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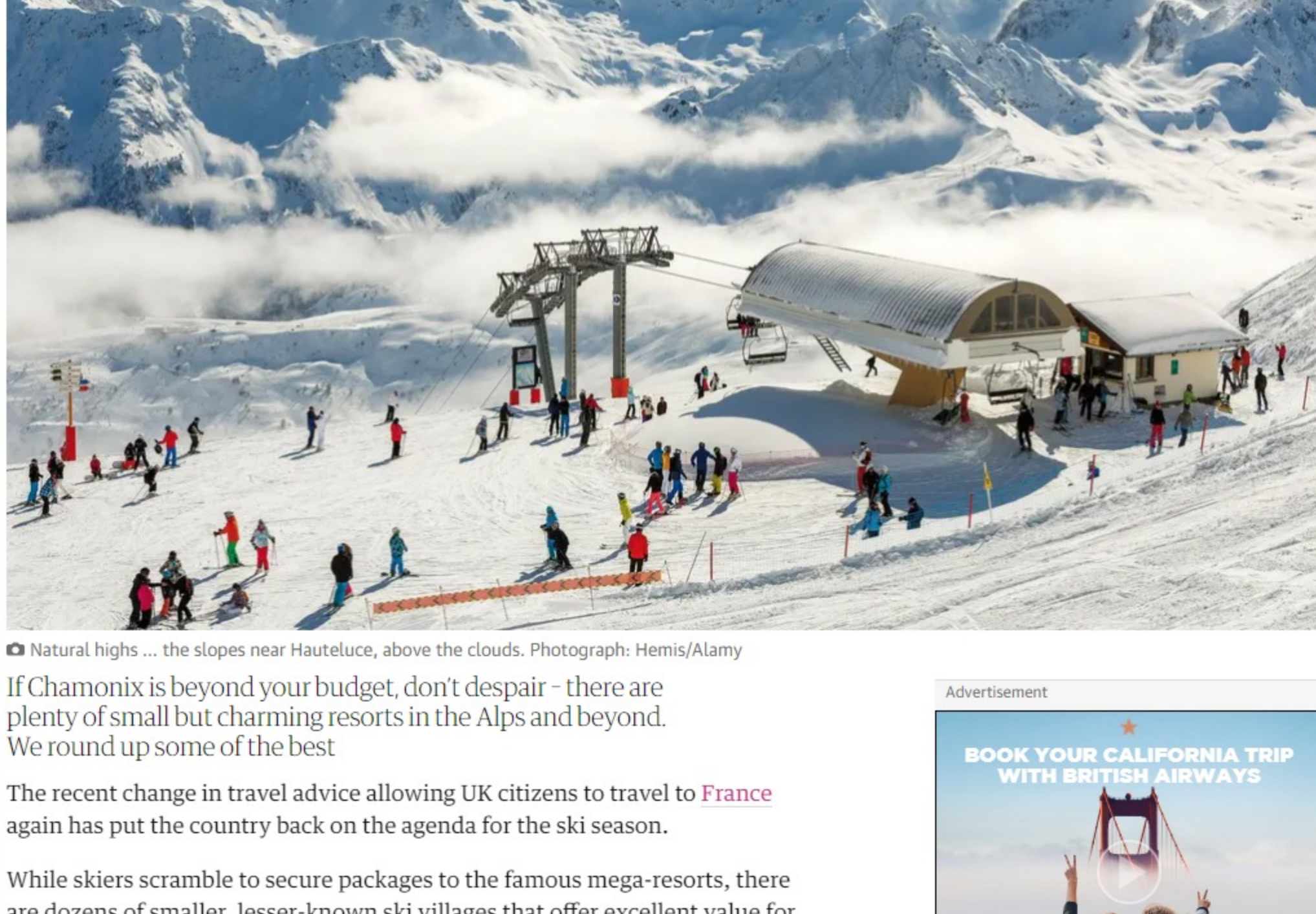
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France holidays

Fresh powder: the best French ski resorts you've never heard of

Gemma Bowers
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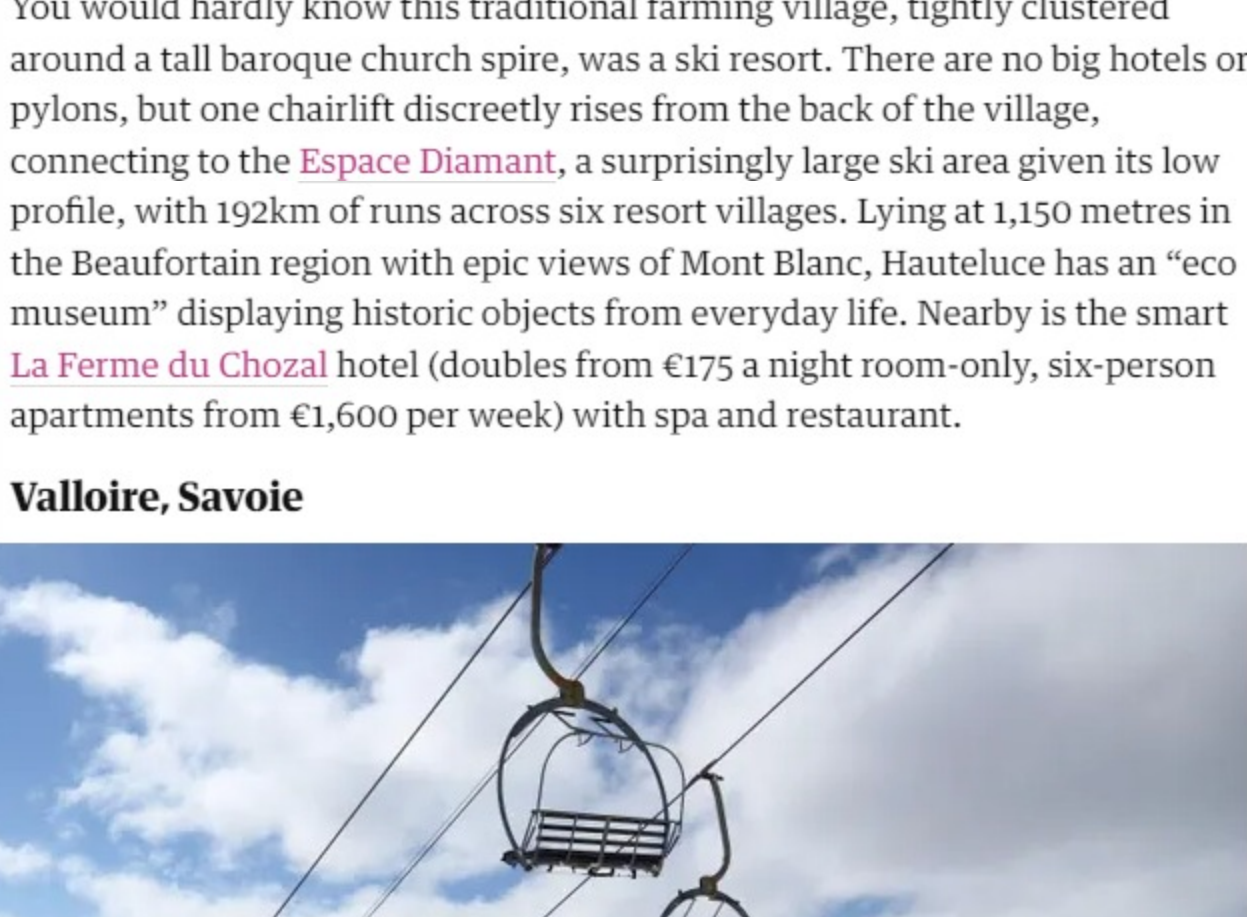
Natural highs ... the slopes near Hautecluse, above the clouds. Photograph: Hemi/Alamy

