

The Horrific Epidemic of Ski Chalet Scams: Consumers are More Susceptible than Ever During the Christmas Season

An exclusive report by I-PRAC

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For years, we have been reading about the shocking, ski chalet scams over the festive season. This report exposes fraudsters and bogus companies; and most importantly, what can be done to protect unsuspecting holidaymakers during the festive time of year.

All sources have been accurately cited and/or referred to.

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I-PRAC Senior Research Journalist

Ski Holiday Bookings are on the Rise, And so are the Risks of Property Rental Fraud

The statistics speak for themselves. The Chalet Ski Stats Report 2019 found bookings for 2019/2020 have been up for 56% of operators and agents. And despite Brexit, only 15% of operators have reported a drop in sales, year-on-year.

These days, and increasingly so, luxury ski holidays are spoken about in the same breath as Christmas and the festive season; with the UK continuing to be the number one market for those booking winter breaks in France and Switzerland.

The most popular time of booking these holidays that cost up to tens of thousands of pounds is in fact, the present (between the months of September and December). It's likely that there are hundreds of families planning for their festive getaways right now, eagerly looking for the "best packages" that offer the best experience and value for money.

The problem? This massive consumer market has now become a breeding ground for fraudsters and bogus holiday rental companies.

Sadly, this epidemic isn't "old news". Upon conducting my research as I-PRAC's Senior Research Journalist, I came across shocking ski chalet scam stories that dated as far back as 2013. Just last year, **Action Fraud** reported that in 2017, fraudsters (operating in the ski chalet space) conned victims out of **£230,000**. Note, this figure is only taken from the cases reported to the Police and it's likely that the actual figure is double this amount.

In this report, we're going to delve into the recent scam stories as well as the "leading" fraudulent companies that have gone to extreme lengths to dupe their victims.

However, most importantly (and something we don't see very often), we're going to uncover exactly how these scammers can be avoided and how travellers can ensure that they're booking luxury winter holidays with legitimate property owners and agencies, only.

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Sophisticatedly Sinister: The Fake Ski Chalet Websites That Have Been Fooling Innocent Holidaymakers

An exclusive travel report by the **Daily Mail** claims that one unsuspecting traveller lost an eye-watering **30,000 euros** after he transferred the money into a scammer's account, for a "luxury ski break". You could argue that that's an extortionate amount of money to directly send to an agency/property owner; but the trouble is, ski chalet fraudsters are investing their own money to ensure that their websites and online platforms are convincing as ever.

The con-artists target a "high-end" consumer market (ski chalets don't come cheap) during the most popular time of year; where people are usually in high spirits anyway. By taking advantage of all these factors, fraudsters have been getting away with scams that are ultimately, turning them into the most sinister kind of "rich" criminals.

Alps-Stay.com

Also known as AVO CHALETS, Alps-Stay was a fake and incredibly "professional looking" website that has now been suspended.

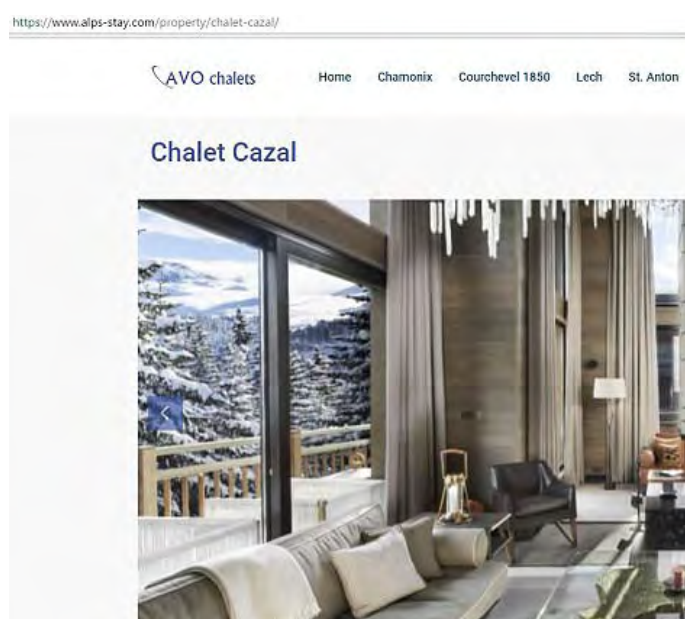


Image from Alps-Stay Website (Fake)

The website, which was up and running only last year, boasted numerous images of beautiful chalets and the most enticing descriptions (most likely written by professional copywriters). The images, as seen below, were illegally stolen from **The Firefly Collection**, a company that was shortlisted for the **World's Best Ski Travel Agent** in 2016 and 2017 at The British Travel Awards. Clearly, the scammers had done their research and planned to steal only the most high-quality content.

