

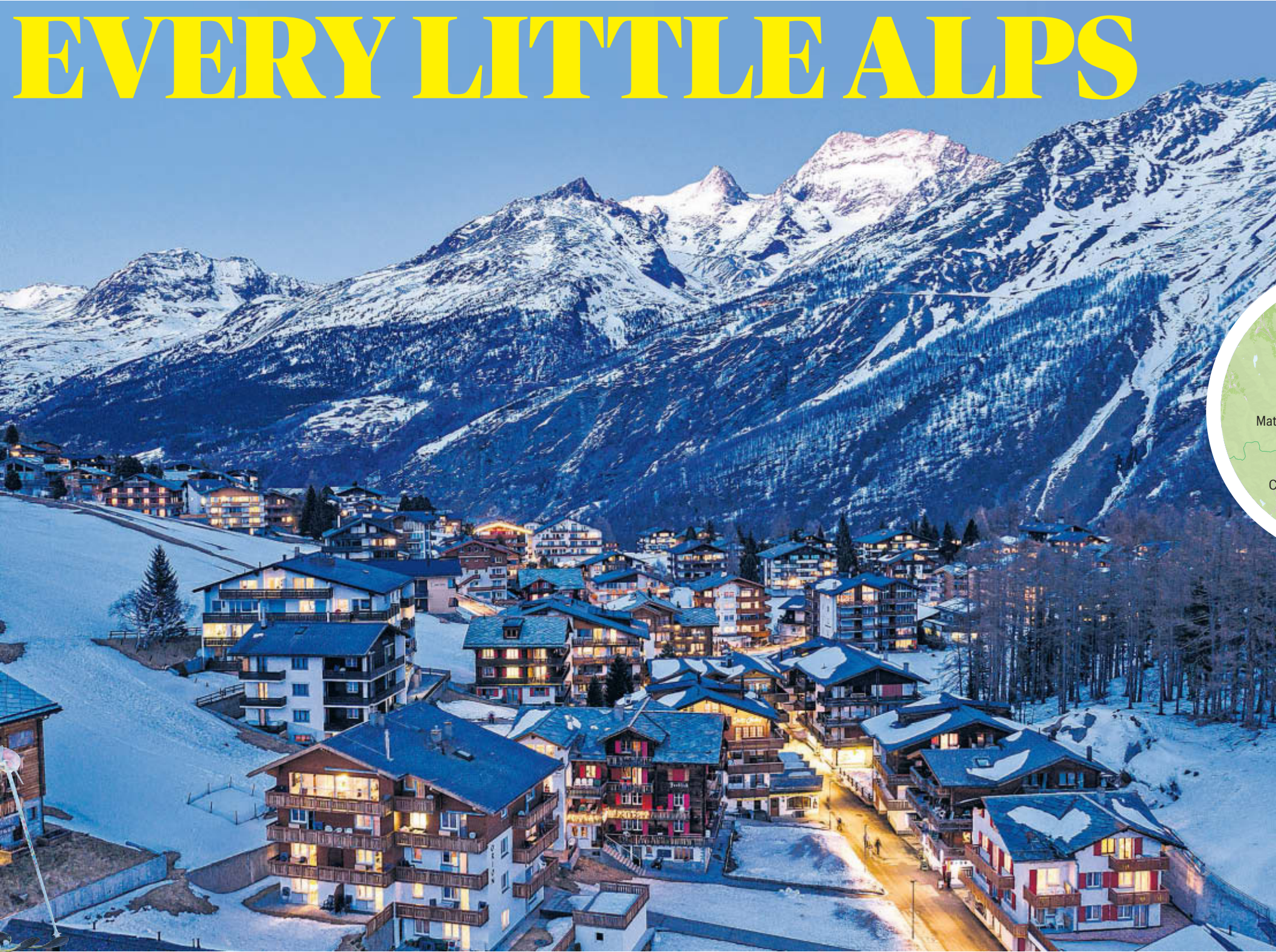
Are you looking for a mountain foothold without the steep prices? Forget Zermatt and make for these lesser-known resorts, says *Cathy Hawker*

It's February half-term and Alpine slopes are alive once more. After a two-year hiatus and despite continuing regulations for vaccinations, masks and fit-to-fly tests, the return to the mountains is something to celebrate whether you're an avid dawn-to-dusk skier or prefer panoramic views and lengthy cheese-filled lunches. The Best Ski Resort Report, an independent visitor satisfaction survey conducted in 55 leading Alpine resorts, put Zermatt as the overall winner between 2012 and 2020 – but local rules make owning property there all but impossible for non-Swiss buyers. So where else should you look?

Nendaz and Veysonnaz in the Four Valleys share the same slopes as top-dollar Verbier but have more affordable property prices. Elyse Constantin, a director of Alpine Homes, recommends Villars for its easy access to Geneva airport and many international schools, giving it true year-round life, and Crans Montana for its events, activities for children, good skiing and lakes to enjoy in summer.

If you're after a foothold in a high-altitude family-friendly resort that you can afford to buy in, here's our snow-sure pick in the shadow of the Matterhorn.

**SAAS FEE, SWITZERLAND**  
There's a host of similarities between the Swiss resorts of Saas Fee and Zermatt. Both are within three hours of Geneva airport, both are charming, car-free villages and both carry an unwaveringly dependable snowfall reputation. However, while Zermatt is a superstar of the Alpine world, dominated by the Matterhorn, Saas Fee is rather more under the radar. "We get a huge number of inquiries for Zermatt but foreigners are not permitted to buy property," says Simon Malster, the managing director of Investors in Property. "Our advice is to check out Saas Fee. It's a real village with a school and year-round life; wonderful



Main: twilight in Saas Fee. Right: sweeping views from the piste at Cervinia



scenery and something for all levels, from first-time skiers to serious mountaineers."