If Chamonix is beyond your budget, don't despair - there are plenty of small but charming resorts in the Alps and beyond. We round up some of the best.

The recent change in travel advice allowing UK citizens to travel to France again has put the country back on the agenda for the ski season.

While skiers scramble to secure packages to the famous mega-resorts, there are dozens of smaller, lesser-known ski villages that offer excellent value for money while combining thrilling skiing with old-time charm and glorious natural surroundings. Here are a few that offer a change of scene and pace.

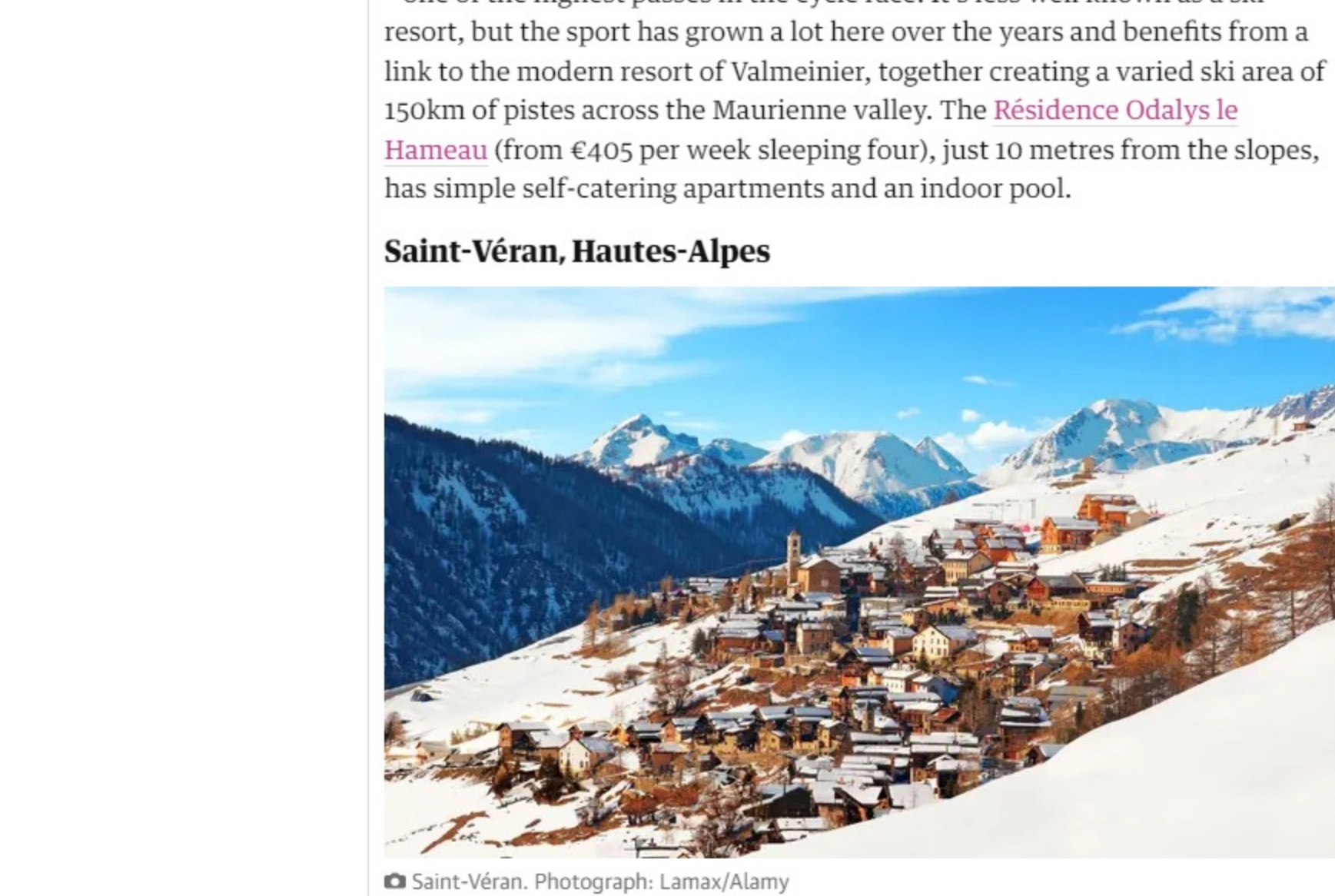
Hautecluse, Savoie



Hautecluse. Photograph: Only France/Alamy

You would hardly know this traditional farming village, tightly clustered around a tall baroque church spire, was a ski resort. There are no big hotels or pylons, but one chairlift discreetly rises from the back of the village, connecting to the Espace Diamant, a surprisingly large ski area given its low profile, with 192km of runs across six resort villages. Lying at 1,150 metres in the Beaufortain region with epic views of Mont Blanc, Hautecluse has an "eco museum" displaying historic objects from everyday life. Nearby is the smart La Ferme du Chaval hotel (doubles from €175 a night room-only, six-person apartments from €1,600 per week) with spa and restaurant.

