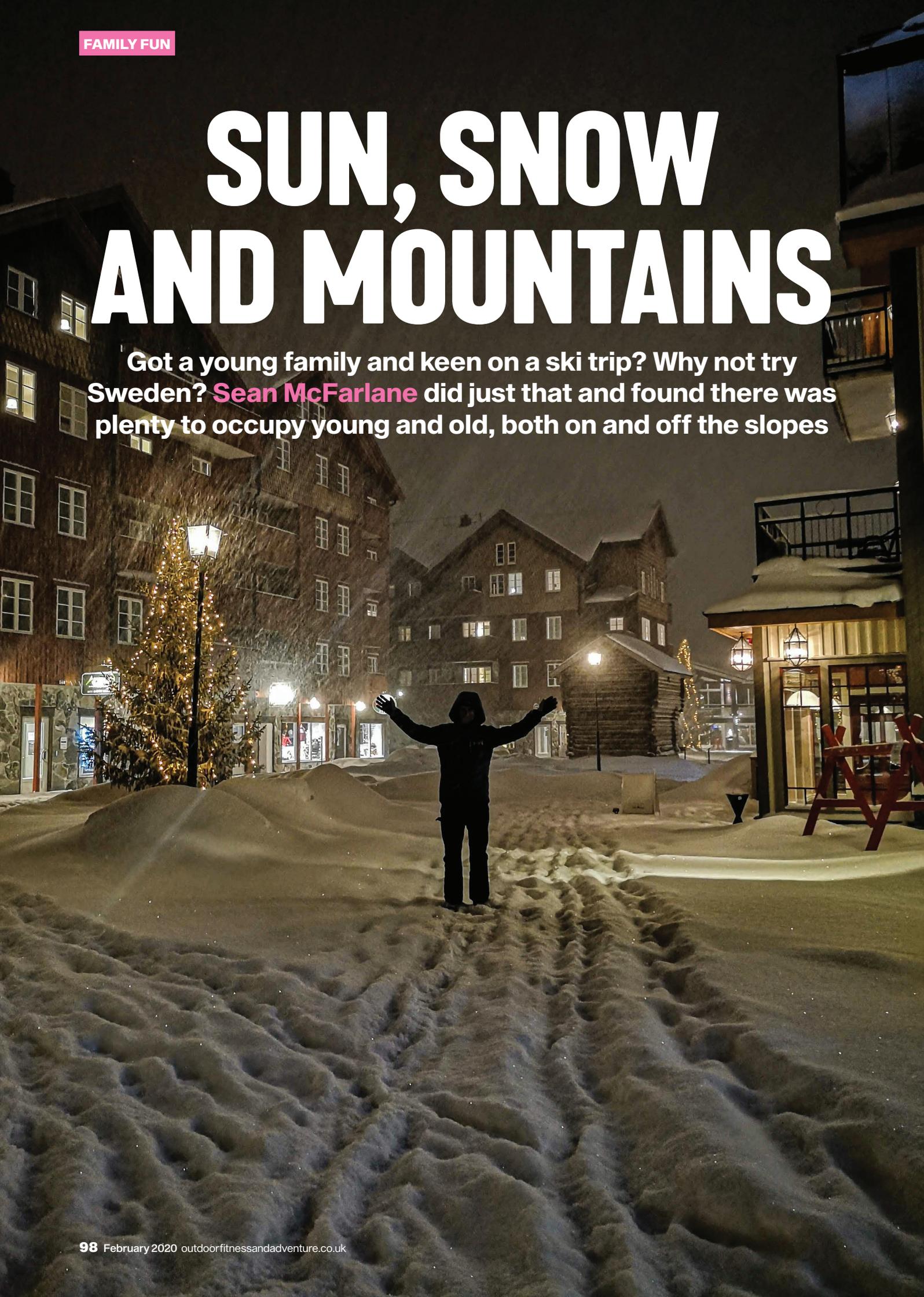


SUN, SNOW AND MOUNTAINS

Got a young family and keen on a ski trip? Why not try Sweden? **Sean McFarlane** did just that and found there was plenty to occupy young and old, both on and off the slopes



A

ctive family holidays can be a real blast, provided they run smoothly. Mum gets a

proper break, Dad uses his testosterone to burn plenty of calories with the kids charging about all day, behaving like angels and sleeping like logs. There are many options for active family holidays available, but skiing always appeals to me – snow and mountains combine in a format that’s very hard to beat. As a family, I suspect like many active families, we love the idea of skiing but are very far from the finished article. My wife and I can scrape down most of a ski resort, given a lot of time, largely due to a lack of skill but also not helped by starting our skiing experience later in life. So, we wanted to introduce our three-year-old daughter Holly to it all as early as possible. We scoured Europe for the best location for a ski holiday with a young family and decided to try Sweden. We weren’t disappointed.

