

Irish Daily Mail weekend

# TRAVEL



# Back on board

*Our writer clicks on return to the Alps after five years away*

**T**HERE are very few thrills in Dublin suburbia that can compare with the anticipation of a snowboard adrenaline rush. When I clicked into my board for the first time in five years last week, I got that nervous excitement that only comes with a high vantage point and fresh, crisp air.

As an out-of-practice seasoned snowboarder, my first run could have gone one of two ways; an enjoyable, smooth sailing down the slope, my twists and turns graceful like a ballerina; or, a nervous struggle between two stilted legs, where my over-concentration ultimately ends with me face down in the snow. And though my surroundings were an idyllic bliss, like some painted white canvass from a movie script, my first run down the mountain snapped me back to reality and I struggled for composure. The snow tasted every bit as fresh as I had imagined.

This is Austria and our pass covers 2,790 kilometres of beautiful piste, stretching out

**BY CORMAC CAHILL**

in vast chasms across the countryside, where everyone from the seasoned skier to the first-time snow boarder is catered for.

A SuperSkiCard/Allstarcards Kitzbüheler Alpen pass allows full access to the region with 25 resorts to choose from and our first port of call was St Johann in Tirol; the perfect starting point to brush away the cobwebs.

The town itself is almost two hours away from Munich airport by taxi, but with an early departure with Aer Lingus that morning, we managed to arrive at our hotel before lunch, with plenty of time to get set-up with our gear.

The wonderful people at Wilder Kaiser ski-school could not have been more accommodating and after securing our rental equipment, we were treated to a gondola trip up the mountain and lunch overlooking our new surroundings of the lush green valley

**TURN TO NEXT PAGE, TRAVEL**



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**INSIDE: ITALY'S LITTLE TIBET • DIANA'S FAVOURITE RESORT**



Happy Après: Our Cormac relaxes

**FROM PREVIOUS PAGE**

below. The sight of skiers and snowboarders whizzing past us in the restaurant made me yearn to get back on the slopes, but I consoled myself with the one meal I'd been dreaming about since my last ski trip to Kitzbühel, five years previously: Kasepatzle.

It wouldn't be a ski trip without Austria's version of mac and cheese and after gorging myself silly on the rich, creamy dish, I was almost ready for sleep.

Our Explorer Hotel is newly opened and conveniently situated just five minutes walking distance from the first lift.

The decor is pristine and extremely clean, but it isn't what you might expect from your typical Austrian hotel. One of my travel companions described it as 'Ikea show-room meets a German Youth hostel' and this probably captures it best.

Our guide in St. Johann explained to us that the modern-style hotels are

beginning to replace the more traditional Austrian guesthouse accommodation, which generally tends to be more expensive to maintain, to adhere to the strict local council regulations.

It's a pity, really, because the modern-style hotels are no match for the traditional Austrian architecture that one typically associates with skiing in this part of Europe.

Convenience is one thing, but the old-school Austrian guest-houses have always represented warm hospitality and fantastic service. One can only hope that the new hotels don't scrimp on the famous old traditions.

After lunch, our guide took us up through the market area, down past some beautiful old Austrian buildings and on to the Huber Brau brewery for a few pints before dinner.

The Post hotel - our venue for dining on the first night - was typical of the old Austrian decor and with the mountain air invading the senses, it really did feel like we were a million miles from home.

The meal certainly didn't disappoint. A feast of noodle soups, wurst sausage, salads and cheeses smothered the table... and that was just for starters! Steaks, fish and pasta followed, with enough food to feed an army. Culinary bliss, Austrian style.

Being one of only two snowboarders in the group, it didn't take long for Laurence and I to separate ourselves from the skiers and venture off on our own. Skiing is a bit like riding a bike - the first run is all about settling back into a rhythm, but once the first run passes, it becomes second nature again.

**T**HE unseasonably warm weather for this time of year should have impacted on our skiing conditions and while the drive up to St Johann was dominated by green countryside, the mountain staff at the ski resort had been careful to preserve the early dump of snow that came in mid-November.