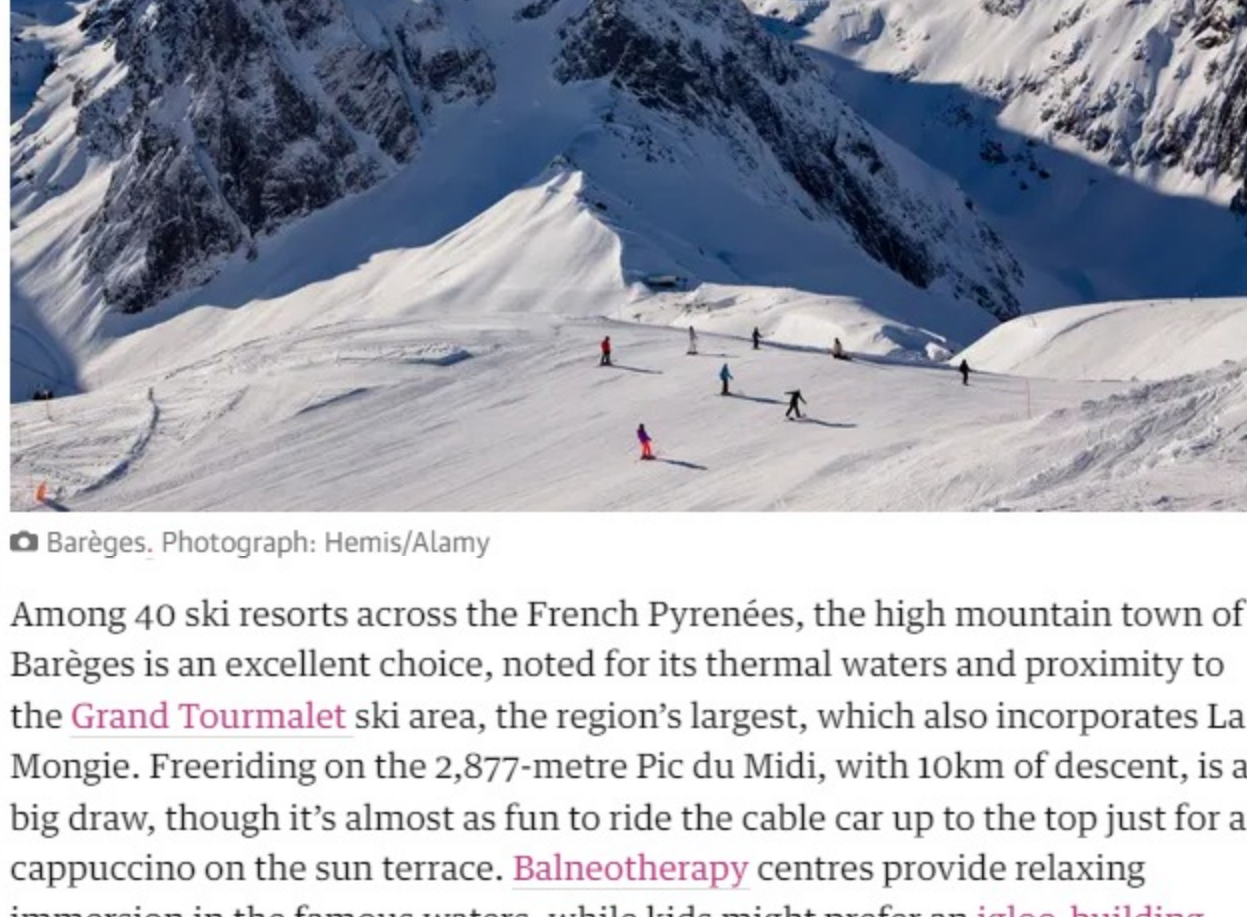
Valloire, Savoie



Valloire. Photograph: Marek Sianazy/Alamy

The traditional Alpine town of Valloire is famous as a point on the classic Tour de France route between the Col du Télégraphe and the Col du Galibier - one of the highest passes in the cycle race. It's less well known as a ski resort, but the sport has grown a lot here over the years and benefits from a link to the modern resort of Valmeinier, together creating a varied ski area of 150km of pistes across the Maurienne valley. The Résidence Odalys le Hameau (from €405 per week sleeping four), just 10 metres from the slopes, has simple self-catering apartments and an indoor pool.

