

Alpine Adventures

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With ample snow, first class luxury hotels and fine dining facilities Val-d'Isère is an alpine paradise

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The first thing you notice when you look up is La Face de Belvedere. Glinting in the winter sun high up above the lift station – 1,400 metres high to be exact – Val d'Isère's infamous slice of pearly white piste can test the most hardened skiers. Specially developed for the 1992 Albertville Winter Olympics and fashioned into the world's steepest giant slalom course by the downhill ski guru Bernhard Russi the almost-vertical slope is a magnet for veteran skiers and adrenaline junkies eager to carve their way down of the most iconic black runs in the French Alps.

These days the course is rarely used for competitive races, but it remains an important part of alpine racing folklore and Val d'Isère's DNA, forever synonymous with those white knuckle runs which beamed into living rooms around the world. Those downhill slaloms crystallised the resorts' reputation as a high altitude playground for serious skiers and that legacy remains.

Located in the Savoie region at the top of the Haute-Tarentaise Val d'Isère is one of a handful of resorts that can guarantee regular dumps of snow due to its lofty 1,850 metre altitude and artificial "Snow Factory", the largest in Europe. Once a haven for hard skiing and apres skiing anglophiles, it is now a chic, cosmopolitan resort with luxury hotels, boutiques and world-class cuisine.

Hotel Airelles, a palatial five-star ski-in ski-out chalet-style hotel dripping in haute époque glamour, is the latest jewel in the resorts' polished hospitality portfolio. Val d'Isère has plenty of chalets too, most of them dotted around the village, enabling easy access to restaurants and amenities, and the lift station. Having recently ventured to lower resorts where skiing has been limited due to snow loss, it's a welcome feeling arriving somewhere caked in powder. That somewhere is Chalet Jupiter, a cosy four room hideaway situated just off the high street.

Modelled on the spirit of those historic mountain-faring chalets, Jupiter fuses rustic old school charm with contemporary flourishes. It's fitted with wooden beams and panels, floor-to-ceiling French doors and en-suite bathrooms. Amenable luxuries also include a roaring log fire – much appreciated after a day on the slopes – and a balcony sporting a jacuzzi. Downstairs there's a hammam and on the ground floor a spacious garage with heated pads to warm your boots. The chalet also offers a fitting service that comes direct to the door so you don't need to drag yourself down to the ski shop; a handy asset, particularly during a blizzard.

The next day the snow clears and I'm treated to blue sky views of Val d'Isère's white-capped vistas. The resort's 153 pistes cater to skiers of all abilities and stretch all the way to the picturesque Grande Motte glacier that can be reached by an underground funicular railway and a cable car. In essence: it's a perfectly put together ski resort with slick lift service and an abundance of runs to carve your way down. The off piste is excellent too, although newbies would be advised to explore that tougher terrain with a guide and to lay off La Face de Belvedere after an afternoon in La Folie Douce.



With ample snow and runs to choose from Val d'Isère is renowned as one of the best ski resorts in the Alps

The apres-skiing mecca was birthed here long before it conquered the Alps and it remains riotously popular, pumping out tunes and drawing in a hard partying clientele at the foot of the La Daille gondola. For those with more refined tastes there's plenty of mountain restaurants to pick from. Located inside the former cable car station of Solaise, Gigi serves up delicately presented Italian dishes and delivers eye watering views across the Vanoise National Park. Meanwhile, René, a family-owned restaurant on the Mangard slope, prepares its hearty, mostly meat heavy dishes in an open kitchen, filled with rich, salty aromas, panoramic views and extremely full and satisfied customers.

Back in town there's also a varied dining scene, not least at Hotel Airelles which houses three top notch restaurants. La Grande Ourse, serves traditional but ever so slightly refined Savoyard treats, and Loulou, helmed by Chef Benoît Dargere, has brought the spirit of La Dolce Vita to the alps. Matsuhisa, a contemporary Japanese-style restaurant helmed by the eponymous Nobu creator, brings a refreshing dash of oriental style to the alps. Adorned with dark woods and soaked in velvet, with a beautifully crafted sushi bar – and resident DJs spinning cool funk-pop remixes – it's an elegant but easy going place to sip a cocktail and savour the chef's signature dishes.



Above: Matsuhisa brings chef Nobu's beloved Japanese-Peruvian cuisine to Val d'Isère Below: Ice floating on Lake Ouillette



For non-skiers Val d'Isère has also stepped up its act to be more inclusive. Near the beginners slope on Solaise mountain and an immaculate children's ski school is Lake Ouillette, a popular spot for walkers in the summer that has been turned into an ice floating rink. Our instructor emerged from his igloo – a good start – holding orange drysuits and gestured to a three-metre hole in this giant frozen lake. Ice floating feels like a strange concept at first, but as it turns out: bobbing about sipping herbal tea and taking in the mountain scenery feels novel and relaxing.

Head down to the town centre and you can try your hand at Fatbiking. Riding through the twisting mountain trails led by the affable former downhill racer Frederik Van Buynde is a fun, carefree way to explore Val d'Isère from another angle and requires very little effort thanks to the bikes' inbuilt electric propulsion system. It's a fitting way to end a tour of this world class resort which has not forgotten its hard skiing roots, but is shifting gears and looking beyond the slopes to accommodate a new and increasingly diverse clientele.

A Contactless Catered seven-night stay at [Chalet Jupiter](#) based on eight people costs £800pp with Ski France; skifrance.co.uk

Ski passes cost €63 a day for adults for the full area of Tignes and Val d'Isère, and are free for under 8s. If you are purchasing a [six-day ski pass](#) you receive the seventh day for free.

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