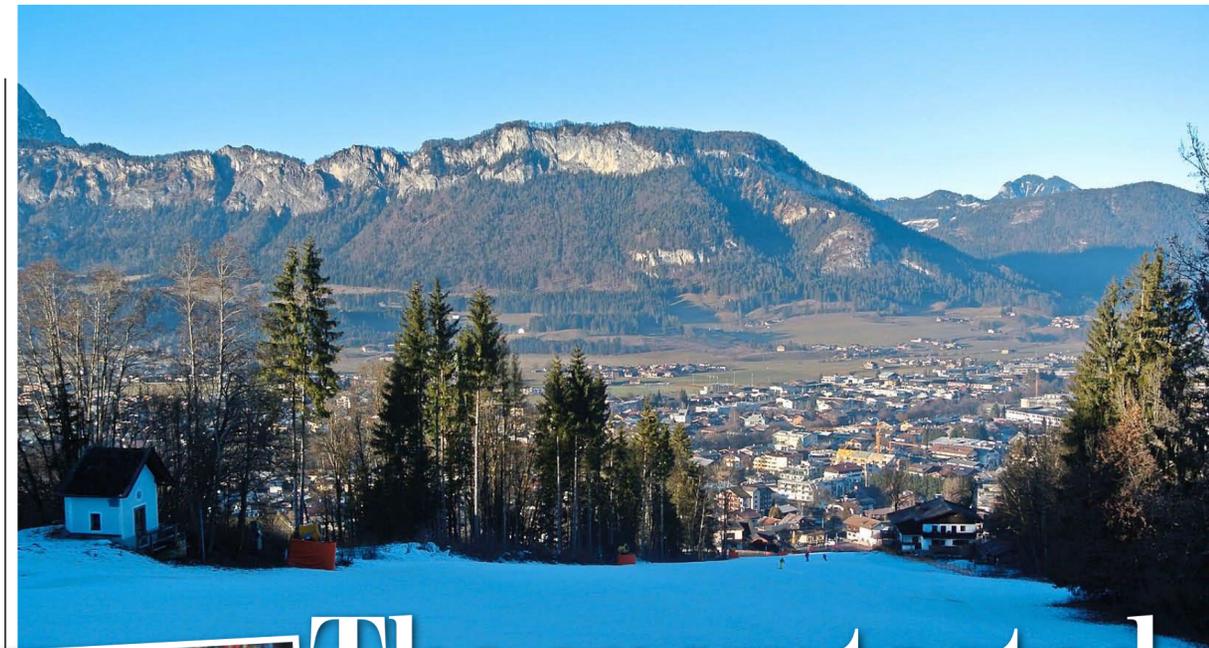
As soon as the temperature drops below zero on the mountain, the snow canons pump fake white gold over the ski runs to keep them covered.

Seasoned skiers claim there is no substitute for the real thing, but for us novices, the conditions were perfectly fine.

The season hadn't officially started, so we had the pleasure of the mountains all to ourselves.

On our second day in the snow we headed for Kirchberg - five minutes down the road - to the Adler hotel on the edge of the town. This was familiar territory for me and I was excited to get back on the slopes where I had spent so much of my time working as a rep many years ago.

My old skiing route was as inviting as ever and it didn't take long before I grabbed Laurence off for a stretch of the 170km circuit from the famous Hahnenkamm race



# The snow tasted just as fresh as I had imagined



Thirsty work: The Austrians know all about refuelling



slope across to Pass Thurn, taking in the snow park along the way. Talk about nostalgia. It was just like turning back the clock.

The evenings on a skiing holiday are all about the après ski and the perfect way to unwind after a hectic day on the slopes.

That evening, we stopped into the Eisbar for Austria's unique take on the night-time entertainment; a veritable feast of cheesy

Euro pop music and drinking games.

Our final day took us back over to Westendorf, just five minutes drive from Kirchberg. A full day of skiing and snow boarding was topped off with an evening meal and some tobogganing.

The beers and wine over dinner banished any hesitation we might otherwise have had about flying down the mountain in a wooden

toboggan that gives virtually no protection.

And while this made for a lot of fun, it also resulted in a few injuries. Two people in the group suffered bruised ribs and a third picked up a broken finger.

Tobogganing is brilliant fun, but perhaps it's best saved for the end of the trip. Injury and skiing holidays are not a good combination.

For me, Austria represents everything a ski holiday should be and while I'm not huge fan of the transition from traditional guest-house to modern hotel, I have been assured that the new accommodation will not result in a decline in the wonderful warm welcome that is standard across the sector.

