

# Alpine highs

**Cathy Winston discovers small is beautiful when it comes to a first ski holiday for her family**

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The village of Vaujany

The snow sparkled a dazzling white under the cloudless blue sky, mountain peaks stretching off as far as my goggled eyes could see. The only sound, the swish of skis and my own slightly surprised exclamations of relief that I had made it down the green run without crashing into my instructor or falling off the edge of the piste.

On only my second ski lesson in over a decade, I'd been resigned to spending hours with the kids on the nursery slope, rather than much actual skiing.

The fact that the video of me tackling the run showed my face frozen in concentration as I slalomed slowly down the gentle slope (rather than curving nonchalantly at high speed down a sheer precipice, as it had seemed in my head) couldn't take away from my exultant feeling. I was on top of the world. Almost literally.

It had been a long journey to my first family ski trip — in this case not literally, as our pretty destination of Vaujany was just an hour from Grenoble, and only a slightly longer transfer from Lyons or Geneva.

But after successive plans had been cancelled by Covid, Covid again, post-Covid flight price hikes and then an unseasonal lack of snow, I'd started to wonder if we'd ever have a chance to pull on our salopettes and start snow ploughing. But with sunny skies above the French Alps and powdery snow on the slopes, it was well worth the wait.

While Vaujany isn't among the best-known locations for UK skiers, it's ideal for families or if you're looking for a quieter place to stay. Part of the huge Alpe d'Huez grande domaine, covering five resorts and two villages, you're linked to an impressive 250km of runs — 34 green, 31 blue, 28 red and 18 black, including La Sarenne, the longest black run in Europe, which stretches for 16km from the top of the Pic Blanc lift at 3,330m.

Needless to say, neither my 11-year-old nor I were even considering black runs, but with the Montfrais 1650 gondola just a few minutes away from our base at Hotel des Cimes (even in ski boots), we started each day soaking up the mountain scenery, including partly frozen waterfalls and the occasional mountain goat roaming among the trees.



One of the pistes at Vaujany

The nursery slope itself was then only sliding distance from the lift, with a magic carpet and drag lift to take you to the green runs, plus gondolas and chair lifts leading to more blue and red runs, and on to the rest of the slopes.

As I brushed up my limited — and very rusty — ski skills on the nursery slope, trying to ignore the fact that I towered a good foot above everyone else, my daughter was coaxed into pushing herself further by the resort's very patient ski instructors whose impressively fluent English only failed briefly when they heard the words "I can't".

For added motivation, I promised that she could throw snowballs at me for each new challenge she attempted.

My own reward? A Panaché in the sunshine — the French equivalent of a shandy, it somehow tastes a lot better sitting at an outdoor table under a cloudless sky.

For more advanced skiers, or those looking to brush up their skills even further, you could spend all day on the snow; a faster lift whisks you from Vaujany up to Alpette, linking to the cable cars to Alpe d'Huez via Oz-en-Oisans.



The domaine has its own snowpark (with an expert and a beginner's area), a boardercross zone with its various jumps and obstacles, a 1,200m run for sledging, and even a late-night ski run.

For a few more adrenaline thrills, we took the lifts across to Alpe d'Huez, a succession of gondolas soaring over one peak before dropping down to the next valley, until several journeys later, we found ourselves at the area's busy heart, where several pistes converge and a string of restaurants are a mere snowball throw away.

For those with nerves of steel and enough skiing ability to stand up and land in skis, there's the chance to go paragliding. Or for a rather different thrill, a chance to try husky sledging.



Husky sledging in Alpe d'Huez

You can't miss them: the yaps and barks (interspersed with the occasional plaintive howl) echoed across the snow as the teams of eight dogs pulled in the traces, desperate to be able to run. Settled into our sleds, the noise stopped instantly the moment our driver urged them on.

Racing through snowy tracks, in moments we'd left the busy slopes behind, speeding uphill towards the trees before looping back again – stopping only for our driver to whip out a bag to do some poop-scooping on the otherwise immaculate snow.

With aches in muscles I'd forgotten I had, my legs were relieved to find plenty to do away from the slopes as well. Vaujany itself has all the traditional Alpine charm you could want, its streets lined with wooden chalet-style buildings, a population of just 350, and a laid-back feeling that's perfect for families keen to avoid the commercialised bustle of other Alpine resorts.

And while it's no après-ski hotspot, you'll find all the essentials when it comes to ski hire at Sport 2000, as well as the village's own swimming pool with small spa, a small bowling alley and even an ice rink, all tucked away in one building at the heart of the resort near the gondolas.

Set on several different levels connected by lifts, it's very quick to find your way around, and easy to squeeze in a relaxed hour floating in the pool as your kids check out the water slide.

Or the interactive Espace Musée de Vaujany, the village's newly opened free museum, offers a fun way to learn more about Vaujany's history and wildlife, with plenty of captions in English, finishing with a simulator game challenging you to fly above the landscape.



Hotel les Cimes, Vaujany

All after a much-needed snack break back at Hotel les Cimes, of course, with berry muffins, marble cake and hot drinks laid out for afternoon tea.

If you can't get enough of the muffins, they also appear at breakfast alongside an array of huge croissants, giant pain au chocolats, breads, cereals, and a cunning contraption to boil your own eggs to their perfect softness.

Dinner in the evenings also felt far more indulgent than just refuelling, with some delicious soups on the menu, plus a weekly fondue night during the winter.

Menus in the Alps tend to have limited vegetarian choices, but there are still options if you're not self-catering, from veggie burgers at La Table de La Fare restaurant to aubergine dishes at Le Stou, as well as a crêperie, not to mention menus featuring as much melted cheese as you can tolerate.

On the practical side, the hotel's boot room has lockers for guests, as well as the chance to dry ski boots — after sliding down as many snow banks as possible, my daughter tested out its ability to tackle sodden boots to the full.

Meanwhile, the huge rainhead shower with White Company toiletries also proved very effective at soothing those aching muscles.

Kir royale in hand, with a great view of the mountains and the traditional wooden chalets of Vaujany from our little balcony, it's not hard to see why people are drawn back to chase those Alpine highs again and again.

## Getting There

*Return flights from Gatwick to Grenoble cost from £47 with easyJet. Shared return transfers to Vaujany cost from around £95 with [MV Transport](#). You can also fly from various UK airports to Lyons, around 90 minutes from Vaujany, and Geneva, which is around two and a half hours away, with transfers also available.*

*Rooms at Hotel Les Cimes cost from £638 B&B per week, based on two sharing, with family rooms also available. Book with [Ski France](#).*

*Ski lessons cost from around £40 per lesson with [ESF](#) and lift passes from around £38 per day.*

*A half-hour husky sledding trip costs around £50 for adults, £30 for children under 12 with [Second Souffle](#)*