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Sebastian Faulks goes off piste



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Ski special

A ski holiday fit for royalty

Klosters is famous for its Windsor connections, but James Palmer-Tomkinson is making the rest of us very welcome, says Jane Knight

So, I'm skiing in the tracks of Tara Palmer-Tomkinson's brother, James, and, for a while, it's proving tough. That's not because I am a hopeless amateur compared with James, who has skied since he was 4, with a father and two uncles who were British champions. No, the problem is that James seems to know everyone on the slopes: at the top of the ski lift, on the piste — he even knows the accordion player in the restaurant where we stop for lunch — and his innate courtesy means he stops often to exchange a polite word.

He's on more than polite terms with the Royal Family too, although it's his sister, Tara, who features in the Royal Family's holiday snaps along with Charles, Wills and Harry.

This is Klosters, the Swiss resort beloved by its extremely well-booted skiers and, although we have missed the Prince of

“Klosters turns out to be far from the chic Swiss hang-out I'd expected**”**

Wales by two weeks, Tara is in town and my six-year-old and I are getting the royal treatment from James's company PT Ski.

In fact, it feels rather like we are extended members of the Palmer-Tomkinson clan from the moment James's charming wife, Sos, meets us at Zurich airport and loans Christian an iPad for the two-hour journey. We find thoughtful gifts on our bed, including lip salve and stamped postcards, restaurant reservations are made for us and PT's guides are always on hand.

I have already spent a day on the slopes with the charismatic Sos, transferring our chatter about books and James's other famous sister, the writer Santa Montefiore, from the ski lift to the Pizzeria Alberto in Klosters Dorf, which Sos rightly says has tastier and less expensive pizza than in Klosters Platz (one of Sos's many tips).

Now I am skiing with James "PT" and, as the 200 miles of well-groomed pistes on Parsenn and the surrounding mountains around Davos Klosters are devoid of the kind of crowds seen on France's slopes, we soon have them enough to ourselves to take in several runs uninterrupted.

"My ethos is that people must be looked after as if they were our private guests," says James, who gave up City banking to do what he's long been doing for friends — arranging personalised ski holidays in Klosters. "Sos and I both try to ski at least once with each group."

We glide over to the children's group and James instantly lights up, with four children of his own and experience at the local non-profit children's ski club, Marden's, he admits teaching children is his passion. "I try to make it fun," he says simply. When we stop to share the children's picnic, he conjures a spade out of nowhere ("You never know when you need something for the children to do") and they busy themselves digging snow thrones fit for the next royal visit. While their parents are shepherd around the slopes by PT's guides, the children learn in age-specific classes accompanied by both an instructor and a PT staffer.

If it sounds a little like the luxury family ski company Powder Byrne, that's because

Klosters is loved by British celebrities and the Swiss



it is: Will Herrington, Powder Byrne's former managing director, is a consultant and James freely admits to using the same formula. "I have brought my own ideas to it too, particularly the fact that I think kids learn best by racing," he adds. There is a big difference though — the price tag. While Powder Byrne's holidays can easily cost £12,000 for a family of four ("It's the price of a small car," wailed one mum to me on a Powder Byrne holiday), PT Ski's price, even with flights and tuition, is about half that. And then there is James's knowledge of Klosters, where 85 per cent of the skiers are Swiss, and which is little known to the English beyond its celebrity visitors.

In fact, Klosters turns out to be far from the chic Swiss hang-out I'd expected. Instead, it's a charming village with timbered chalets, a relaxed atmosphere and a single night club, Casa Antica, which is beneath a piano bar inside a house with a wooden roof. There are quaint village restaurants where we taste local delicacies such as barley soup and capuns (dumplings) and where I sample the local Monsteiner beer.

One day, we hear of a milk bar in the village, and go in search of it. Will it be a swish, trendsetting affair? Far from it. Instead, we head up a small alleyway outside the farm on the main road out of the village to find a

small, wooden cabinet attached to the wall. More milk-vending machine than milk bar, it accepts our money and, in return, pours out milk so fresh it's still warm.