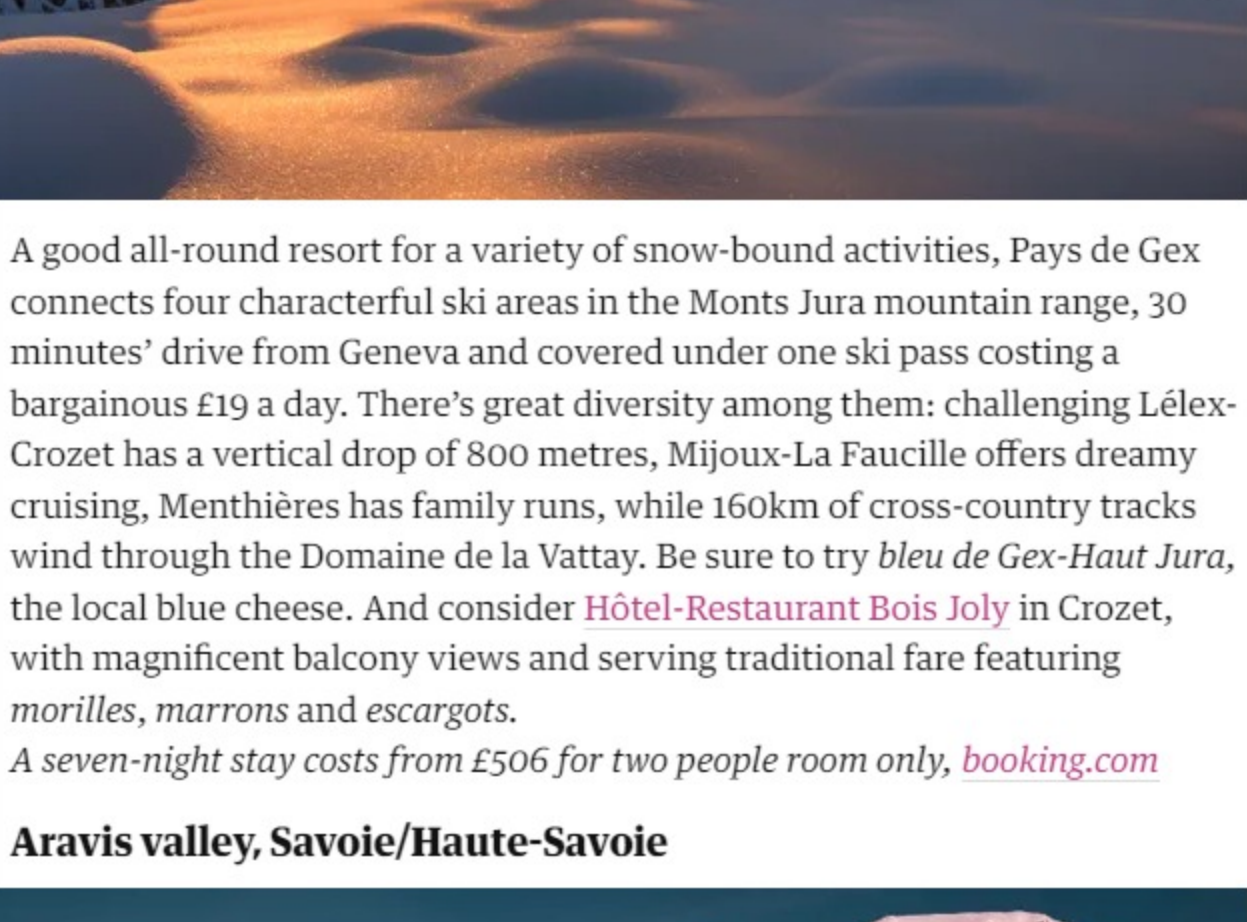
Saint-Véran, Hautes-Alpes



Saint-Véran. Photograph: Lantini/Alamy

Many smaller ski resorts lie at a lower altitude than the big hitters, but not so Saint-Véran in the unspoilt Queyras valley, which sits at 2,040 metres and stakes a claim to be the highest (and, they say, the most beautiful) resort village in France. Situated in glorious Queyras regional natural park and known primarily as a place for enthusiastic ski tourists to get into the backcountry, it also has a small network of lifts for downhill skiers. Try the Chalets du Villard, whose rooms and separate gîtes have access to a sauna and restaurant (studio rooms from €102 per night sleeping two or €160 sleeping four, room only; gîtes from €465 per week sleeping four).