I'll be putting that theory to the test when I return early in the new year.

## TRAVEL FACTS

**Aer Lingus** flies twice daily from Dublin to Munich and operates a weekly service from Cork. One-way fares inc. taxes and charges from **€54.99**. Visit [aerlingus.com](http://aerlingus.com)  
**Ski Pass AllStarCard:** day/ 3 day/ 6 day - €55, €155, €265.  
**Adler Hotel, Kirchberg:** One night €70 with breakfast pp.  
**Explorer Hotel, St**

**Johann:** From €429pp for a week sharing with breakfast.  
**For tobogganing you have to pay the lift card and the hire fees. The hire fee for each toboggan is €8. The lift card for one day costs €29 per person, for the night run it costs €20 per adults. A single ticket for the Gaisberg lift costs €13.50.**

# Why we are all heading back to Italy's Little Tibet



**H**IGH Altitude, tax free Livigno was a firm favourite with the Irish before the Crash. And it is again as we all head back to Italy's 'Little Tibet'.

We visited at the close of last season to find a lively, charming, sophisticated resort where ancient wooden buildings vie with glitzy shops for your attention.

Here are our top ten favourite things about Livigno this winter.

**1 Skiing at:** Livigno's skiing is high altitude (1,800-2,900m) guaranteeing a long snow-sure season, late November to late April. Enjoy 110km of pistes in the Carasello and Mottolino sectors with lifts to Passo d'Eira and Trepalle and reasonably-priced heli-ski options for experts.

The resort itself divides the skiing into sectors on both sides of the mountain but a modern lift system and regular bus service ease access.

**Ski with Devid Bormolino** from Scuella Sci - he will work on your ski technique with laughter and fun and may even point out the Italian ski team as they train in the area.

**2. Shopping heaven:** Yes you can buy a litre bottle of alcohol for around €3 but there's far more to Livigno's duty free shopping. The resort has enjoyed duty free status for hundreds of years and now has 250 shops - from high-end designer to cosmetics and ski gear - perfect for non-skiers.

**3. Exploring:** Livigno is set in a remote corner of Italy's Lombardy region. The downside is that the transfer from Milan is around four hours. The upside is that it's just 14km from Switzerland and you can visit St Moritz as well as nearby Santa Caterina and Bormio. With the right lift pass, advanced skiers can also ski in these areas.

**4. Relaxing:** The recently re-opened Aquagranda sports centre is a big amenity for a relatively small resort. Whether it's wellness and relaxation, family fun or high altitude training, it can cater for you. Even Swiss women's ski champ Lara Gut has trained here.

Look out for Finnish saunas, ice room, aromatic showers, thalasso bath, hammam and above all, reasonably priced admission with a family day pass costing €42 and individual admission €15 per adult and €10 per child.

**5. Get active:** Enjoy the unspoilt nature. Activities include ice climbing, snowmobiling, fat biking, ice driving and winter walking. Alternatively, learn about

**BY CATHERINE MURPHY**

Livigno's history and its old buildings.

**6. Eating:** Livigno's tax-free status means great prices on the ground so eating out is largely unpretentious and inexpensive. You can enjoy pizza and a beer for just €7 at Mario's restaurant or at Bait del Ghet (which offers free beers for queuing customers). Mirage restaurant is another pizza favourite.

Try Pizzoccheri; buckwheat pasta served with an unlikely-sounding but delicious mix of cabbage, garlic, butter and cheese. Eat it at Paprika restaurant, Camana Veglia or Mario's.

**On the mountain:** M'eating Point Mottolino is a large self-service restaurant with a smaller table service restaurant for those in the know. For more rustic fare, try Stuvetta mountain hut at Carasello 3000.

**7. Drinking:** You can't go through a morning's skiing without trying Bombardino, a hearty mix of advocado, brandy and coffee. Drink Valtellina wines with dinner and Braulio, a herby digestif, afterwards. For après, drink Aperol Spritz (prosecco, aperol, soda water), Hugo (prosecco, elderflower syrup, soda water, lime juice, mint leaves and ice) or Campari.

