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Swiss skiing: Saas-Fee a delight in spring

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Sledding is favourite family pursuit in Saas-Fee. Twice a week you can tackle the prepared 5.5 km track at night.

SWISS-IMAGE.CH

Neil McKay
Toronto Star

Recommend

SAAS-FEE, SWITZERLAND—Skiing in southern Ontario, the subject of avalanches rarely comes up on the chairlift. But if home lies at 1,800 metres, your house surrounded by 14 peaks over 4,000 metres, it's impossible not to glance upwards when you step out the door.

PHOTOS: Saas-Fee

Saas-Fee, a laid-back, car-free village in the Valais region in southwest Switzerland, sits in a spectacularly dramatic setting. Looking down on the houses from the Alpin Express gondola, it's easy to see how it came to be called the Pearl of the Alps. The village lies at the bottom of

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what could pass for a gigantic oyster shell with glaciers, rock and snow forming the walls of one very, very big shellfish.

Standing at the bottom of the ski area, just steps away from the pretty main street — Gletscherstrasse — you realize that should the gods decide to send down a tsunami of ice, snow and rock, there's not many places to run.

That's why on this snowy day in mid-December, Franziska Supersaxo looks a little preoccupied as she attends to her guests at the family-run [Hotel Waldesruh](#), which sits directly facing the ski area, while keeping an eye on the weather and avalanche advisories from the Saas-Fee tourist office. A couple of days previously, Supersaxo was considering evacuating her guests to the family's other hotel, the Alphubel, in a more sheltered part of the village.

The snow was about a month behind schedule in the Alps this season, but on Dec. 16, winter arrived like a long-lost relative at the front door with six kids and a dozen bags in tow. About 95 centimetres of the white stuff in 24 hours had the resort's army of slope groomers swinging into action. Two days later, the snow was still falling heavily and two of the resort's three major ski areas were closed because of the risk of avalanche.

For Frau Supersaxo, the timing of this first major storm of the season was particularly unsettling. While a metre of snow in one day is not all that unusual, Franziska says, the date was what really unnerved her.

On the evening of Dec. 16, 1981, two massive avalanches roared down from opposite directions and converged at the Hotel Waldesruh and next door at the family's home. The hotel withstood the onslaught remarkably well even though the lower two floors were filled with snow. No one was seriously hurt. The home, however, was demolished.

Two of Supersaxo's brothers, who were sleeping on the upper floor of the house, managed to escape unharmed. But her mother, Rosa Kalbermatten, was asleep one floor below, a part of the house that was buried under 10 metres of snow.

Through the night, rescuers dug through the debris, hoping for a miracle. "It wasn't like snow," recalls Franziska of that haunting night. "The snow was like cement." But at 5 a.m., eight hours after being buried, Rosa was rescued. She was alive. A bedroom wall had given way but had fallen over Rosa's bed, providing her with a small air cavity that saved her life.

"That must have been a terrible night, thinking your mother had died under all that snow," a visitor suggests as a group of guests stand around after dinner listening to the story with mouths slightly open.

"No, I never thought she was dead," Supersaxo insists. "I just kept praying and praying."

As for injuries, "She had a small operation on her hip, where it was crushed by the snow a little bit, but a couple of years later she was skiing again," Franziska remembers with a chuckle. "She was a very interesting woman, my mother."

Mind you, living in Saas-Fee and *not* skiing might be a fate worse than death.

The main ski season runs from November to late April but the glacier at the Allalin ski area (altitude, 3,600 metres) provides skiing year-round and many national ski teams, Canada's included, train here in the summer months. Allalin is accessed by an underground gondola that carries skiers the last 500 metres up the mountain. A couple of flights of steps lead to the exit and the sudden exertion at that altitude will quickly tell you what kind of shape you're in. (Some weaklings almost fell on to the benches at the top of the stairs. But within five minutes I was ready to move on.)

It's always wise to choose a resort with good elevation when planning a spring skiing trip, and Saas-Fee is about as good as it gets. There's no chance you'll be skiing around grassy patches in March or April, and given the amount of snow this season, even May. (On Dec. 19 the powder was so deep that even skiing down a freshly re-groomed piste in the afternoon the powder was at mid-calf.)

The resort is more popular with families and intermediates than off-piste devotees and offers an excellent range of long cruising runs. Each of the three ski areas — Plattjen (2,570 metres),

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Felskinn-Allalin (3,600 metres) and Spielboden-Laengfluh (2,870 metres) — feature long, winding runs that start high above the tree line and weave through the trees down to the village. The spotless Morenia self-serve restaurant at the top of the Alpin Express gondola in the Felskinn ski area is a good choice for lunch or a hot chocolate. The food is excellent and the prices are reasonable.

If you're lucky and the village streets are still covered in snow, you can ski down Gletscherstrasse past the shops, hotels and cafes to not only the Alpin Express high-speed gondola in the morning, but even more importantly directly to the Black Bull or Nesti's bars at the end of the day. You'll have to take your skis off to get in the door at Nesti's but the friendly folks at the Black Bull won't bat an eye if you snowplow right onto the patio and up to bar for a schnapps or gluehwein. *Zum wohl!*

JUST THE FACTS

ARRIVING Saas-Fee is 235 kilometres from Geneva airport.