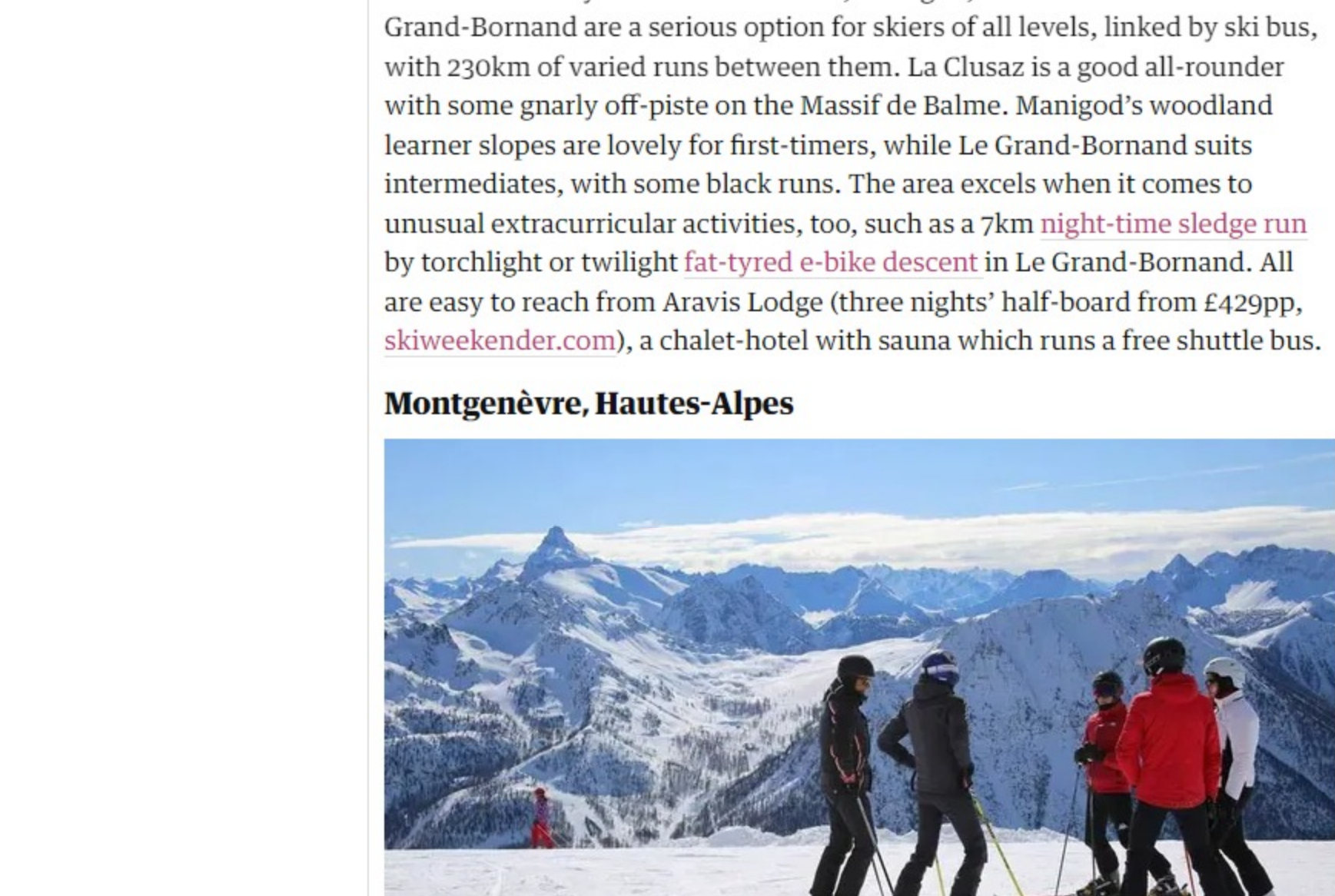
Barèges, French Pyrénées



Barèges. Photograph: Hemi/Alamy

Among 40 ski resorts across the French Pyrénées, the high mountain town of Barèges is an excellent choice, noted for its thermal waters and proximity to the Grand Tourmalet ski area, the region's largest, which also incorporates La Mongie. Freeriding on the 2,877-metre Pic du Midi, with 10km of descent, is a big draw, though it's almost as fun to ride the cable car up to the top just for a cappuccino on the sun terrace. Balneotherapy centres provide relaxing immersion in the famous waters, while kids might prefer an igloo-building lesson. The recently revamped 13-room Hotel le Central (doubles from €75 a night, room only) has a pool and handy in-house ski hire and servicing.

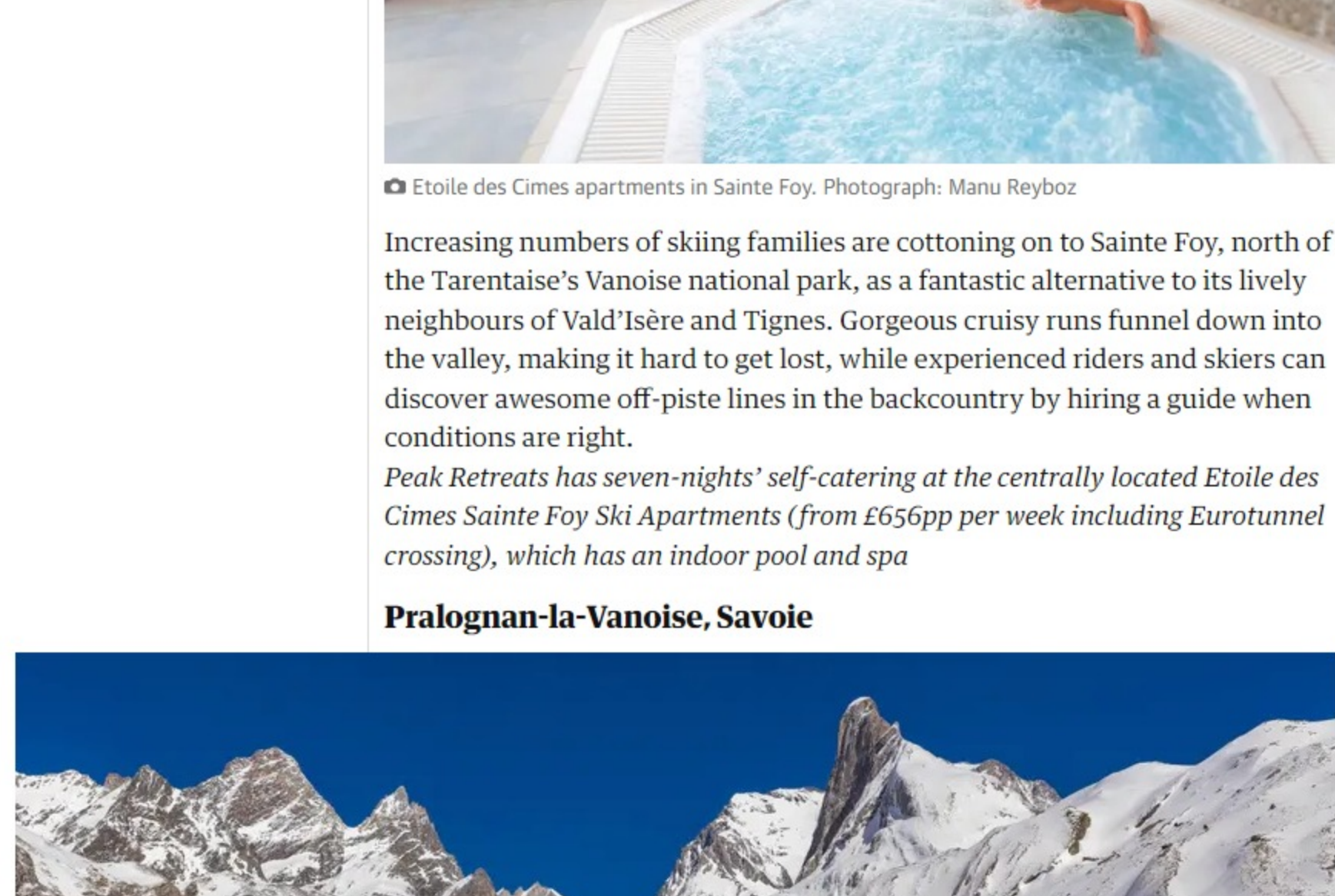
Pays de Gex, Monts Jura



Pays de Gex

A good all-round resort for a variety of snow-bound activities, Pays de Gex connects four characterful ski areas in the Monts Jura mountain range, 30 minutes' drive from Geneva and covered under one ski pass costing a bargainous £19 a day. There's great diversity among them: challenging Lélex-Crozet has a vertical drop of 800 metres, Mijoux-La Faucille offers dreamy cruising, Menthères has family runs, while 160km of cross-country tracks wind through the Domaine de la Vattay. Be sure to try *bleu de Gex-Haut Jura*, the local blue cheese. And consider Hotel Restaurant Bois Joly in Crozet, with magnificent balcony views and serving traditional fare featuring *morilles, marrons and escargots*. *A seven-night stay costs from £506 for two people room only, booking.com*

