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A quicker way to hit the slopes

Les Deux Alpes' new gondola, which can shift 3,000 people an hour, has transformed the skiing experience, finds Nan Spowart

From the the top the view is dizzyingly beautiful. Snow-capped mountain peaks surround me, including Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in France.

I am standing at the highest point of the resort of Les Deux Alpes – at 3,600m more than twice the height of Ben Nevis.

The natural world is a wonder to behold but it's humankind's engineering genius that has brought me here, in the shape of a funicular and a huge gondola that stretches 6.4km from the town to its highest point.

This gondola is new and has cut the journey time up to the glacier at Les Deux Alpes, as well as shortening the queues of skiers. It is just one of the many innovations that have been made to improve the skiing experience here.

Set in the heart of the Oisans region, Les Deux Alpes is the highest skiable area in France and has guaranteed snow cover from its glacier which reaches up to 3600m.

Some of the longest runs in any resort can be found here and at the highest points there are beautiful blue, red and black runs as well as excellent off-piste if the conditions are right. This means that even beginners

can enjoy the fantastic 360 degree panorama from Mont Blanc to Mont Ventoux, the Massif Central and Italy.

The resort, in fact, has been described as "upside down" because, unusually, many of the easier runs are at the top with harder ones below. However, there are still plenty of beginner areas near the town and there are three free "magic carpets" as well as three free button lifts.

The Vallee Blanche slopes facing the main ski area are also nice for beginners as they are much quieter and have a new green run.

The biggest improvement is the new super shiny Jandri 3S gondola which has been the biggest project in the French Alps in the last ten years. This has doubled the capacity of the old lift from 1700 to 3000 people per hour, lifting them from the resort at 1,650m to 3,200m in a record time of 17 minutes – an incredible shortening of the previous journey time of 40 minutes.

The lift travels at 28.8km per hour and is more reliable in the face of adverse weather conditions such as strong winds, thanks to its tri-cable suspension system.

The funicular, which takes skiers up the last 300m to the

top of the glacier has also been renovated and now boasts an instagrammable jazzy lighting system. It stops at an ice cave and there is a restaurant for those who want to linger here.

In these days of unpredictable snowfalls and rising temperatures, a high resort is a boon and 75% of the ski area at Les Deux Alpes is above 2100m. In total there are 88 runs at the resort – 16 green, 46 blue, 16 red and 10 black – which is divided into seven different sectors with 43 lifts in total.

We arrived after a heavy snowfall, which was great for skiing, but meant there were huge queues at the lifts first thing. However we sailed past them as we had booked an instructor from ESF to help us regain our ski confidence after the summer and autumn hiatus. It's not particularly cheap but it is definitely worth it, if you feel a bit rusty.

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Travel



Les Deux Alpes is the highest skiable area in France, main; Hotel Ibiza, above

The town itself sits at an altitude of 1650m on a high plateau at the edge of the Ecrins National Park. The resort, which is the largest in the Oisans area, makes up part of the Grande Galaxie ski area with Alpe d'Huez, Puy Saint

Vincent and Vaujany.

The main street of Les Deux Alpes is dominated by the sharp peak of La Muzelle (3465m) and is full of welcoming bars and restaurants, making the resort popular for its apres ski.

Our base was the Hotel Ibiza

where we enjoyed spacious rooms with balconies giving beautiful views of the mountains. Facilities include a lovely pool, sauna, steam room, Jacuzzi and games room with a table tennis table.

The hotel sits a few minutes

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walk away from the many shops and restaurants and is close to the lift for the Vallee Blanche. The Jandri and Diablo lifts are further away but this is not a problem as there is a very efficient private shuttle from the hotel to the lifts, as well as a stop for the resort shuttle.

There are numerous excellent restaurants in Les Deux Alpes, but we had no need to eat out as the buffet breakfasts and dinners at the hotel are fabulous.

Breakfasts include hot food, baked goods like croissants and muffins, cheese, hams, fruit, yogurt and cereals, while dinners consist of salads, soups, a choice of excellent main courses, desserts and a huge cheese board. The food is so good it is hard not to overdo it, but with the swimming pool and the skiing much of it is burned off. That's what we told ourselves anyway.

On the mountain there are

several restaurants to choose from for lunch, from self-service to the award-winning Les Melezes Restaurant and Brasserie and the party Pano Bar.

If a break is needed from the winter sports, a nice wee jaunt is to take a cable car down to the old, picturesque village of Venosc. Here there are independent craft shops and on Tuesday mornings there is a guided tour.

Other activities on offer at the resort are electric mountain biking on snow, paragliding, snowshoeing and glacier hiking from March onwards. There are gourmet evenings at the high altitude restaurants, night skiing and the chance to ride in a snow groomer at altitudes of between 3,200m and 3,600m.

There was too much for us to try in one week, meaning a return visit will be on the cards in the near future.

Accommodation in Les Deux Alpes can be booked through Ski France, www.skifrance.co.uk. A seven-night stay at Hotel Ibiza costs from £863 for two people sharing a standard room on a B&B basis and from £1,438pp total for four people sharing a Duplex Suite with Kids Go Free Offer on an all-inclusive basis. Lead in prices for a seven-day L2A ski pass cost from £263 per adult and £207 per child (age 5-12).

Average equipment rental is £7 per day including skis, helmet, poles and boots. Book via www.intersportrent.com.

A return private transfer for up to eight people from Geneva to the L2A costs from £658. MV Transport: mvtransport.fr/en. A half-day ESF ski instructor costs £205 for 1-2 students.



A room at Hotel Ibiza, which is close to the slopes