And so the days pass in a blur of white. Because Christian is clearly enjoying himself — if any of the children have a wobbly moment, the guides produce some chocolate or whisk them off for a game of cards — I can take to the slopes guilt-free. One day, I arrive late but triumphant, having skied two black runs with the PT guide; I would never have done it on my own. Christian is sitting on the terrace of Hotel Alpina, which in quirky Klosters style has dozens of toy rabbits perched on top of its wall, happily playing a game of Pass the Pigs with James.

Mr PT stepped in with the childcare because the ski instructor needed to dash off to his second job, where timing is crucial. What is he, a royal bodyguard? No, he works on a farm and the cows won't wait. This is Klosters, after all.

Need to know

Jane Knight and her son were guests of PT ski (020-7736 5557, pski.com). They stayed at the four-star Silvertree Park hotel, which has children's menus, a bowling alley and pool, and costs from £4,248 in the Easter holidays for two adults and two children sharing a room for seven nights, including airport transfers but not flights. They also stayed at the four-star Hotel Alpina, which is just a short walk from the ski lift, with pool and Gault Millau-recommended restaurant. It charges £5,490 on the same basis. Kids' ski weeks cost £475 for five days, including lunches. Adult piste hosting is included.

Getting there Swiss (0845 601956, swiss.com) has flights to Zurich from London, Birmingham and Manchester, from £113 return.

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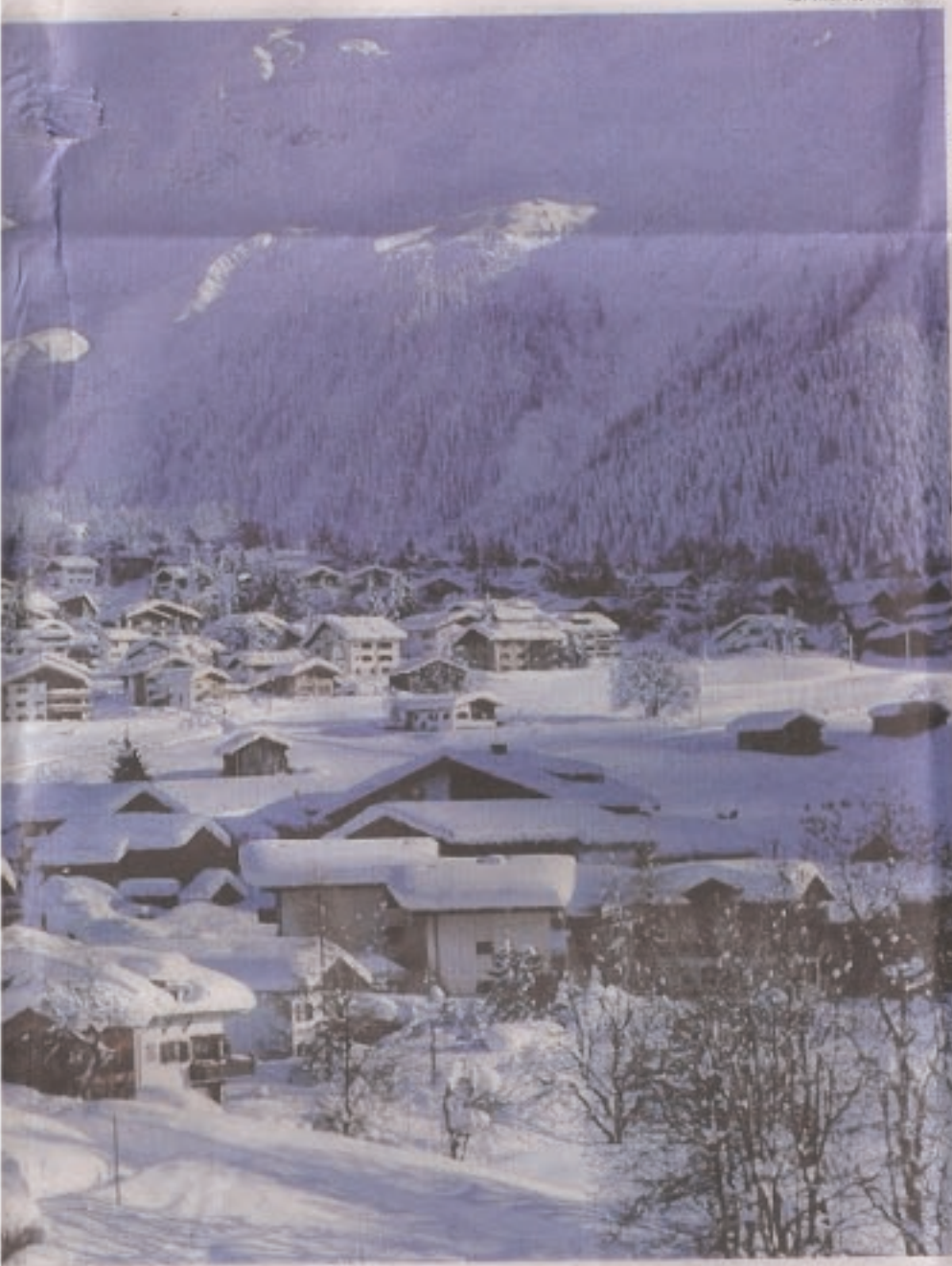