Aravis valley, Savoie/Haute-Savoie



La Clusaz

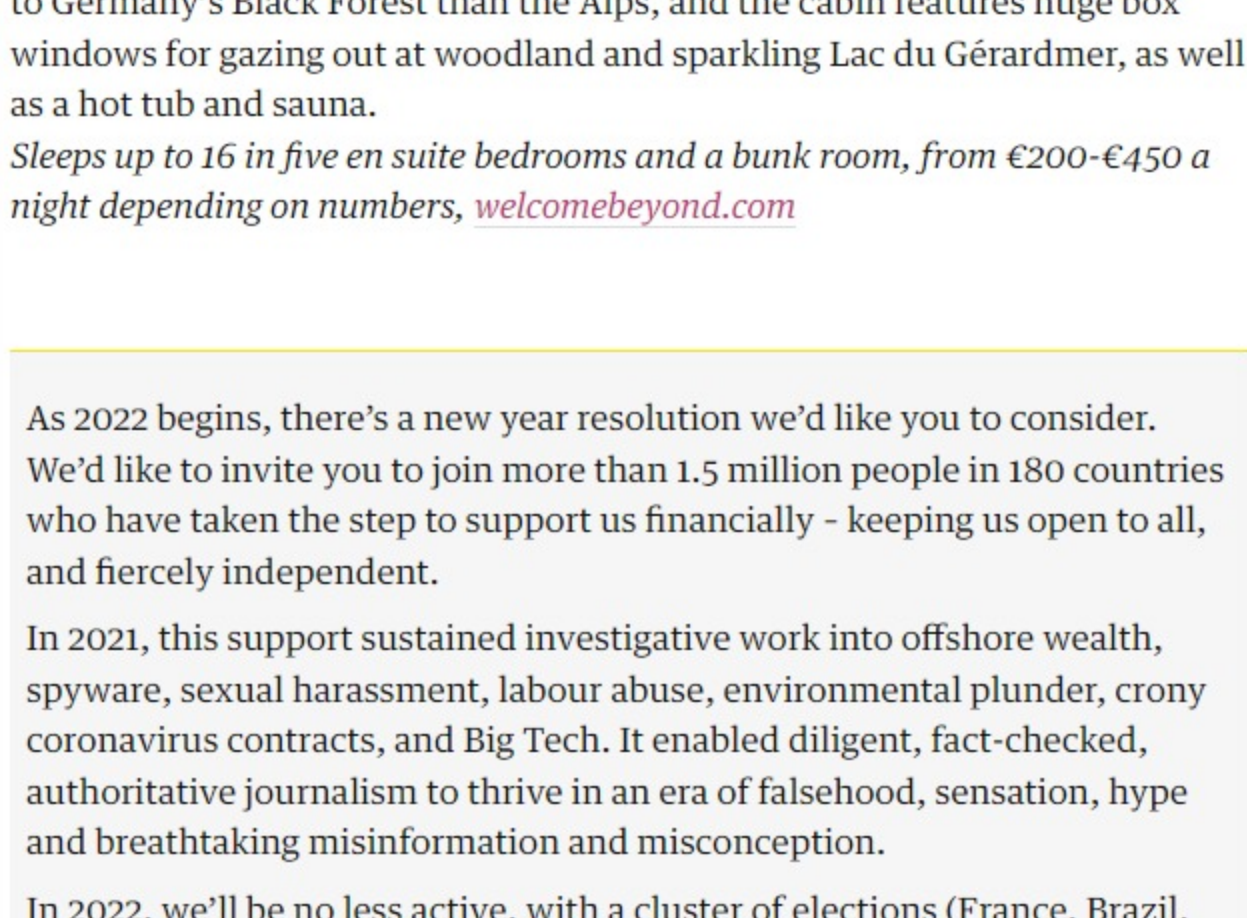
The Aravis valley resorts of La Clusaz, Manigod, Saint-Jean-de-Sixt and Le Grand-Bornand are a serious option for skiers of all levels, linked by ski bus, with 230km of varied runs between them. La Clusaz is a good all-rounder with some gnarly off-piste on the Massif de Balme. Manigod's woodland learner slopes are lovely for first-timers, while Le Grand-Bornand suits intermediates, with some blue runs. The area excels when it comes to unusual extracurricular activities, too, such as a 7km night-time sledge run by torchlight or twilight fat-tired e-bike descent in Le Grand-Bornand. All are easy to reach from Aravis Lodge (three nights' half-board from £429pp, skiweekender.com), a chalet-hotel with saunas which runs a free shuttle bus.

Montgenèvre, Hautes-Alpes



This snow-sure resort on the French-Italian border lies at one end of the Milky Way ski area, where its own 60km of slopes are extended to 160km under the Grand Montgenèvre ski pass, which also covers the Italian resorts of Pragelato, Sestriere, Cesana, Sanisclario and Sauze d'Oulx; the two countries' cultures mix here. Montgenèvre has two boardercross courses, and some folk make day trips to the extreme off-piste resort of La Grave an hour away. Try Le Napoleon's modern collection of self-catering apartments, with shared access to an indoor pool, hammam and sauna. *A seven-night self-drive package costs from £420pp including Eurotunnel crossing with Ski Solutions*