**8. Speaking of Après:** The Bivio bar (which translates as junction) lives up to its name. It's a meeting place for Italians both during après-ski and for live music and après-dining later on.

Miky's pub caters for a younger crowd while Ypicoa cocktail bar offers wines and cocktails at great prices. For stunning views, take the short bus ride to Latteria di Livigno to buy local cheese and sip a beer on the sunny terrace.

**9. Staying at:** Christallo, a traditional hotel run by sisters Maura and Lorenza Cola. On renovating the property, they gave each room an individual flavour and superior rooms feature private sauna or whirlpool.

Livigno stretches in a long line that can require a taxi from one end to the other so be conscious of distance. The 3-star Hotel Alaska is centrally situated in the pedestrian zone, close to a ski lift. Apartments are also popular and spacious.

**10. Family fun:** Livigno caters as well for families as après-ski lovers. This winter the resort has plans for kids clubs with lessons and play between 11-4pm daily. Junior and senior lift passes are offered at reduced prices.

## SO, BOOK ME UP...

**Topflight Holidays** ([topflight.ie](http://topflight.ie)) offer package holidays to Livigno. If you prefer to go it alone, fly Aer Lingus to Milan Liniate and take a shuttle, €45 each way on Saturdays ([livignoexpress.com](http://livignoexpress.com)). Alternatively, hire a car. Lunch in lakeside Dongo.

A six-day Livigno adult lift pass costs €229 in high season (€138 child). The resort also offers 'skipass free' periods at the start and end of the season. From April 15-May 1, booking four nights in a hotel or seven nights in an apartment will get you a free lift pass for the length of your stay.

For more information, go to [ski-livigno.com](http://ski-livigno.com).

# Irish Daily Mail Breaks

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# Why January is my favourite month on the slopes

**SKI REPORT**  
**Catherine Murphy**

**WHEN** it comes to ski resorts, I have a few pet hates - girly ski gear; ski hire staff who insist on giving me girly ski gear; overpriced booze and of course, lift queues.

Admittedly, you can use queuing time to prank your pals, recover from the last run or spout loud nonsense about your ski/life/financial achievements but in general, there's nothing more tedious than wasting valuable ski time in long lift queues.

This is one of the reasons I avoid the February mid-term break and try to ski in the Alps in January instead, even if it's for a short break.

Poor old January gets a bad press; it has a reputation for being cold and dreary but in truth, I've had fresh snow and blue skies in January and -15 degree white-outs in March. January is

also the month in which winter now truly arrives in many Alpine resorts so if you're lucky, you could enjoy the best snow of the season whilst avoiding the post-Christmas blues back home.

But back to ski lift queues. One of the biggest reasons I like skiing in January is that most people are at home recovering from the Christmas spend or saving for that family ski holiday in February. This means quieter slopes for me.

Quiet slopes mean less chance of accidents on the mountain, more relaxed ski lessons, cheaper lift pass and accommodation prices, better preserved snow, less waiting time for a table at my favourite mountain restaurant and yes, you've got it - no lift queues.

Since I'm a bit of a princess who enjoys the sensation of having my own private ski resort, this is all very good news indeed. So where should you book a last-minute January ski trip?

While many European resorts are still waiting for winter to really begin, the eastern Alps (Salzburg area) got fresh snow this week - over 50cm in some resorts - and forecasters are looking to a significant change in the weather in the coming week or so ([weather-toski.co.uk](http://weather-toski.co.uk)). So for optimum conditions at the moment, check out Obertauern

and Schladming in Austria or Cervinia, Sestriere, Gressoney and La Thuile in Italy which had fresh snow in the past two weeks.

The Ski Welt and Kitzbüheler Alpen areas in Austria are massively popular with Irish skiers. If you're heading there this month, make the best of the region - invest in the All Star card area pass and hop on the train between St Johann, Westendorf, Kirchberg and Kitzbühel to sniff out the best snow and shortest lift queues!

■ [topflight.ie](http://topflight.ie), [crystalski.ie](http://crystalski.ie), [directski.com](http://directski.com) and [highlife.ie](http://highlife.ie) all offer January ski deals with prices from as little as €281 in Andorra. If you're flush, head to the US where many resorts have already enjoyed great snow falls.