Car free since 1951 and approaching carbon-neutral status, Saas Fee is totally powered by renewable hydroelectric energy. A new SwFr5 million (£4 million) pumping station guarantees the water for artificial snow on the lower slopes and an electric roller conveyor now links skiers with Metro Alpin, the world's highest funicular railway. There are plans to build a gondola from Metro Alpin to Feekopf. Saas Fee's 120km of piste include one of the highest vertical drops in the Alps – from 3,600m to 1,800m.

It is why Saas Fee is a regular top-five performer in the estate agency Savills' Ski Resilience Index, a measure of the quality and reliability of a resort's conditions and resilience to climate change. "Saas Fee's excellent snow record comes from its high altitude and a comparatively long season of 281 days, including glacier skiing in the summer," says Jeremy Rollason, the head of Savills Ski. "Many national race teams use Saas Fee for off-season race training."

An added attraction is the value for money, with prices about half of those in Zermatt, but the combination of that value and snow-sure slopes have led to significant price rises. Malster reports that the price of resale homes has jumped 25 per cent in the past year and new flats by even more. "Two-bedroom apartments start around

“**Locals turn up for festivals in national dress and there are street parties every year. Best of all is the setting; I always wonder at the view**

SwFr750,000 and three bedrooms from SwFr1.1million, but you could easily spend SwFr3million on a penthouse near the slopes," he says. "Chalets start from SwFr2million." Especially in demand are smart new-builds in former hotels run by generations of the same family, some beautiful dark wood chalets more than 100 years old and others dating from the 1960s. Once renovated, interiors mix high-tech, contemporary styling with wonderful antique wood. Good examples include the Grand – formerly the Metropal – part of a 57-apartment development; the Astoria, due for completion in August, where the final four-bedder is for sale at SwFr1.4million; and Saastal Village, where a two-bedroom bolt hole in the new-build Nordic development is SwFr720,000.

"It's a traditional village with so much character," says Jamie Mullner, 31, who runs a photography company with his brother Jack, 29. They came a decade ago and have

never left. "Locals turn up for festivals in national dress and there are street parties like the Nostalgic Culinary Mile food festival every September. In winter we play curling on the ice and in summer we play boules outside the Hotel La Gorge. Best of all is the setting. We film all over Switzerland, but I always wonder at that amazing view when I walk back into the village."

**CERVINIA, ITALY**

Even closer to Zermatt, sharing the same slopes, the sun-filled Italian resort of Cervinia is also dominated by the majestic Matterhorn. As the highest resort in the beautifully scenic Aosta Valley, its snow record is excellent, with 220 miles of pistes extending into summer up on Plateau Rosa. Everything from your daily cappuccino to a bowl of pasta is considerably cheaper compared with wonderful antique wood. Good examples include the Grand – formerly the Metropal – part of a 57-apartment development; the Astoria, due for completion in August, where the final four-bedder is for sale at SwFr1.4million; and Saastal Village, where a two-bedroom bolt hole in the new-build Nordic development is SwFr720,000.

Fully furnished one and two-bedroom flats beside Cervinia's golf course with views of the Matterhorn start from €440,000, including IVA tax. Owners have access to a ski storage room and spa as well as a rental scheme offering full management year-round. "Cervinia is an exceptional resort," says Gemma Bruce of the Viewing, a property portal. "The altitude of 2,050m provides a long season – one set to

become even longer as the International Ski Federation has just announced that its international downhill races will take place in Cervinia every October for the next five years."

Exclusive Courmayeur in the Aosta Valley and at the foot of Mont Blanc is 90 minutes from Geneva airport and 30 minutes from the French resort of Chamonix. After selling their chalet in Les Gets, Vicky Jarman, 49, a board director from Sussex, and her husband, Matthew, 51, an investment banker, are now looking in the Aosta Valley, which is one hour and 15 minutes from Turin airport and two hours from Milan airport. "We've always had Italy in the back of our mind," Jarman says. "Italy ticks an awful lot of boxes. My husband and my children are really good skiers. I'm more of a hot chocolate skier."

The couple are also looking to the Gressoney valley, which is where *House of Gucci* was filmed. She adds that they are particularly intrigued by the area because of a rumoured future cable car link between Champoluc and Gressoney. However, they are looking for a large property – they have a maximum budget of €3.5million – which is proving difficult. "It's quite hard to find something that hasn't been converted into flats," she explains. "If you want to buy an apartment there are a lot of choices, but luxury catered chalets are very hard to find."

Additional reporting by Emanuele Midolo

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**SAAS FEE, SWITZERLAND**  
Chalet Kafer, which is in the centre of the town, is spread over four floors connected with a contemporary spiral staircase. It has five bedrooms and four bathrooms, plus a snug and useful utility and ski rooms. [investorsinproperty.com](http://investorsinproperty.com)



**VILLARS, SWITZERLAND**  
Built in 2006, the log Chalet Gryon is set in 1,500 sq m of land. A five-minute drive from the slopes, the four-bedroom, four-bathroom property has a hot tub and a large basement area ripe for developing. [alpinehomesintl.com](http://alpinehomesintl.com)



**SAAS FEE, SWITZERLAND**  
Standing in a sunny elevated position, you get stunning views of the Saastals from Chalet Gabro. Built in the 1980s and fully renovated in 2012, the five-bedroom house has old-school chalet looks and contemporary fittings. [savills.com](http://savills.com)