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HOPES DASHED AGAIN AS ITALY SKI RESORTS STAY SHUT

"It's so frustrating! They are having a laugh," vented skier Matteo Morsia, after the long-awaited reopening Monday of Italy's resorts was postponed at the last minute over fresh coronavirus fears. The 27-year-old trav-



elled 200 kilometers to the Italian Alps from Milan to take advantage of the first day of skiing this season-only for the government to announce on Sunday evening that they could not open. Morsia claimed a refund for his ski pass and returned home, but for those running the Cima Piazza Happy Mountain resort in Valdidentro, near Bormio, there is no such easy fix. "It's a disaster. For a week now, we have been readying the slopes

for the opening and preparing the health protocol," said Denis Trabucchi, a 35-year-old ski instructor.

"This last-minute announcement is unacceptable." He was particularly angry given scenes in many Italian cities this weekend of streets and outdoor restaurants packed with people enjoying the winter sun. "We see images of throngs of people in city centers, whereas we're here in the open air," he told AFP. Trabucchi is one of around 3,000 instructors in Italy's northern Lombardy region who have been on furlough since March 8, when the ski lifts closed under last year's coronavirus lockdown. Resorts had hoped to reopen before Christmas, then after New Year, and then on February 15. But in the first public act of Mario Draghi's new government that was sworn in on Saturday, this has now been delayed until March 5.

Political row

The Swiss and Austrian ski resorts are open, but Italy, like France, is still waiting for the green light. The timing of the latest postponement sparked outrage among business owners and politicians, with far-right leader Matteo Salvini—who is part of the new government—among those



A general view shows Bormio's world famous ski resort in the Italian Alps. — AFP photos

weighing in. "You can't say on Sunday that on Monday everything changes," he said—particularly in the winter tourism sector, which is worth between 10 and 12 billion euros a year, according to the agricultural body Coldiretti.

Luca Zaia, the governor of the northern Veneto region, added: "Our operators prepared the slopes, hired staff, turned on the heating in hotels... It's not just about support, they (the government) have to pay for the damage." The decision comes against a backdrop of warnings about a resurgence of Covid-19 infections in Italy, where more than 93,000 people with the virus have died since it hit the country one year ago. "The variants are a source of concern, we must continue to be vigilant," Health Minister Roberto Speranza said Sunday.

Lack of respect

Happy Mountain, a little resort with a spectacular view of the Cima Piazzini glaciers, was hoping to receive around 300 people for the opening day Monday—but instead, it was mostly deserted. Giovanni Battisti Migliori, a 61-year-old doctor with a salt-and-pepper beard and fluorescent sunglasses, was one of the few coming down the slope—but only after he walked up himself. "I'm so angry... it shows a lack of respect towards the snow sector," he said, boiling over despite the freezing temperatures.

The delay affects hundreds of companies, from ski lift operators to hotels, shops, restaurants. "The money they spent getting ready to reopen is all lost, it's money thrown out the window," said the mayor of Valdidentro, Massimiliano

Trabucchi. But not everybody is unhappy. "Opening up to skiers was good news for business, but less good for the virus," said Mauro Pancheri, 67, who owns the Bar Jolly, next to the legendary Stelvio Slope in Bormio. A few meters away, 2,000 pairs of skis are lined up in Celso Sport, waiting to be hired. "Our clients are renting snow shoes, but not skis," said its owner, Marina Compagnoni. "They made us believe that the slopes would reopen, but it's delayed again. All I want is some clarity so we can organize ourselves." — AFP



Children on excursions with their daycare groups, cross-country skiing on trails made of artificial snow in Oslo, Norway. — AFP photos

Norway moves mountains to bring skiing to the people

Norwegians, the saying goes, are born with skis on their feet. But with a lack of snow and the pandemic this year leaving many in despair, authorities are bringing snow and ski trails to downtown Oslo. For the past few weeks, big trucks have been dumping hundreds of cubic meters of fluffy white stuff, made by snow cannons perched on the hills outside the capital, in the city's still-green parks. Packed down or groomed with cross-country trails, the parks have transformed into winter wonderlands for skiing enthusiasts of all ages: little children on excursions with their daycare groups, active seniors, and office workers taking a break from their work-from-home schedule.



Miriam Heen Skotland out to cross-country ski in the Voldslokkka park on her lunch break in Oslo.

"For three months, we've had very strict corona restrictions in Oslo, but we can still go outside," city councillor Omar Samy Gamal says, as a grooming machine behind him prepares a snowboarding hill in the Torshovdalen park. "Since we haven't had a lot of snow this winter, we're doing what we can to bring it to the people. We're bringing them a little bit of 'marka'," he says.

What's marka?

The word refers to the wooded hills outside Oslo, popular among urban dwellers for long walks, or more frequently, skiing

after work or at the weekend. The first snowfall of the season in early January caused long traffic queues, and, more worryingly during the pandemic, crowded commuter trains. "We don't want people packed together. We want them to keep their distance from each other, and the best way to ensure that is to make use of local public spaces," Gamal says.

Four Oslo parks—including that belonging to the royal palace—have already been or will be partially covered in artificial snow to quench locals' thirst for sledding and skiing. "It's extremely important to keep people active without everyone having to take the same train to leave town," says Miriam Heen Skotland, a psychologist out cross-country skiing in the Voldslokkka park on her lunch break.

White Christmas?