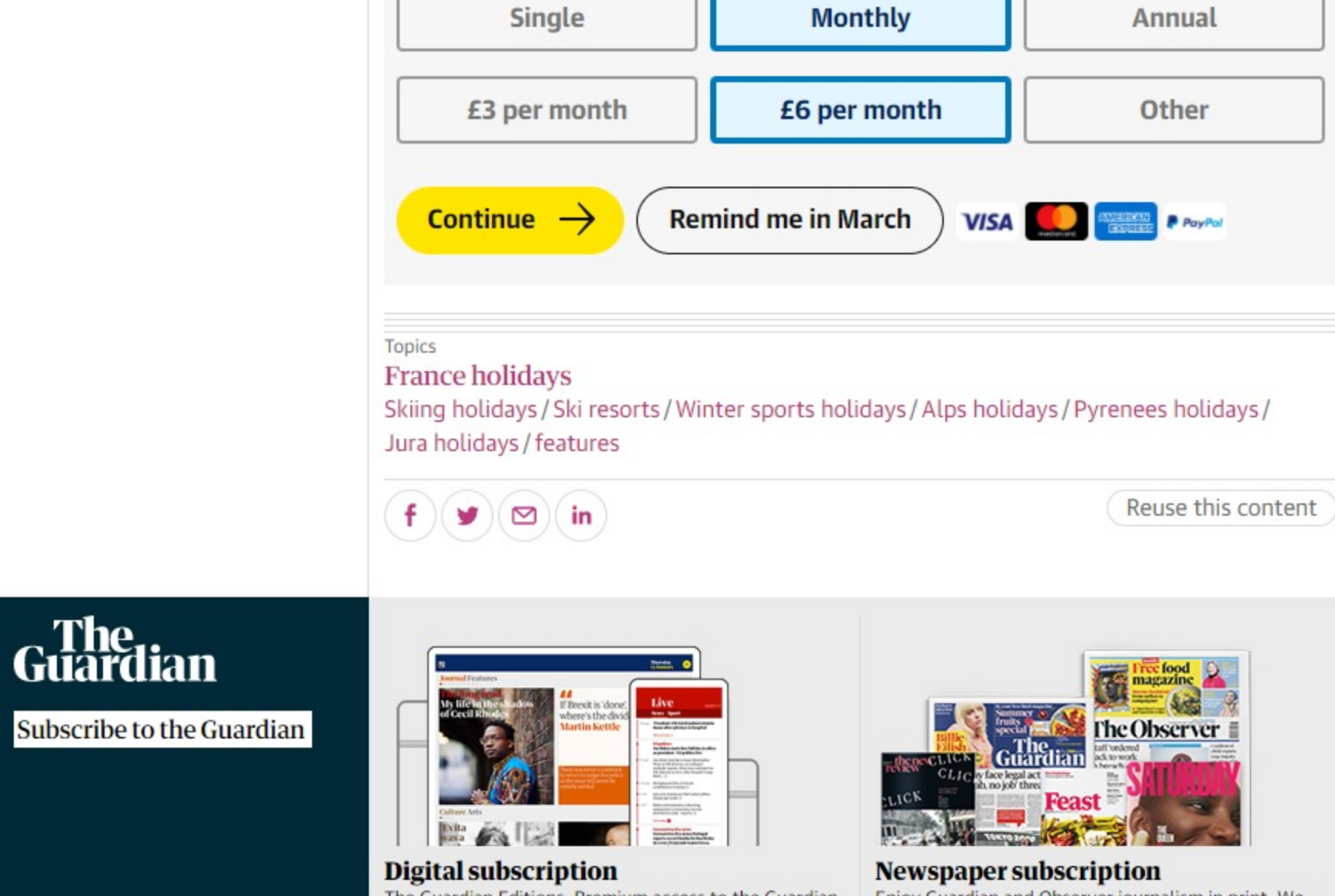
Sainte Foy, Savoie



Etoile des Cimes apartments in Sainte Foy. Photograph: Manu Reyboz

Increasing numbers of skiing families are cottoning on to Sainte Foy, north of the Tarentaise's Vanoise national park, as a fantastic alternative to its lively neighbours of Vald'Isère and Tignes. Gorgeous cruise runs funnel down into the valley, making it hard to get lost, while experienced riders and skiers can discover awesome off-piste lines in the backcountry by hiring a guide when conditions are right. *Peak Retreats has seven-nights' self-catering at the centrally located Etoile des Cimes Sainte Foy Ski Apartments from £565pp per week including Eurotunnel crossing, which has an indoor pool and spa*

Pralognan-la-Vanoise, Savoie



Photograph: Only France/Alamy

One of the lesser-known resorts among 110 that are spread through the Savoie Mont Blanc region, Pralognan-la-Vanoise is only one valley over from Courchevel but a world away in terms of cost and atmosphere. This underappreciated gem in the Parc de la Vanoise combines decent downhill (10 reds, four blacks, 10 greens, five blues) with beautiful terrain for snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. One of France's few curling rinks is open for visitors here, or try cold *Toumo yoga*, which originated in Tibet and is performed outdoors in the snow and glacial rivers. [Hotel] Etoile des Cimes, with spa, sauna and gym, became the resort's first four-star this season (from €980 per week B&B sleeping two, five course dinner €35pp). Or self-cater in an apartment at Les Hauts de la Vanoise (from £500 per week sleeping four).

Gérardmer, Vosges



The Vosges Cabin in Gérardmer. Photograph: Jonathan Mauvozier

For those whose idea of a winter break involves lots of cosy time padding around a timber cabin watching snowflakes, rather than hammering the sort of pistes you see on Ski Sunday, this might be the one. A 10-minute drive from Gérardmer, whose ski area has 21 runs, night skiing and 30km of cross-country ski trails, is Vosges Cabin, a modern minimalist refuge in a nature reserve in the Vosges mountains. The owner describes the area as more akin to Germany's Black Forest than the Alps, and the cabin features huge box windows for gazing out at woodland and sparkling Lac du Gérardmer, as well as a hot tub and sauna. *Sleeps up to 16 in five en suite bedrooms and a bunk room, from €200-€450 a night depending on numbers, welcomebeyond.com*

