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Travel

'There will be no Christmas skiing:' Ski holidays stopped in their tracks as Europe goes into lockdown

With foreign holidays banned from Thursday the chances of hitting the slopes this year look slim

By Lucy Aspden

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The hope for ski holidays to recommence this year has been dashed as England prepares to enter a second national lockdown.

Under new rules, from Thursday travel will be banned and international holidays stopped as the nation [enters a month-long lockdown](#).

Boris Johnson announced the news in a press conference on Saturday, with measures set to last until December 2, but there is [the prospect of restrictions being extended further](#). England joins the likes of [Italy](#), [France](#) and [Austria](#) where national measures are also being introduced and ski lifts shut, killing any hope of a normal start to the ski season.

The lockdown, which hopes to curb the second wave of coronavirus cases, coincides with the time when tour operators and resorts would be gearing up to welcome guests for the winter.

Put bluntly, "There will be no Christmas skiing," said Richard Green, founder of Ski France, which has been operating ski holidays in the Alps since 1988.

Many in the industry are in agreement, the likelihood of Britons being able to ski before the New Year is almost nonexistent. "It would seem the chances of any UK skiers being able to head away on holiday in December are now very slim," said James Gambrill, CEO of the Mountain Trade Network, which has been regularly surveying the thoughts of skiers and operators over the past few months.

The impact of new lockdown across Europe could be disastrous for businesses. "Most operators have now given-up any hope that a ski season can be salvaged," said Green. "They must batten-down their hatches, hope that furlough to include social charges will be extended, and cross their fingers. Large, well-funded firms should be able to hang-on, as should ultra-nimble small ones, but mid-size firms with head office rents and full-time staff are in a terrible position," he said.

Despite the grim forecast some operators are now "holding their nerve" as insight suggests the majority of skiers will book trips to the mountains at the very last moment. While resorts in France, Austria and Italy are currently banned from opening until the start of December, a deadline that has forced some to postpone their openings, all do hope to be able to open once the lockdown is lifted-with a [plethora of new rules and regulations ready to be put in place](#).

"Customers are saying they want to book Christmas or [New Year](#) after they see if the lockdown really does end at the start of December," said Richard Sinclair, managing director of ski travel agent SNO.

"That's tough for tour operators who are holding their nerve in the hope of late bookings – some might have to pull the plug before then, if they don't have enough bookings guaranteed," he said.

This hope for last-minute bookings is all that is keeping the ski industry afloat. "The new lockdowns across Europe have killed any optimism there was about the season starting as planned. We could see significant last-minute bookings, and at present that is the best we can hope for," said Iain Martin, host of The Ski Podcast.

Gambrill's research suggests this hope isn't unfounded. "If they can people will travel at Christmas... our research suggests [the desire is certainly there for many skiers to get away](#) as soon as possible if they can," he said.

Angus Kinloch, managing director of SkiLine, agrees: "Skiers by their very nature are risk takers, why else would we strap skis to our boots and drop off a mountain. We know many of our clients are desperate to get away skiing. To skiers and snowboarders, winter sports are more than just a holiday," he said.

However, despite this desire to return to the slopes, the future of travel beyond the new lockdown remains uncertain. Leading operators,

including Crystal Ski and Inghams, have all confirmed that [they will not run holidays](#) to destinations that the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office advises against all but essential travel to-as package operators, they are legally obliged to take this stance. Currently this includes all the major Alpine destinations.

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Inevitably the uncertainty will put some people off travelling, especially in the early months of the season. “To date 90 per cent of all of our December bookings have decided to move due to the huge uncertainty on what the situation will be in December. Bookings for the early part of the season are to be honest non-existent now,” confirms Nick Williams, managing director of chalet operator Mountain Heaven.

Despite this, there is still some hope that travel may be back on the cards by the spring and skiers could get to the mountains later in the season. “We are actually relatively busy for February onwards as people hope to be able to travel,” said Williams.

“Operators are very much looking to the second half of the season from mid-February with the hope that a relatively normal season could operate from then... Almost every operator has been offering full flexibility and zero cost changes so skiers who booked for December or January will be able to move to a later date” said Gambrill.

Some are looking even further into the future and promoting ski holidays for 2021/22 earlier than usual, as some skiers give in to the uncertainty and put their next trip to the slopes on hold for another winter.

“For our customers who are due to travel this winter, up to the date that the final balance is due they will have the option to postpone their holiday until next year and put their deposit payment against a future booking with us at our 2021/22 ski season prices. For this reason, we have put our 2021/22 winter holidays on sale early to give our customers the option to do this now, if they would like to,” said a spokesperson from Inghams, who also confirms the operator has postponed taking the final balance for holidays departing in December while they review the situation.

Smaller companies are also having to be flexible in their approach to dealing with the pandemic. “We have definitely seen people wanting to defer their holidays. Most have deferred to next season, but we have given our customers an opportunity to move their holidays to the 2022/23 season too. People have deferred so that they know they have a holiday to look forward to,” said Sam Thomas from More Mountain, a chalet operator based in Morzine.

“We are being very flexible, and so far this has meant that all of our customers have been extremely positive and felt in safe hands,” she said.

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It's hoped that lockdown measures will help ensure the usual festivities in resorts can go ahead but it's unlikely Britons will be able to visit Megeve

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