

WORDS TOM OTLEY

Val d'Isère
lofty altitude
ensures near
guaranteed
skiing, and
that's far
from its only
draw

Stepping out of La Fruitière restaurant at 2,290m on the slopes above Val d'Isère mid-afternoon after a long and delicious lunch, we could finally see where all the noise was coming from. The next door bar – Folie Douce – had gone from hosting from a few people having early lunchtime drinks into a full-on outdoor nightclub. Loud music, people dancing, hands in the air (not easy with ski boots, slightly easier with snowboard boots) and a DJ standing on a balcony. There were even professional table dancers (I assume they are paid to dress like that). This wasn't the Val d'Isère I had been expecting.

Each resort in the Alps has a reputation that precedes it. To take just a few examples: Courchevel in France has pose value; Klosters and Lech are for upper-class wannabes and royalty; and Val d'Isère? Well it makes no concessions for beginners and has lots of intermediate and advanced slopes for those who like challenges. It is a skier's ski resort, in other words.

Whether fair or not, reputations such as these persist and influence future generations of skiers. While there are those who like to try a different resort each year, there are also plenty who stick to what they know and like, returning each winter, confident that improvements will have been made, but that the fundamentals remain. Val d'Isère attracts a high proportion of return guests, but that is both a strength →

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LET IT SNOW



The Sibelius Monument, Tempelaukio Church and Esplanade Park

DESTINATION



and weakness. For instance, if its slopes have a reputation for being difficult, how does it attract new skiers? One way, as I found out on my own return to the resort after a gap of some 12 years, is by making sure there are more attractions for non-skiers in town. Val d'Isère is almost unique in being at such a high altitude – 1,800m – and also being a real village. It dates back to the 11th century, and it still has buildings from the 17th century, including a much-renovated church in the old town and a village museum. The first ski lift – the Rogoney surface lift – opened in 1936.

It's fair to say, however, that it isn't overly attractive. It doesn't have the moonscape of nearby Tignes, but nor does it have the chocolate-box attractiveness of Megève or Courmayeur or Alpbach. It's also fair to say it's getting better. There are now strict controls on development, such as ensuring new car parks are constructed underground to avoid the centre becoming filled with cars and construction mandated in traditional materials of stone, wood and slate. The restrictions are such that new construction often involves tearing down 1960s' buildings and replacing them with much more expensive but authentic-looking newcomers.

Improvements will continue. Le Coin de Val is the name given to a huge five-year £170 million development – the largest in the French Alps in 20 years – in the centre of the village with an extension of the piste towards the main road and an underground moving walkway all the way back to the main mountain access lifts. In addition, there will be 900 new beds in two hotels, apartment blocks and 100 private chalets.

So part of its appeal to regulars, the majority of whom are British (55 per cent of visitors come from the UK, with Scandinavia a distant second at 15 per cent) comes from the sense of being a real community, and there are many family-run businesses in the village. But it's a long way to come for that. Really what attracts is the near-guaranteed skiing. In an age of uncertain snow, most resorts have snow cannons to help maintain the pistes, but Val d'Isère's altitude minimises the need for this, while the Isère river ensures there has been no need to construct dams for the 900 cannons in the same way other resorts have.

Some 60 per cent of the 153 pistes are located above 2,200m, up to 3,450m, with the lowest slopes at 1,550m. There are two glaciers and, from the highest lift on the



Helsinki was modelled on Paris and St Petersburg – though its atmospheric streets

Pissaillas above the hamlet of Le Fornet nearby, you can ski 1,400 vertical metres. The canons cover 40 per cent of these slopes to supplement the natural snow, of which there was plenty in the 2017-18 season, although as skiers know, plentiful snow one year isn't a guarantee of the same the following.

The resort is also building lifts and creating slopes for beginners. As well as the nursery slope close to the village, there is also the Sunny Ride at the top of the Solaise gondola, a fun run for novices, which opened in 2016. Here, too, is a new area for young children to learn and have fun and, opening this season (2018/19), a 40-room, boutique mountain hotel which is France's highest hotel.

Throw in a new mountain restaurant – at the bottom of Solaise – L'Etincelle (which means spark) and it's obvious

FACT BOX

ACCOMMODATION: A seven-night stay at VIP SKI CLUB Aspen is priced from £709pp and includes return flights from Gatwick to Geneva, coach transfers, accommodation, catered chalet board (of cooked breakfast, afternoon tea, three-course evening meal on six nights followed by cheese board and coffee and mints), complimentary beer and house wine, and complimentary toiletries. +44 (0)20 8875 1957; **vip-chalets.com**

LIFT PASSES: A one-day adult lift pass for Espace Killy is priced from €57; a six-day adult lift pass is priced from €285. **valdisere.com**

SKI SCHOOL: An adult beginner group ski lesson costs from €265 in Val d'Isère with Oxygene. **oxygene.ski**

SKI HIRE: Ski hire can be booked with VIP SKI. Advance bookings save up to 25 per cent on resort prices. Six days' ski hire is priced from £91; six days' ski and boot hire is priced from £154

WHERE TO EAT, DRINK AND DANCE

Restaurants and bars:
Cocorico; +33 (0)4 79 24 60 04; cocoricovaldisere.com
Dicks Tea Bar; +33 (0)6 51 39 99 81; dicksteabar.com
La Doudoune; +33 (0)4 79 24 60 04; doudouneclub.com
L'Etincelle; +33 (0)4 79 411 311; letincellevaldisere.com
La Folie Douce; +33 (0)4 79 06 07 17; lafoliedouce.com

that there is more to Val d'Isère than just skiing. A few late nights at spots such as Dick's Tea Bar, Blue Note, Doudoune Club, Cocorico and La Baraque, which offer food and drinks until the early hours convinces of that.

The range of accommodation options means you can stay in a luxury hotel, or something far more basic, cook for yourself, or be cooked for every night. Having reached an age where a day's skiing and a couple of après-ski drinks then necessitates at least an hour sitting down drinking tea and good meal before I can go out again, catered chalets are a preference, and ones where the food is something more than spaghetti bolognese. On this visit we stayed at the confusingly named Club Aspen, a chalet in the centre of town run by VIP Ski. It was staffed by the British when we visited and we wondered whether such employment arrangements would still be possible post Brexit. For our visit, their talents (when it came to cooking) and hard work (when it came to helping us locate lost skis) was invaluable.

Unless you are a regular to Val, it's also a good idea to take some ski lessons, not least since you then have a guide to the extensive ski area, which also includes Tignes. Ski schools such as Oxygene and innovation in teaching means lessons are more bespoke, with a greater focus on ensuring you enjoy yourself, so you'll return the following year. They can also help you quickly regain lost confidence and actually improve during the course of a trip.

People choose a resort for a mixture of skiing, après-ski, restaurants, nightclubs, price, ease of access, accommodation and the previous visit's memories. I know plenty of friends who see their annual ski trip as an excuse to pretend they are 20 years younger, and then spend the following month blaming their aches and pains on skiing, as opposed to dance injuries. For me, the attraction of Val is a combination of deep snow, excellent restaurants and people of all ages dancing to tolerable music at three in the afternoon. Perhaps next year I might join in. **BT**