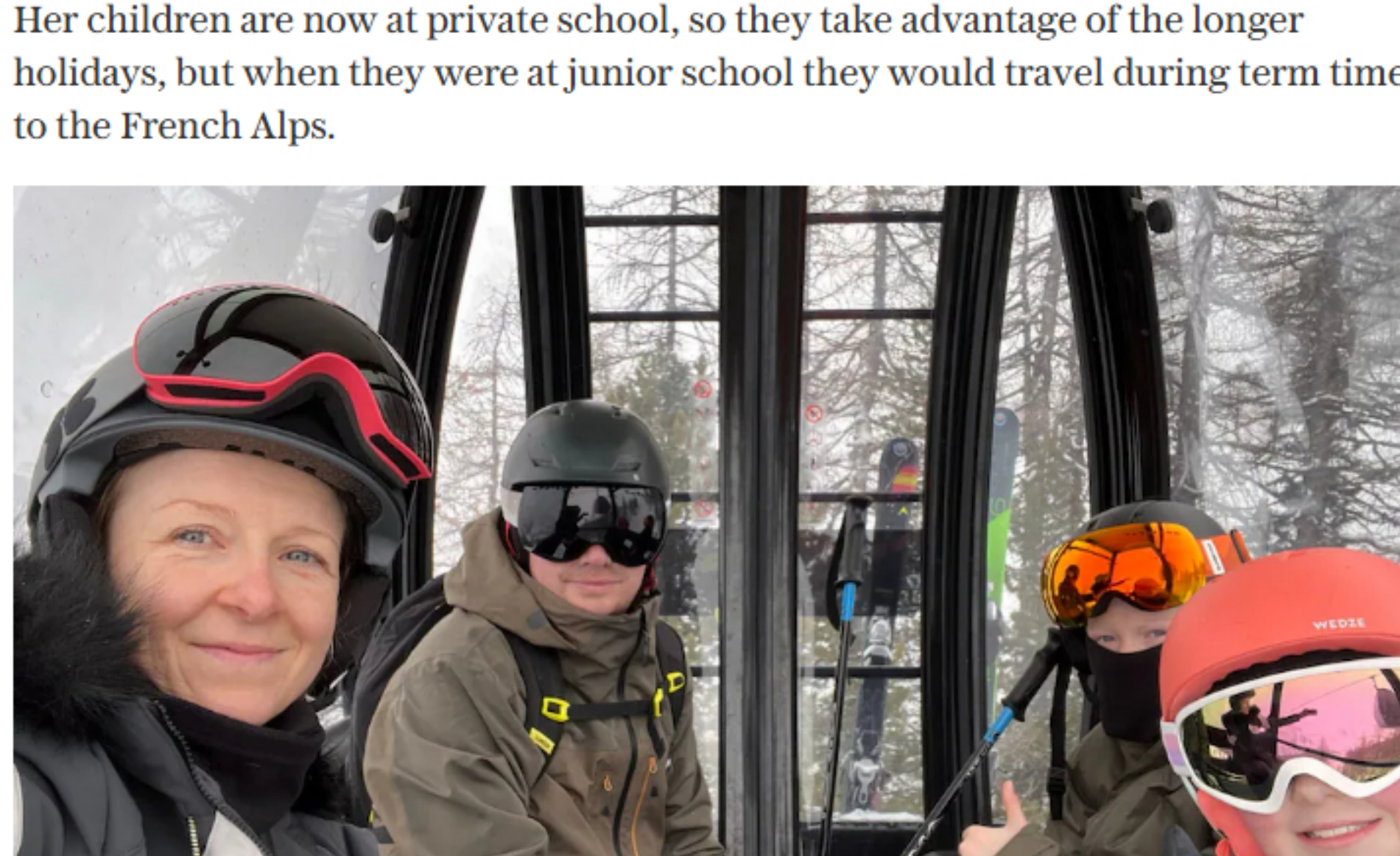
“As the founder of Maison Sport, I know how important it is to have the right tuition for your children when they’re learning to ski. At half term, class sizes can be up to 14 children when elsewhere it’ll be more like six, which is really important because it improves the group dynamic, the safety and the enjoyment levels.”

“This year alone, we have seen a 9 per cent year-on-year shift from February half term to January and March,” says Nicola Moss, the head of marketing at Peak Retreats, for whom families contribute the majority of bookings. “Our accommodation and resort partners have also reported similar changes in demand. Outside of peak weeks there can be significant savings – we’ve seen ski accommodation and flights in January up to 50 per cent cheaper than February.”