The bogus company listed one particular chalet by the name of "Cazal Chalet" that had suspiciously been reduced from the price of 75,000 euros a week to 1,800 euros a night. This chalet was actually the Perce Neige, as advertised on The Firefly Collection's website.

It has been reported that the correspondence from the team representing Alps-Stay had always been "professional and polite", with emails being replied to in a timely and well-written manner. What's more, is that the company had active social media accounts (including a Twitter page with thousands of followers since 2012).

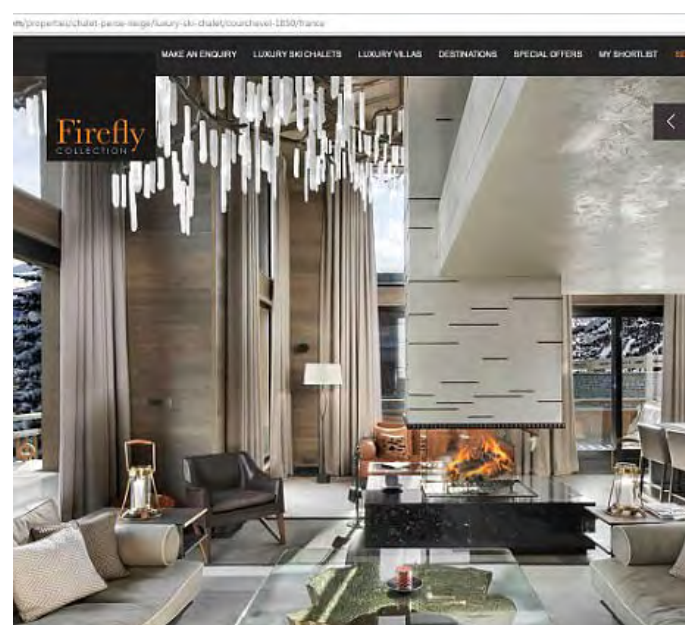


Image from The Firefly Collection (Legitimate)

Sophisticatedly Sinister: The Fake Ski Chalet Websites That Have Been Fooling Innocent Holidaymakers

PremiumSwissChalets.com

Another illegally operating “ski chalet resort” that had their eyes on the success of The Firefly Collection was **premiumswisschalets.com**. According to reports, journalists at **MailOnline** attempted to reach out to this company, to discuss allegations of fraudulent activity; however, their emails were met with tumbleweed silence.

Unlike Alps-Stay.com, this website didn’t change the name of their chalets; but instead, tried to lure victims in with more astonishingly reduced prices. It listed the “Zermatt Peak Chalet”, which cost around 7,800 CHF through The Firefly Collection for only, 4,500 CHF per night.

Combined with the beautiful images and descriptions, this offer would have been too-good-too-miss for keen, last-minute bookers. In retrospect, the lesson that we can take from this is that if a winter break package seems “too good to be true” then it unfortunately, probably is.

The screenshot shows a website interface with tabs for 'Property description', 'Map', and 'Location description'. The 'Property description' tab is active, displaying the following text:

Interior

The bright and spacious 5-room apartment is on the 3rd floor of the newly built TITLIS Resort. The TITLIS Resort is situated just a few minutes' walk from the Titlis Cableways. Free local bus stop by the resort. The apartment has 4 double bedrooms, a spacious living room with swedish fireplace, flat-screen TV and the option for a double sofa bed, a separate dining area, an open kitchen with modern appliances (dishwasher, Nespresso coffee machine), shower/WC and bathroom/WC and separate WC, a separate room with washing machine and dryer and a balcony with views to the west. Underground parking and ski storage (including lockable ski room with boot dryer). Free Wi-Fi in the building. Pets are not allowed. NON-SMOKING apartment. Our wellness-oasis is free of charge for our guests and consists of a Finnish sauna, herbal bath, steam bath, ice shower, multi-sensory shower, relax lounge and a spa garden (incl. bathrobe, slippers and sauna towel). Entry from 14 years. We are happy to take your bookings for the DaySpa and Massages by phone or email. 5-room apartment (147 m2), 3rd floor: kitchen, living room with double sofa bed, 4 double bed rooms, bath-toilet, shower-toilet, separate toilet. Included: Bath- and kitchen towels, local tax, free entrance to wellness-oasis. Excluded: Parking/underground parking CHF 12.00 per night.