Have a great New Year on the slopes, Catherine x

BY ISABEL  
CONWAY

# Shoe shopping in Princess

## Diana's resort... so that I can look my best for the season

**W**HEN was the last time you visited a ski hire shop designed

like a 5th Avenue New York art gallery, marble embellished lifts transporting skiers and their equipment effortlessly between floors.

Imagine the bliss of sinking into a sumptuous sofa in front of a flickering cosy fire after a painless fitting of azure and cream ski boots so beautiful that Jimmy Choo himself might have dreamt them up?

I am loathe to leave palatial Strolz – possibly the most glamorous ski hire shop on the planet – in the super smart Austrian resort of Lech for the slopes of this renowned ‘Cradle of skiing’. It was pure 007 territory and Bond might join us at any moment on the shaggy sheepskin cushions for a chat about gradients and free riding

Such luxury – as opposed to most ski hire shops I have known with their hard benches scuffed equipment and lingering musty smell of sweaty feet – where you took your place in a long queue, ending up with boots requiring the brute force of Conor McGregor to get them on was all new and wonderful.

**O**UR eyes were out on sticks entering the automatic glass doors of newly opened Strolz competing with the local onion domed village church for selfies with locals and tourists taking photos of the interior with its glass sculptured lights that hang like icicles from the ceiling above.

A blonde willowy vision in a champagne shaded short fur jacket casually draped across her shoulders swept past hardly giving the interior a second glance. From the rear she could have been (but as it turned out wasn't) supermodel Claudia Schiffer, among A lister regulars to Lech.

Also a favourite ski resort of the late Princess Diana she was to become Lech's unofficial patron, lured by its alpine charm, stunning scenery and fantastic skiwear retail therapy. A generous sprinkling of Royals from the Netherlands, Monaco, Spain and Jordan continue to ‘grace’ its luxury hotels, designer boutiques, manicured slopes and ritzy restaurants. Lech boasts the highest density of Gault & Millau eateries of any Austrian ski resort.

The frozen bar on the Schlegelkopf is still a celeb hang out and its new gourmet restaurant is the latest to be seen spot.

The good news is that ordinary folk like us can also afford to ski in Lech whose prices from food to lift



Only the best will do:  
For our Isabel

### TRAVEL FACTS

Get there: VIP ski vacations start from €1,106 inc. flights ex London Gatwick to Friedrichshafen (Belfast departures also available) with reduction on holiday price for individual travel, private transfers can be arranged. VIP packages include transfers, en-suite half board, daily afternoon tea, gourmet dinners at Hotel Theodul in Lech and VIP dedicated chalet service assistance ([www.vip-chalets.com](http://www.vip-chalets.com)).

Daily flights also ex Dublin-Zurich with Aer Lingus and Swiss Air. Six-day area lift pass €260 Ski hire €147 boots €72. See [www.lech-zuers.com](http://www.lech-zuers.com) and [www.vorarlberg.travel](http://www.vorarlberg.travel)

passes and ski hire, especially later in the season compare well with the likes of Verbier in France and Switzerland's Zermatt and Davos.

Hus 8 Lech's most traditional and historic restaurant hidden behind a Hansel and Gretel carved door is where everyone – celebs and the rest of us – can enjoy affordable fare. Cute little dining rooms are also ideal hide outs when the blizzards blow. Claudia Schiffer and a role call of Europe's elite including the Dutch Royals are regulars for its fondues, lunchtime regional Walser cheese soup (€7.40) and an awesome strudel (€7.70) Sadly I could get no confirmation that Claudia was ever seen indulging in such calorific temptation.

Arriving at 1400 metre high Lech in mid-December there had been no significant fall of fresh snow since early November. Would we find green brown grassy slopes littered with rocks we wonder having consulted Google who delivered a zero snow forecast for the week

ahead but lots of equally welcome bright sunshine.

Not so long ago the scarcity of fresh snow would have confined skiing to a handful of slopes serviced by snow canons. The highest pistes of Ski Arlberg, Austria's largest ski area now offers an impressive 305 kms of continuous skiing throughout Zurs, Lech, St Anton and cross border thanks to a new €45 million cableway added this season.