But does it just come down to the cost for families deciding to [take their children out of school](#)? We spoke to four families to find out why they’re prepared to risk being fined.

‘It’s not like we’re sitting in an all-inclusive for a week’

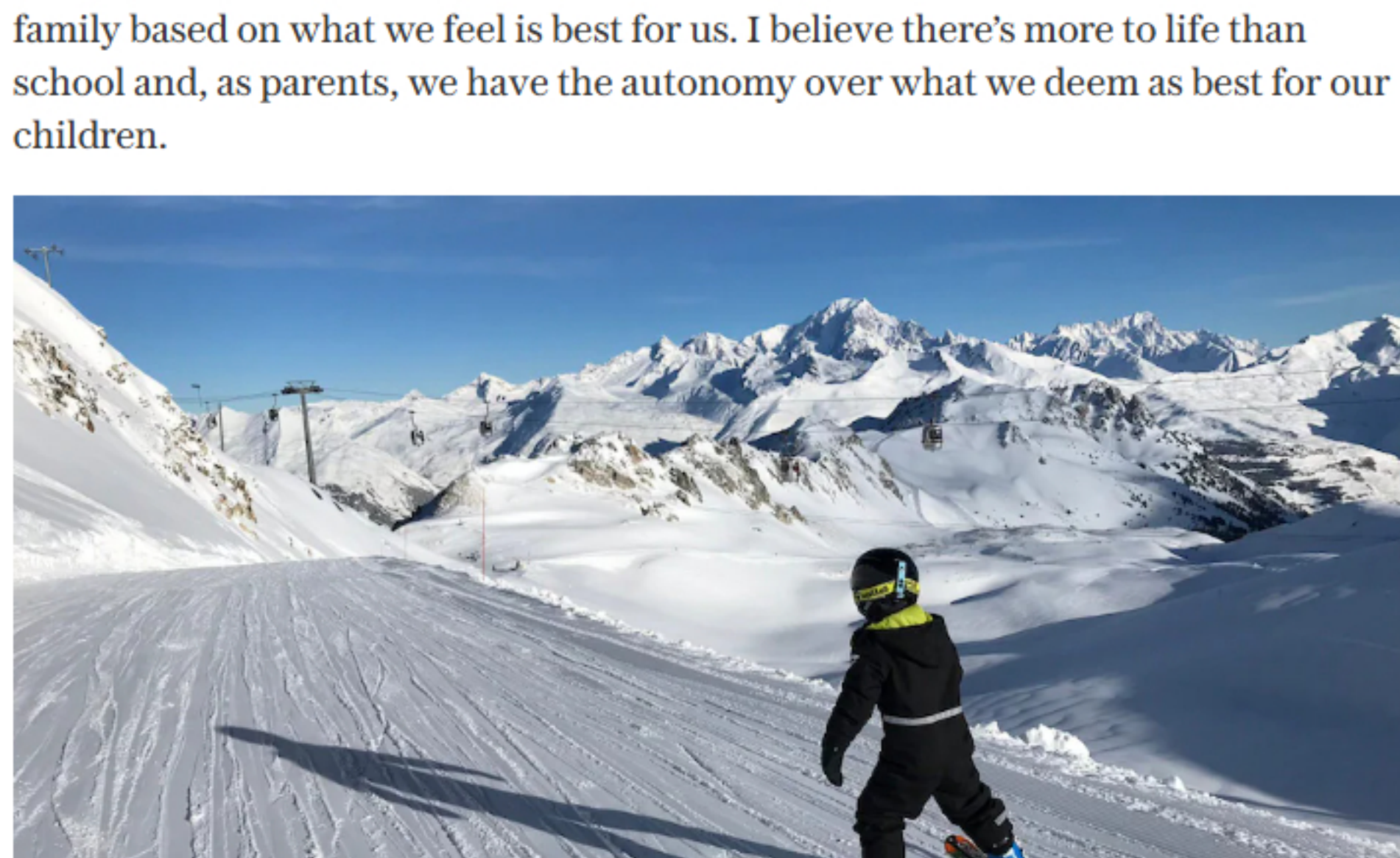
Rebecca Butler has a son, 14, and a daughter, 12, and lives in Guildford, Surrey. Her children are now at private school, so they take advantage of the longer holidays, but when they were at junior school they would travel during term time to the French Alps.