On-site service
Here you receive personal on-site assistance
Info and directions

Questions?
We are here for you.
01483 863500
Holiday Hotline
[Contact form](#)

Text from Interhomes (Legitimate)

SwissAlpsChalets.com

Now marked as a “scam site” by the **Zermatt Tourist Office**, this fake website had been stealing high-quality images and chunks of copy from a legitimate agency, **Interhomes** (www.interhomes.co.uk). The con-artists behind this operation had even gone as far as listing fake, Google Ads – knowing that many unsuspecting travellers would see this as a sign of “authenticity”. Both the website and the ads have now been taken down; but this was only after victims had been targeted, duped, and as a result, at a serious financial loss.

Thanks to the Daily Mail, we have a quote from a Google Spokesperson who says this:

“We have a set of policies which govern what ads we do and do not allow on Google. These policies make it clear that we do not allow fraudulent or misrepresentative sites. If we discover sites that are breaking this policy, we quickly take appropriate action.”

Property Description *

The bright and spacious 5-room apartment is on the 3rd floor. The Resort is situated just a few minutes' walk from the Titlis Cableways. Free local bus stop by the resort. The apartment has 4 double bedrooms, a spacious living room with swedish fireplace, flat-screen TV and the option for a double sofa bed, a separate dining area, an open kitchen with modern appliances (dishwasher, Nespresso coffee machine), shower/WC and bathroom/WC and separate WC, a separate room with washing machine and dryer and a balcony with views to the west. Underground parking and ski storage (including lockable ski room with boot dryer). Free Wi-Fi in the building. Our wellness-oasis is free of charge for our guests and consists of a Finnish sauna, herbal bath, steam bath, ice shower, multi-sensory shower, relax lounge and a spa garden (incl. bathrobe, slippers and sauna towel). Entry from 14 years.

5-room apartment (147 m2), 3rd floor: kitchen, living room with double sofa bed, 4 double bed rooms,

Text from Swiss Alps Chalet (Fake)

Additional Coverage

As it stands, all it takes is a simple Google search to uncover a series of disturbing, ski holiday scam stories, particularly during the Christmas season.

We could spend hours going into the details of these fraudulent companies (the list is somewhat never-ending); but what's important here, is that we focus on the solution now that the problem is stark clear- and has been, for several years.

If you're interested in further reading and reports regarding fake ski chalet listings, then **Planet Ski**, a news and entertainment platform for skiers and snowboarders worldwide, released a report last year (2018) about the rise in ski holiday scams.



Find the full article, here:

<https://www.planetski.eu/news/12172>

Leading UK media platforms such as **The Daily Mail**, **The Telegraph** and of course, the likes of **Action Fraud** are also always covering holiday and property rental fraud.

Spotting the Signs of Ski Holiday Scams

One of the biggest issues that we face, is that despite the alarming number of reported scam stories, the everyday traveller/ holidaymaker still needs to be educated about widespread fraudulent activity, and how to spot those warning signs early.

Listed below, are some of the most common signs that are easy to spot (and should send alarm bells ringing). As a company that verifies property owners and short-term rental agencies worldwide, the team at I-PRAC are experts in differentiating legitimate operators from scheming, con-artists. With our know-how of the industry, as well as countless other resources that are available on the internet, the plan is to eliminate fraud and devastating financial loss, this Christmas.