Miracles of engineering technology the Flexenbahn and new Trittkopfbahan lifts have done away with long and congested bus journeys but it took 5 years before they got the go ahead, not so long considering a new piste restaurant ‘Der Wolfe above Oberlech whose architecture in wood and granite reflects its surroundings took 10 years to open. Our skiing guide, charming Eddie from Croatia points to snowfields below 2544 metre Mohnerfluch saying “they've banned heli skiing here

in the weekends to prevent stressing rabbits and wild goats but its allowed from Monday to Friday so restrictions don't make much difference to the wildlife as they wouldn't know what day of the week it is”.

The Beast and ‘Everest’ are huge piste caterpillars among an impressive arsenal of machines that mill, grind push and compress Lech's snow day after day. Thousands of tons are shifted day and night to maintain perfect conditions regardless of natural snow.

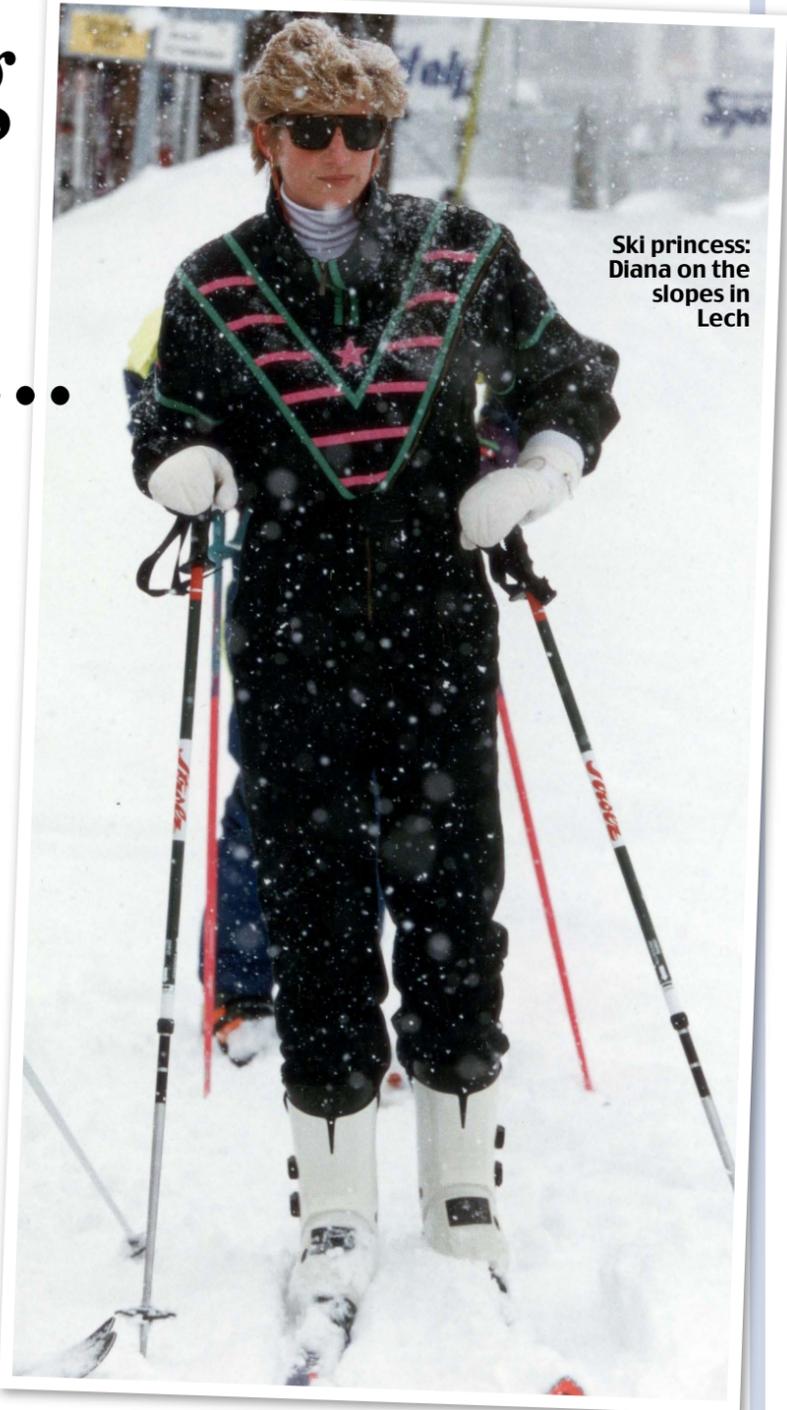
Thanks to the combination of snow harvesting, advanced snow making technique and around the clock slopes maintenance here none of us could tell the difference between artificial and real snow. We were spoilt for choice taking umpteen easy to medium perfectly groomed long wide runs over a couple of days, venturing over to St Anton on one of them.

