

# Swiss ski stations see salvation as quarantine quashed

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Switzerland's ski resorts breathed a sigh of relief when the government lifted from Saturday quarantine restrictions imposed due to the Omicron variant, which had triggered an avalanche of booking cancellations.

The wealthy Alpine nation had slapped 10-days' quarantine on anyone flying in from countries where the new COVID-19 variant of concern had been detected, in a bid to stop its spread.

That included Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands—the three main sources of tourists heading to the Swiss slopes.

The crackdown had threatened to wreck the vital Christmas period for a seasonal sector struggling to recover from the pandemic's impact last winter.

"It is a huge relief that the quarantine requirement, which was a de facto travel ban, has been dropped," the Swiss tourism agency said.

Instead, travellers must do a PCR test before arrival in Switzerland, plus a second test four to seven days later.

The tourist agency welcomed the testing-only system, saying people were already familiar with tests and "they give guests a feeling of security and remove uncertainties when planning visits".

The quarantine requirement was first imposed on November 26, but

Swiss Health Minister Alain Berset announced Friday that it was being removed from Saturday onwards.

"It no longer makes sense to maintain quarantine for people coming from countries where this variant is circulating because it's also circulating here," he said.

The impact of the quarantine requirement had been immediate.

Planning had become "impossible", said Sabrina Marcolin, spokeswoman for the tourist office in Zermatt, Switzerland's busiest ski resort, in the shadow of the country's iconic Matterhorn mountain.

"Bookings for the winter season were really great... almost back to normal" before the quarantine rule came in, she said.

It instantly affected "everybody: the ski schools, the restaurants, the ski lifts. We are a destination that pretty much lives from tourism," she said.

## **50% drop in 48 hours**

Ski schools saw their reservations plummet.

"We lost 50 percent of our bookings in 48 hours," said Maxime Riviera, director of the Alpine Ski School, which employs 35 instructors.

"It is mainly the British who have cancelled. They are a major customer base in Zermatt."

Others, who saw the situation becoming more complicated, also pulled out, he added.

Riviera lost 60 percent of his annual turnover last year, when in late

December, quarantine was retroactively imposed on British tourists who had already arrived in Switzerland, due to the emergence of the Alpha variant.

The festive period accounts for a third of the winter season turnover, and Riviera hopes at least to break even this time around.

Three days before the government lifted the quarantine requirement, the HotellerieSuisse hotel industry body sounded the alarm about the surge in cancellations it had caused.

It too voiced its relief Friday, calling it an "important signal" for the British, Dutch and Belgian markets.

"HotellerieSuisse calls on the government not to impose any more unexpected and unnecessary travel restrictions in the coming months in order to guarantee planning security for guests and establishments in an already fragile situation," it said.

Many British tour operators specialising in ski holidays pulled back from Swiss breaks.

Quarantine forced Inghams, a subsidiary of Hotelplan, to suspended all December departures to Switzerland.

It offered customers the option to postpone their booking or cancel with a full refund.

Beforehand, bookings to Switzerland this winter had been strong and accounted for around six percent of holidays in their winter programme, the company said in a statement.

British, Belgian and Dutch tourists are "very loyal" customers to the

Wallis and Bernese Oberland regions, and major resorts like Davos and Saint Moritz, "especially during the Christmas holidays", said Andreas Zullig, HotellerieSuisse president.

They stay an average of seven to 14 nights, he added.

Many hotels hope to achieve up to a quarter of their turnover during the busy holiday season, thanks to Christmas and New Year bookings and peak rates.

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