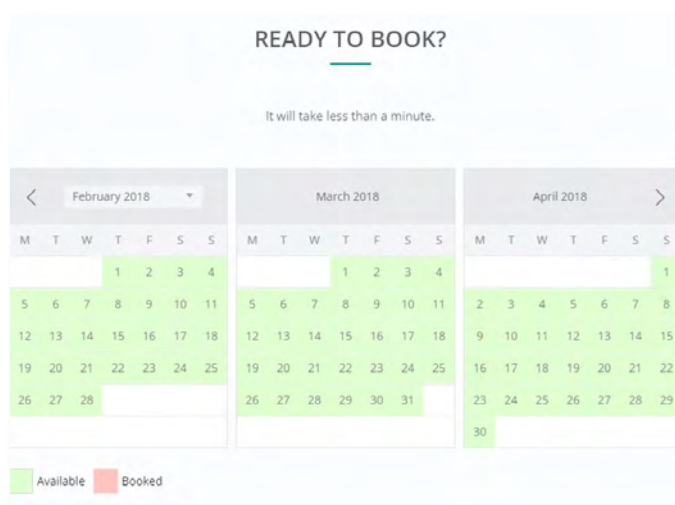
1. They don't take credit card payments

All of the fake ski chalet websites that we've mentioned so far, conned unsuspecting customers by asking them to wire thousands of pounds into a bank account. Remember, whilst some legitimate companies may use bank transfers, if this is their only way of accepting payments, then this is a **huge warning sign**. It has been reported by MailOnline that one skier "smelled a rat" when bogus agency, swissalpschalet.com demanded a bank transfer (in full), and didn't offer an alternate method of payment. Luckily, this traveller backed out of the booking; had she have gone through, she would have lost thousands of pounds.

What's worse is that when money is directly transferred to a scammer's account the bank has no control over the situation (even if you can prove that the website was illegitimate). So, once that money's gone, it's likely that it'll never be returned again.

2. The website is always listing "availability"

The image below is taken from scammer website, premiumswisschalets.com and as you can see, shows constant availability. Fraudsters are keen to con as many innocent travellers as possible; and with "double-bookings" not being an issue for them, they like to maximise their chances of stealing money, by listing as much availability as possible.



Taken from premiumswisschalets.com

Spotting the Signs of Ski Holiday Scams



3. They ask for a passport number

According to **ABTA** (The Travel Association), being asked for a passport number when booking into a short-term rental is not normal and should be taken as a warning. It can only be assumed that the fraudsters hold onto personal information for other kinds of criminal activity.

4. The chalet prices seem “too good to be true”

Fraudsters like to reduce the prices of their “luxury chalets” as a way of luring holidaymakers in. Sadly, this is especially enticing for last-minute bookers who are looking for “affordable deals” in the run-up to Christmas. If at the time of booking a winter break, a chalet seems underpriced compared to competitors, there is often a reason to be concerned.

However, also note that only because some listing are priced are what consumers would expect, this does not guarantee that they are legitimate operators. Some fraudsters are very sophisticated in their approach and research other legitimate companies, to come across as convincing as possible.

For further information you can also download I-PRAC’s free guide (which outlines all the details that you’ll need):

<https://www.i-prac.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/I-PRAC-Property-Check-Guide-1.pdf>

Keep Your Money and Your Loved Ones Safe This Christmas, With I-PRAC

The short-term rental sector is one of the most innovative in the world and growing at a phenomenal rate. Because of this, industry bodies have been forced to play “catch up” where regulations and policies are concerned. The biggest issue of all – as we frequently come across – is of course, property rental fraud.

At the expense of unsuspecting travellers, scammers are operating fraudulent “companies” with polished websites, fake reviews, and listings for properties that are either non-existent or ripped-off from legitimate businesses (ultimately affecting their bottom line and reputation, too).

Sadly, whilst Christmas is supposed to be a joyous time of year, fraudsters will be using it at their advantage to target the likes of keen skiers and groups of travellers; all looking to spend their hard-earned money on once in a lifetime winter holidays. What’s concerning is that the majority of these people will be near-oblivious to the widespread threats of rental fraud.

The trouble is, with no “official” laws or regulations, it is all too easy for criminals to advertise fake listings and lure holidaymakers in with luxury offers “that cost a bargain”. At I-PRAC, we’re dedicated to the service of not only protecting legitimate property owners and rental agencies; but the end-consumers too. Until our inception in 2016, there has been no other business offering this rigorous and much-needed verification platform.

This year, when families and close groups of friends excitedly book their winter breaks; they can have the guarantee that by booking with owners/ agencies that are “**I-PRAC Approved**”, they are **100% protected**.

I-PRAC’s Free Resources & Tools

>>> Free Property Check

This free-to-use tool created by I-PRAC’s expert team allows travellers to check a short-term rental property, using a simple application form: <https://www.i-prac.com/property-check/>

>>> Free Guide

As you’ll have already come across in this report, I-PRAC also offers a comprehensive free guide for travellers, created by a team of experts that keep up-to-date with industry trends and the latest “techniques” that fraudsters are using for their criminal activity: <https://www.i-prac.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/I-PRAC-Property-Check-Guide-1.pdf>



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