By car: Driving time: 2:40 from Geneva; highway tolls: 55 euros; gas: 26 euros. Shuttle bus from parking garage to car-free village.

By train and bus: Train from Geneva airport to Visp; bus to Saas-Fee: 3:20, \$86 return (www.rail.ch).

CAR RENTING Auto Europe (www.autoeurope.com) is a large, discount wholesaler. Main roads to ski resorts are always well maintained but if you plan on doing any exploring on secondary roads in the Alps, go with four-wheel drive or something like the Peugeot 3008 crossover that comes with "grip control" and upgraded tires.

SLEEPING The Hotel Waldsruh (www.hotelwaldesruh.ch) is family-friendly and located near several of the main gondolas. The Belmont (www.hotel-belmont.ch) and Derby (www.hotel-derby.ch) are also located near gondolas/cable cars and well-priced for Saas-Fee (\$100-\$150 per night, per person with breakfast and dinner. Check hotel websites for deals on lift tickets). The Mistral (www.hotel-mistral.ch) and Ambiente (www.hotel-ambiente.ch) are also well located but a little more expensive.

GOING Saas-Fee has good skiing till late April. Village sits at 1,800 metres and ski area extends up to 3,600 metres.

BUYING 1-day pass \$75; 6-day pass \$380.

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Spring skiing: Where to go where there's still snow

Article **Photos (2)**

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We don't have any snow in Toronto, but there's plenty in other parts of the world, including Quebec, B.C. and Switzerland. It's a great time for that spring-time ski trip.

DREAMSTIME PHOTO

Neil McKay
Toronto Star

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It's been a forgettable winter for Ontario skiers and some folks may be thinking about putting the boards away for the season. Not so fast, friends.

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There is still some snow to be had this spring if you don't mind hitting the road or, better yet, heading to the airport. And after this season's paltry dustings of the white stuff, you deserve that spring ski trip. Accommodation and lift tickets are greatly reduced this time of year and it's worth investing a little time on the Internet to find that perfect last-minute spring ski trip.

The Alps have enjoyed tons of snow this season and the high-altitude resorts in Europe like Saas-Fee in Switzerland or Val Thorens in France are hard to beat. All feature loads of runs above 2,000 metres where the snow will remain in good shape till the end of April. If you can manage the flight to Geneva, this is option No. 1 in these eyes. Lift passes in Europe are generally less expensive than at major North American resorts and the price of food and lodging is much the same.

Heading west is also a safe bet with good conditions almost guaranteed with just a little research. And there's still a few good spots in the East, both in Quebec and south of the border, to get those last runs in.

Here's a look at some of the best spring skiing options in North America and Europe:

QUEBEC

Mont-Sainte-Anne While the hordes descend on Mont Tremblant, this resort 40 kilometres east of Quebec City is worth the drive if you prefer quieter slopes and shorter lift lines. Who doesn't? About 800 kilometres from Toronto. Ranked No. 1 in Quebec by *On The Snow*. Enjoys one of the longest ski seasons in the East.

www.mont-saint-anne.com

Le Massif Located an hour east of Quebec City, resort boasts fabulous views of the St. Lawrence and an impressive vertical drop of 770 metres. Has a very reliable snow record. Proximity to Mont-Saint-Anne means you can spend a few days at each resort while enjoying the pleasures of Quebec City. The resort said it got 24 cm of new snow on Monday of this week.

www.lemassif.com

MICHIGAN

Boyne An eight-drive from Toronto, the resort is a good alternative to Vermont and offers superb skiing for intermediates and families. A lift ticket lets you ski both Boyne Mountain and Boyne Highlands — about 20 minutes apart. The latter is quieter and better for families, but both hills are worth skiing. Kids 8 and under ski free. Very welcoming of Canadians. Good snow record.

www.boyne.com

BRITISH COLUMBIA

Big White Located 56 kms from Kelowna in B.C.'s Okanagan Valley, the resort is famous for its massive annual snow dump of 25 feet. Do you need another reason to go? Over 800 metres of vertical drop. Access by shuttle from Kelowna airport.

www.bigwhite.com

Whistler No. 1 on almost every list as best ski destination in Canada and on every serious skier's bucket list. Vast ski area over two mountains, tons of snow again this season and snow-forecast.com is calling for another big dump this weekend. Bus transfer from Vancouver airport (three hours).

www.whistlerblackcomb.com

EUROPE

Saas-Fee, Switzerland A beautiful car-free village in the Valais region of Switzerland. A three-

hour drive from Geneva or accessible by train (with bus connection) from airport. Village lies at 1,800m and ski area, including glacier skiing, extends up to 3,600m.

www.saas-fee.ch

Zermatt, Switzerland Another car-free village in the Valais, lying at the foot of the magnificent Matterhorn. Three-hour drive from Geneva or accessible by train direct from airport. Village lies at 1,809m and ski area extends to a whopping 3,900m. (If you smoke, this is a good place to quit.)

www.zermatt.ch

Val Thorens, France At 2,300m, the highest resort in Europe and part of the magnificent 3 Vallees ski area which consists of eight inter-connected resorts, including Courchevel and Meribel. The ski area — for many the best in the world — extends up to 3,230m, with 85 per cent of the skiing above 1,800m. Direct bus service (three hours) from Geneva.

www.valthorens.com

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