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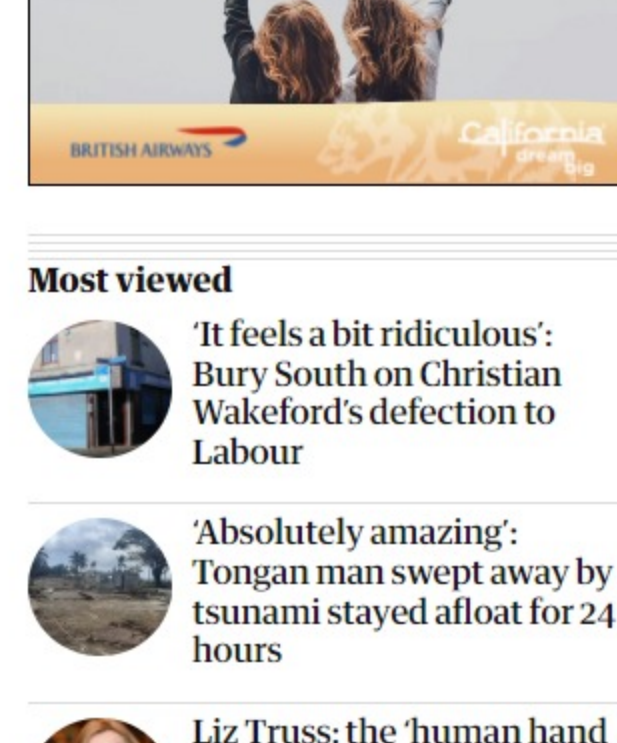
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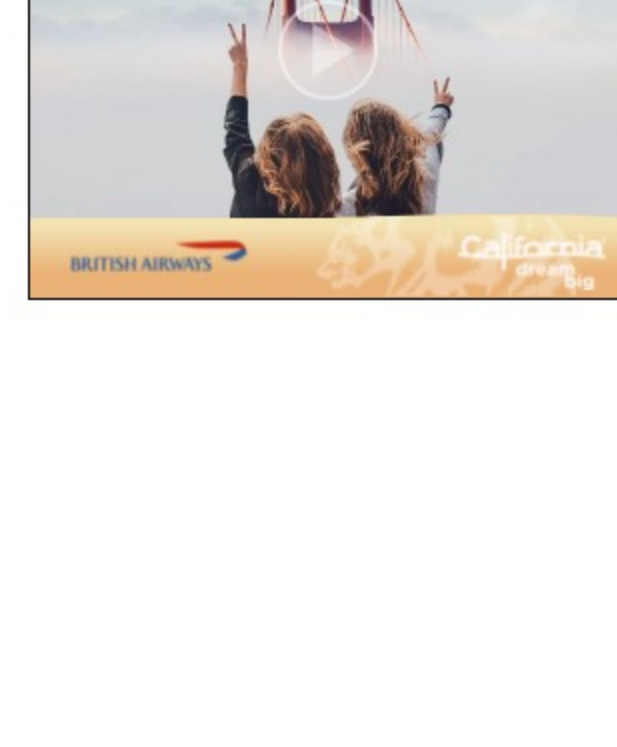
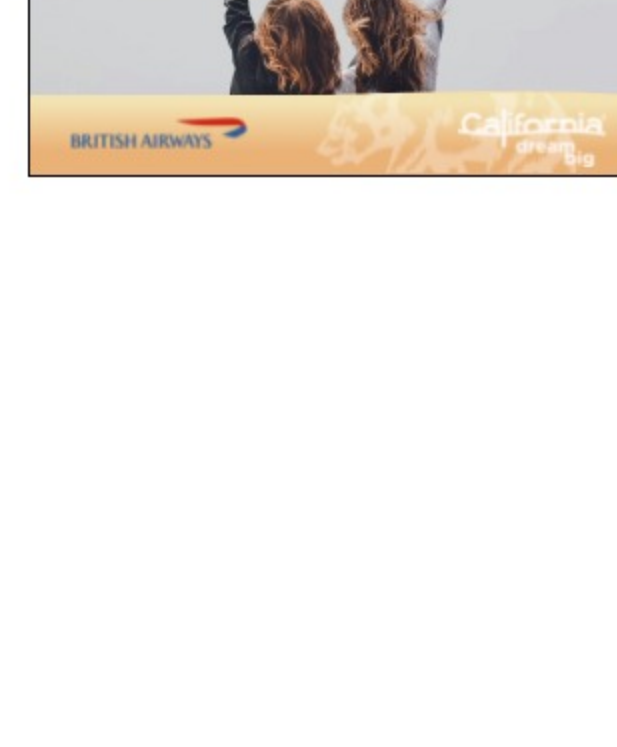
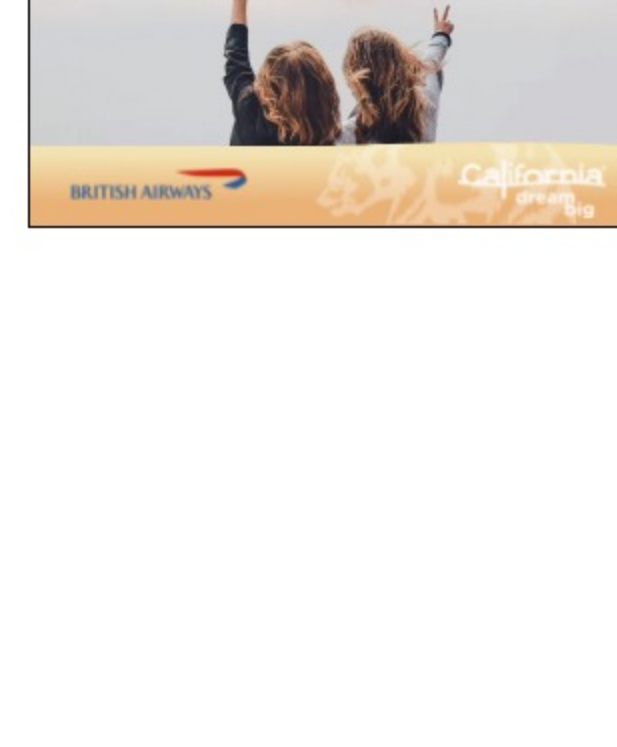
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