Off piste and free riding hounds after fresh deep snow and as the

Tourism blurb puts it “nerve jangling experiences and intoxicating moments of joy” in powder and mogul descents around Zurs and St Anton would have had their adventurous spirits dampened due to the lack of powder. But the trade off for me was skiing slopes like ironed sheets without even a centimetre of ice to shake the knees or a hint of fog to cloud our horizons.

UK based tour operator VIP ([www.vip-chalets.com](http://www.vip-chalets.com)) who have other luxury hotels and chalets (in all price ranges) in France Switzerland and Austria recently took over 4 star village Hotel Theodul with its beautiful spa exclusively for clients.

Mini Club Med meets a very large ski chalet experience here with the privacy and range of facilities that a proper hotel offers with an ever helpful staff. I could imagine coming to this hotel as a single and feeling at home in no time. But only if I can rock back down to Strolz and claim those boots back.



Ski princess:  
Diana on the slopes in  
Lech

## Happy anniversary... wherever you go in 2017

**T**HIS has been a year of anniversaries... well, isn't every year? But this year was special with the centenary of Easter 1916 and we were glad to welcome back the diaspora and old friends for a memorable occasion.

It was also a year when we were reminded of the sacrifices made by our forebears as we stopped to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. Your diarist had the privilege of visiting Flanders and The Somme and knelt at the graveside of my Great Uncle Willie in Ypres. I fully recommend GTI's WW1: Flanders & The Somme four-day group tour with a professional historian guide. From €667pps. Visit [www.gti-ireland.com](http://www.gti-ireland.com). Contact (01) 8434734.



It was also the year when Czechs whacked back the Pilsner and Becherovka for the 700th anniversary of the birth of the father of their people King Charles IV. And the Bajans downed the Mount Gay rum to mark 50 years of Barbados independence.

Aer Lingus currently has 50% off summer flights to Europe, so Prague is from €46.50. When you go, stay at Hotel Lindn prague-castle.hotel-rn.com) up the hill for spectacular views.

As luck would have it Sandals has a 12 days of Christmas Flash Sale on. I stayed at San-

dals Barbados and still get all floaty about it. Stay for seven nights in a Caribbean Grande Luxe Room. Travel between May 1 and June 20 and September 1 and October 22. Was £3,345 (€3,920), now £1,699 (€1,991). Book by midnight on January 6. Visit [www.sandals.co.uk](http://www.sandals.co.uk).

Randomly, 2017 anniversaries include the centenary of the Russian Revolution, Canada's 150th birthday and Finland's 100 years of independence. But before we leave 2016, yesterday saw the 18th birthday of Daddy's Little Girl and the previous day the Son and Heir's 21st. Drink was taken!

**THE** indomitable Mrs M can't wait for the January Sales... she's started already. If it's a holiday you're after: We know you like Cruises: Topflight offers a saving of €800 (February to

March) on a Fly & Cruises deal with MSC Emirates to Dubai. Prices from €999pp, down from €1,799. Visit [www.topflight.ie](http://www.topflight.ie) or call (01) 240 1784.

And Portugal. Falcon Holidays ([www.falconholidays.ie](http://www.falconholidays.ie)) has seven nights' self-catering at Cerro Mar Garden Aparthotel, Albufeira from €480pp. Depart May 21, Dublin. And Cassidy Travel has five nights at the Bellavista Avenida, dep. Dublin, January 8 from €105pp. Ring (0818) 332500. And the US. And GoHop.ie's USA sale. Snaps likes four nights at the 3\* Stratosphere Hotel, Las Vegas from €579pps. Travel, March 3. Ring 01-2412389.

And Spain. Sunway has seven nights self-catering. Lanzarote. 2\* Apartments from €299pp. Call (01) 2311800 or visit [www.sunway.ie](http://www.sunway.ie).

Feliz año nuevo!