Rebecca Butler visited Les Arcs with her family

“I just can’t entertain the idea of going skiing at February half term. Being able to go in those cheaper weeks is important to us, and we justify it to ourselves because it’s not like we’re taking them away to just go and sit in an all-inclusive for a week; they’re learning a new skill that’ll give them confidence and help them through life,” says Rebecca.

“We first took our children out of school to go skiing when they were four and six, and have never been fined; it’s just been marked as unauthorised absences. I’ve always been upfront with the school and said we’ve made this decision as a family based on what we feel is best for us. I believe there’s more to life than school and, as parents, we have the autonomy over what we deem as best for our children.



Rebecca Butler’s son, 14, skiing Credit: Supplied

“However, my son is now 14 and in year 10, so I wouldn’t take him out in term time – instead, we’re fortunate to have private school holidays, so this winter we went the week before Christmas, which worked really well for us. I think we’ve found our new favourite time of the season.”

‘I’d pay the fine, as I believe it’s worth taking her out of school’

Kate James has a six-year-old daughter who enjoys skiing more than any other sport she’s tried. The family are from Bradford, Yorkshire.

“I choose to take my daughter out of school for ski holidays, and have done for the past three years, because I think skiing is really beneficial for her, and we can’t afford to go during school holidays,” says Kate.

“I was lucky to go skiing as a child, and it was never during school holidays, as my parents couldn’t afford it. I don’t think it impacted my education at all, so I decided to do the same for my daughter. My daughter is now six and she absolutely loves skiing, more than any other sport we’ve tried. Yes, it’s expensive, but she enjoys it and gets so much out of it.



Kate James has taken her six-year-old daughter out of school to go skiing for the past three years

“I’m upfront with the school about what we’re doing, and so far it’s been marked as unauthorised absence. If I was to be fined, I’d try to contest it based on the benefits she gets from going skiing, but if I didn’t win, I’d pay the fine, as I believe it’s worth taking her out of school.

“Unless she’s behind on her school work or says she doesn’t want to miss school, I’ll continue taking her in term time. It’s been years since I’ve missed at half term, but from talking to other parents it’s not just the cost that’s off-putting, it’s also really busy.

“Ideally, I’d like to see the dates of school holidays staggered across the country, and the fines to be taken on a case-by-case basis that considers what parents are doing and where they’re going. Skiing means so much to me, and I want the same for my daughter.”

‘I don’t want my kids to be ploughed into’

Jane Pilkington* has two sons, aged eight and 12, and has taken them on two ski holidays in term time. They live in Castleford, Yorkshire.

“We’ve been skiing as a family twice now and both times we’ve gone in January, purely because of the cost,” says Jane.

“Last season it was my 40th, so we had a bit of a blowout, staying at a catered chalet. For the four of us it was just under £5,000; if we’d done the same holiday over February half term it would have been about £10,000, which is totally out of our price bracket.

“My kids have only done two weeks of ski lessons, so the fact that lessons and the slopes are likely to be much busier does play on my mind. It’s mum anxiety, but I don’t want my kids to be ploughed into.



Some parents see skiing during term-time as a safer option, due to quieter slopes Credit: Jimmy Williams

“I wasn’t upfront with the school and told them it was a mix of sickness and a family trip within the UK. Obviously, as a parent, I’m trying to encourage my children not to lie, but I was very straight with my children as to why we weren’t telling the truth (we could be fined £320), and we had some invaluable and much-needed time together as a family.

“Now my eldest is at senior school, the pace of learning has really sped up, so I don’t think we’ll take him out again for a full week – the pressure on him to catch up would be too great. Instead, we’ll look at going somewhere cheaper during the school holidays, such as Bulgaria.”

‘I think that a family holiday is a good thing for children’

Rachel Cunningham* has a son aged six and a daughter aged four, and has no qualms about taking them out of school for family holidays. They live in Salisbury, Wiltshire.

“I work in the travel industry, which means my busy times are other people’s holiday times, so getting time off when the children aren’t in school can be tricky,” says Rachel.

“It means we have to be a lot more flexible with our attitude to time off. As a family, we greatly value education and will take learning books away with us, but I also think that a family ski holiday is a really good thing for children. It’s not just the sporting aspect; it’s the fact they’re outside in the fresh air and using a huge amount of courage to get around the mountain.

“I think you just have to look at what works best for your family and their needs. For example, my son is naturally more cautious, so it’s better for him to ski in term time, when the slopes are quieter.”

*Names have been changed

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Whether you’re planning a family trip to the Alps or a bucket-list powder tour of North America, our ski experts are here to help you plan the perfect trip to the mountains.