Before working her night shift as a nurse, Karen Margrethe Igland has also strapped on her cross-country skis, just 10 minutes from her home. "I try to limit how much I use public transport. If I want to go to the 'marka', I have to take the train. So it's better to be able to come here on foot," she says. Climate change has made winters in Norway shorter. According to the Norwegian Meteorological Institute, Oslo has over the past 30 years lost 21 winter days, defined as days where the temperature dips below 0 degrees Celsius. The city could lose another 26 winter days by 2050, the Institute has warned.

"When I was young, it wasn't hard to predict the weather in winter: it was often cold and there was usually a lot of snow," Norway's Education Minister Guri Melby said in January when new climate measures were presented. "But for Christmas this year I wasn't sure whether I should buy my kids a sled, because the winters nowadays are much milder with a lot fewer snowmen and ski days," she said.

And in an almost sacrilegious move, Norway opened its first indoor ski center in early 2020. It is however currently closed to the general public because of virus restrictions. With Oslo fighting its battle against the thermometer, is it really reasonable to transport tons of snow by truck? The vehicles run on biodiesel, with hydrotreated vegetable oil, the city notes. "Using these carbon-neutral trucks to bring snow to the people so that they won't use their own car to drive to the 'marka', I think it's a pretty beneficial equation for the climate," says driver Tom Kjetil Tangen. — AFP

CREATOR OF MUCH-MOCKED ROMANIA STATUE ACCUSED OF FRAUD

A Romanian sculptor has been charged with fraud after a much-mocked sculpture of the Emperor Trajan—and ten others—turned out to be made of brass and not bronze as claimed, police said Monday. Ioan Bolborea, 65, is accused of selling the statues to the Bucharest municipality and thereby defrauding it of 3.7 million euros (\$4.5 million), a police spokesman told AFP. One of the statues, a depiction of a nude Roman emperor Trajan holding a she-wolf in his arms, was widely mocked after its installation in front of Bucharest's National History Museum in 2012.

The artwork, based on a model by the sculptor Vasile Gorduz (1931-2008), portrays the genesis of the Romanian people from the merging of the Romans and the Dacians, with the wolf as a symbolic animal. The strange posture and the nudity of the male character, as well as the appearance of the wolf with a scarf recalling the Dacians' flag around its neck, prompted a wave of mockery at the time. Online critics quipped it was a monument to Bucharest's stray dogs, and even the museum's curator admitting it was of "doubtful artistic quality".

Suspicious about the material used were raised in 2017 when the statue was vandalized and the tail of the she-wolf was broken. When trying to fix it, experts noticed that the statue was made of brass, not bronze. Contacted by AFP, Bolborea refused to comment on the charges. The investigation started following several complaints from the Bucharest municipality regarding the quality of Bolborea's work, which at the time he rejected as "nonsense". — AFP



In this file picture people take photos next to the statue of Roman Emperor Trajan in front of the National History Museum in Bucharest, Romania. — AFP

Legend 'considered' starting his own fashion line

John Legend has "considered" starting his own fashion line. The 42-year-old singer - who has a penchant for suave fitted suits - hasn't found the time to branch out with his own clothing range yet, but hasn't ruled it out if the "right collaboration" comes along. Asked if he wants to have his own apparel line one day, John told WWD.com: "I've always considered it but I've been so busy doing other things, it hasn't been the first priority...yet. Again, I love collaborating with other artists and I see fashion as an art form. I don't claim to be an artist in that sense, but I do have my own taste and my own sensibility and if the right collaboration came along, I would be interested."

The 'All of Me' hitmaker is set to launch his first men's shoe collection with Sperry later this year, and has loved getting to interact more with the fashion world. He explained: "I've always had an interest in fashion - it's part of my job in some ways - but it's also been something I've taken a lot more interest in as I've developed in my career as an artist. There's just so much interaction with the fashion community and I have so much respect for what they do. So when Sperry offered me the opportunity to collaborate and try to bring our worlds together, I thought it was a great idea and a great way to build our partnership." Elsewhere,

the father-of-two insisted both himself and his 35-year-old model wife, Chrissy Teigen - with whom he has Luna, four, and Miles, two - love "expressing" themselves "through fashion" and working with designers on their looks.

Asked who the biggest fashionista in their relationship is, he replied: "I think we both love fashion. We both see it as a way to express ourselves and collaborate with really great artists. Expression is really the best word because it says, 'This is who I want to present to the world today.' Fashion is a cool part of our lives and we enjoy collaborating with great designers and expressing ourselves through fashion."



John Legend

Moss' 'uncomfortable' early modeling days

Kate Moss was made to feel "terribly uncomfortable" by photographers early in her career. The 47-year-old beauty was just 14 when she started modeling and despite her young age, she felt pressured to strip off, and admitted it's still a common expectation in the industry today. She told Reader's Digest magazine: "There were many shoots in the early days where I felt terribly uncomfortable. I think everyone understands the lifespan of a model, and the fact you will be starting young."

"That was the case with me, but even so there were some photographers who wouldn't agree to shoot you unless there was a nude element." That was very common then and still is now. "For a very young woman that could be incredibly intimidating." Kate - who has 18-year-old daughter Lila with former partner Jefferson Hack - also hit out at the "awful" 'heroin chic' label she was tagged with thanks to her slender frame and pale skin.

She said: "In the early days I became linked with the phrase 'heroin chic', which I always thought was awful. "There is no positive interpretation of that and I certainly never felt one. "At the end of the day I was always thin and

small and no amount of eating would put weight on me." Kate admitted she has to keep a closer eye on her diet these days than she used to. She added: "I see models now who are similar to me and sometimes the criticism they get is unfair because - up to a certain age at least - there are some of us who can just eat what we want without too many real consequences." "That definitely changes in later life though, as I found out after the birth of my daughter Lila." — Bang Showbiz



Kate Moss