Tara Palmer-Tomkinson and sister Santa with Princes Charles and Harry in Klosters

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The Palmer-Tomkinson guide to Klosters

Rustico (00 41 81 410 22 88, hotel-rustico.ch) In Klosters village, this is half traditional Swiss and half international gourmet. Including rosti and barley soup, but also foie gras on toast and giant prawns tagliatelle. A five-course menu costs 112 Swiss francs (£75), while individual dishes include a tasty soup trilogy. There's a children's menu. Rustico also has an adjacent fondue restaurant, a tapas bar over the street and 11 single rooms.

Chesa Grischuna (00 41 81 422 22 22, chesagrishuna.ch) Also in Klosters village, this is really lovely. Food is traditional Swiss and there is a sun terrace for lunch. The Chesa salad — bacon and Roquefort from 10.50 Swiss francs (£7) for a half portion — is very good and there is also Klosters trout and Zurich-style sliced veal with rosti.

The Wynegg (00 41 81 422 13 40) Run by Ruth Güler, who is fondly revered by her very loyal following of English guests (and probably lots of other nationalities too). The Stübli is very cosy with a great atmosphere and does the best fondue chineoise (where you cook the meat in broth



James Palmer-Tomkinson

rather than oil), it costs 35 Swiss francs (£23) per person.

Alte Schwendi (alteschwendi.ch) This looks like a Heidi hut on the mountainside, on the Küblis run a few hundred meters above the Schiferbahn Gondola. It is owned by a Swede, so the odd Swedish dish finds its way onto the menu. Outside, there are plenty of sun loungers where you can relax after a good lunch. Try the spicy penne with chicken (26.90 Swiss francs or £18).

Hotel Kulm (kessler-kulm.ch) At Davos Wolfgang, this has an all-encompassing menu, covering Swiss and European traditions, with steak, Wiener schnitzel and rosti. It costs 37 Swiss francs (£25). I also love the Hansli Toast, which is a special melted cheese on bread for 18.50 Swiss francs (£12.50).

Restaurant Gotschna (00 81 42 21 428, restaurant-gotschna.ch) In Serneus, this is one of the few places where you can get fondue for lunch (27 Swiss francs, or £18, per person). Barley soup costs 10 Swiss francs (£7) and homemade noodles with ham and sweet William pear cooked in butter 23 Swiss francs (£15.50).

Höhwald Restaurant (00 41 81 42 23 045, hoehwald-klosters.ch) In Montbiel, this is half an hour's sleigh ride up the hill from Klosters. The rustic wooden restaurant, with a large open fire in the middle, has lights hanging from antler chandeliers. There is meat from the grill as well as Swiss specialities. Mains from 35 Swiss francs (£23.50). James Palmer-Tomkinson