WE ALL LOVE SWEDISH EFFICIENCY

Sweden has several impressive ski resorts which was a bit of surprise for us, and we opted for Vemdalen. It’s located in the centre of Sweden not far from the Norwegian border. For us Brits,



easyJet’s flights from Gatwick to Åre Östersund (this winter now twice a week) were perfect timing. From there, it was a two-hour coach

Vemdalen lies in the centre of Sweden close to the Norwegian border



Fresh powder guaranteed

‘THE TEMPERATURES WERE COLD – OFTEN REACHING AND GOING PAST MINUS 10 – BUT THEY WERE ALWAYS MANAGEABLE’

transfer to the resort and we arrived feeling fresh.

Our accommodation was on-site at the base of the runs. Right from the off, the Swedish efficiency and ease of living that we’re so often told about was evident. This gave us huge comfort, particularly having first-timer Holly with us. Had we been on our own, we might have skied on the day of our arrival, but for now we were keen just to settle in, check things out and get ready for the week ahead. Anticipation and excitement levels were high.

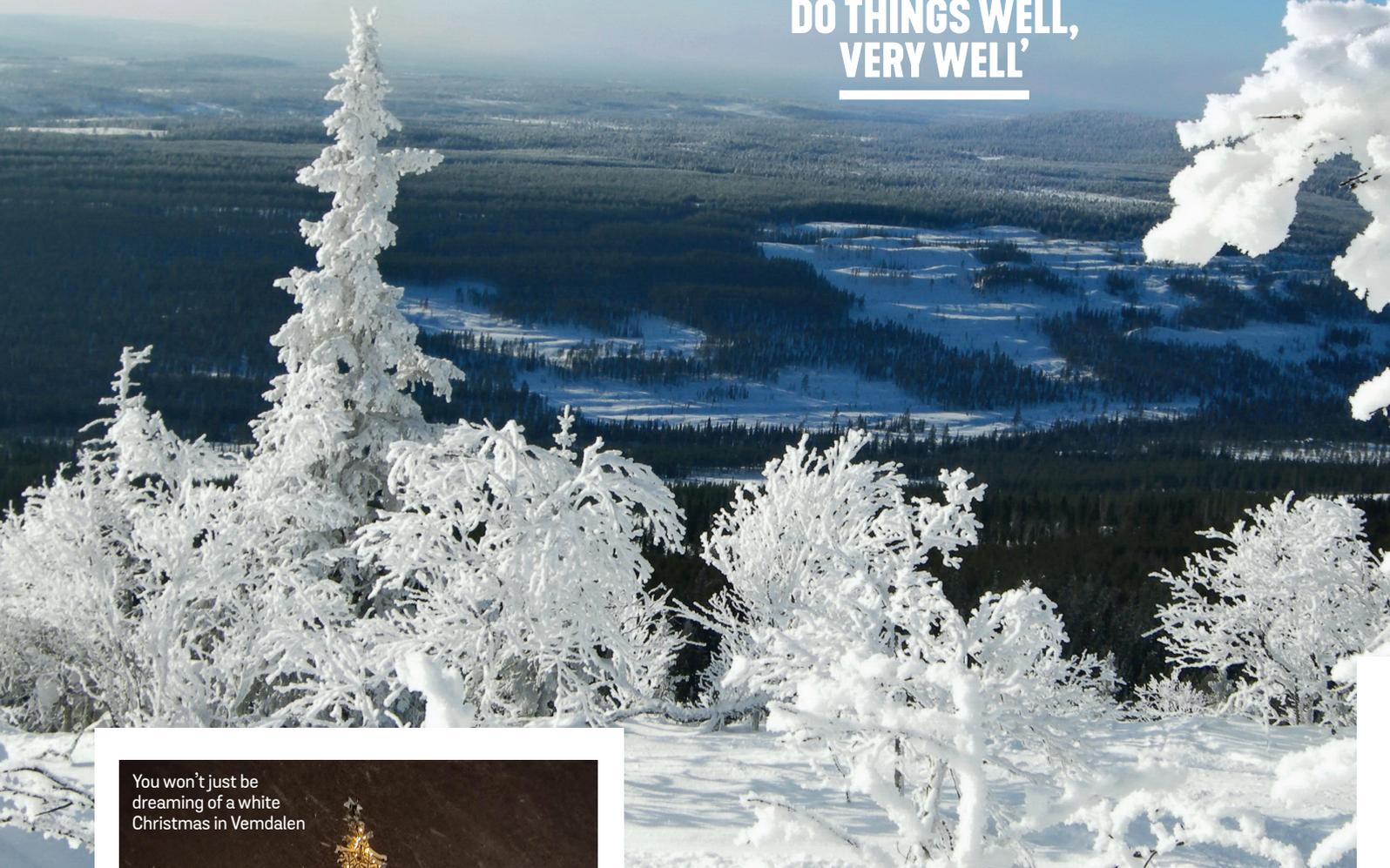
Ski lessons are available for anyone from the age of three upwards at Vemdalen and they have certain weeks where kids’ lessons are free. We were somewhat reluctant to leave Holly on her own from the start, so made sure we could see her during all of her first lesson. Holly was now seriously in danger of joining the ‘all the gear and no idea’ club, of which her parents have been members for years. The instructors were great, and their English was perfect. Striking

that balance between encouraging Holly to do something different so that she would quickly enjoy it, while not putting her off was key. With a magic carpet and



There’s even time for snow angels!

'THE SWEDES JUST REALLY SEEM TO DO THINGS WELL, VERY WELL'



You won't just be dreaming of a white Christmas in Vemdalen



▶▶ beginner's poma, she very quickly found her feet. Her parents put their hands over their eyes as they saw her heading off on the chair lift on her final lesson but needn't have worried. She did three of the five-hour lessons during the week, got her certificate and was very happy. The seed had certainly been sown although in hindsight it would really have helped if we'd got her some lessons at home first, so she could have hit the ground running. With a little bit more experience, there was a perfect range of beginner's slopes to progress to for her. Importantly, there was also plenty of other fun stuff for her to do



during the week. We took her on a snowcat to a mountaintop café for waffles, did a wonderful dog-sledge ride and spent a good deal of time with the resort mascot Valle, including a disco with ice cream – always a winning combination at any age! The days' exertions meant Holly was always happy to go to bed at her usual time, sometimes earlier.

THE IDEAL COMBO
Joining us on our trip was our good friend Dougie and for us



this worked out really well. It allowed two of the adults to ski together while one stayed with Holly. Vemdalen does have childcare facilities but we were mindful of being on a family holiday and making sure she was with at least one of us for a good deal of the time we were there. In terms of the skiing for adults, we were seriously impressed. Snow conditions were very good and to be honest much better than we'd expected. With nothing over 1,000 metres we'd feared somewhat Scottish conditions – sorry Motherland, I do love you but you're hardly Alpine these days! Yet the ice and patches of heather were non-existent. Saying that, the conditions changed as the day progressed depending on the aspect of the slopes, but that was both very much expected and perfectly manageable.

The temperatures were cold – often reaching and going past minus 10 – but again that was always manageable. Winds for the most part were relatively light and only picked up on occasion on the summits. The daylight was noticeably different, with the sun at a lower angle throughout the day, so that bright and powerful sunshine you get elsewhere on skiing holidays wasn't on show here. It only added to the atmosphere. The resort did have night-time floodlit skiing which we managed once. There was very little queuing at lifts, yet one thing we all noticed



All aboard the snowcat to the mountaintop café for waffles

was the politeness of people on the slopes and particularly when standing in line. No standing on your skis from behind and mass invasion of your personal space here.

GET ON THE BUS

There are three systems at Vemdalen that you can access. We were based at the biggest of the three at Vemdalskalet with short, regular and of course on-time bus journeys taking you to the other systems of Björnrike and Klövsjö/Storhogna. One day, after a decent overnight dump of fresh snow, Dougie and I gave Björnrike a go. We were joined by one of the resort's key staff members who informed us that the powder skiing that day was epic. I took his word for it as I ploughed, literally, down!

Dougie and I also went one morning to the Klövsjö/Storhogna area for some cross-country skiing while Becs and Holly spent a very relaxing time in the hotel there, complete with spa. That was a great day, taking the resort bus there and back, with Dougie and Becs skiing back at base for an hour before the sun went down.

A COSTLY BUSINESS?

Sweden has a reputation for being expensive, but we were pleasantly surprised. Ski passes and hire were no more than Alpine prices, with kids under six getting free lift passes. There was a reasonably priced supermarket on-site and plenty of restaurants. In Sweden most places have a daily set lunch meal which is very well-priced and pretty mainstream. Après ski was expensive, though that seems to be the case everywhere now. The cheapest pint was £8!

Compared to my experience of the Alps, the slopes were certainly quieter. It is colder though and we had all our coffee stops inside. The runs in general are a bit shorter and you certainly don't have those mega 10 kilometre runs that other mainstream resorts like to boast of, but for us that was never an issue. The Swedes just really seem to do things well, very well. The same can't be said of mine and Becs' skiing but with a couple more visits to Sweden, I suspect Holly might just get there one day. ☺

MORE INFO:

- Vemdalen resort: vemdalen.se
- Family week info: skistar.com/en/offers-and-campaigns/Campaigns/valles-family-weeks
- Flights from Gatwick to Åre Östersund: easyjet.com
- Night snow run: nightsnowrun.se

Holly, three, received her ski school certificate, after completing three five-hour lessons



Photography Shutterstock