
THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF A LUXURY SKI TRIP TO VAL D'ISERE

31 MAR 2023 BY GARY NOAKES

A chalet stay in Val d'Iserre may cosset guests in luxury, but out on the slopes, the challenges of the snow offer no such reassurance. Yet there are still plenty of laughs to be had along the way in one of the Alps' best resorts.



Val d'Iserre offers plenty of challenging slopes for experienced skiers

The chalet's electric garage door flipped open and I stepped out in my ski gear as dry ice swirled and strobe lights flashed. OK, there was no dry ice or strobes, but it wouldn't have surprised me if there were.

You see, expectations since arriving in Val d'Iserre were raised substantially; someone had already delivered my skis to the chalet and changed them without fuss – I'd overestimated my ability and shamefacedly admitted fat powder planks are not for me.

Kit sorted, I prepared to trudge down the road for 10 minutes to the lifts when a Mercedes minibus arrived to take me. The windows may not have been blacked out, but it felt rock star nonetheless.

I'm a seasoned skier, but not at all used to this kind of treatment. It's as if we had a ski fairy looking over us, and it's all part of the package at Chalet Jupiter, a four-bedroom residence that boasts huge wooden beams, underfloor heating, a hot tub and hammam. Launched in 2021, it was just the right side of luxurious without being vulgar. I loved it; I'm not a celebrity, don't get me out of here.

If you sell winter sports holidays, you don't need me to tell you about Val d'Isere, suffice to say it's fabulously snow-sure and challenging. On that note, several previous visits have convinced me some red pistes should be labelled black and some blues as reds. The runs to resort were always an issue for me – steep and at the end of the day, feeling a little hazardous due to the number of skiers, snow conditions and shade.



Chalet Jupiter was "just the right side of luxurious without being vulgar"

But why ski if you don't want to push yourself? If you are a beginner, however, there are cheaper resorts in which to learn, but the Solaise nursery slopes at the top of the mountain, accessed by cable car, give novices a sense they are getting right out there on the pistes. Moreover, the "magic carpets" there mean no drag lift fears for youngsters and, from this winter, children under eight ski free.

CHILLING OUT

We braved an exceptionally cold spell in January (-25°C on one peak) but were rewarded with roof-of-the-world views, uncrowded slopes and some off-piste terrain I tackled tentatively. It was so cold my ancient ski boots shattered at both heels when I returned to the chalet, but no worries, the ski fairies quickly arrived with a hire pair.

That evening, we eschewed the banging tunes emanating from renowned apres-ski venue Cocorico and headed instead to Val's beautiful Sain Bernard church, opened in 1664. Here every January and March the Classicaval classical music festival takes place. Sat among the 200-strong audience, it was my first experience of a concert pianist and I was genuinely spellbound by the 20-something prodigy's skills.

The experience was truly elevating, as was dining that evening at Airelles Val d'Isere, a five-star hotel completed during lockdown. Its Japanese restaurant Matsuhisa is a Nobu sister brand, with others in Beverly Hills and Mykonos. It was a world away from normal mountain fare and a sushi superlative.



Guests can try ice floating as part of their mountain activities

The next morning, the ski fairies delivered pre-dawn croissants. We hit the slopes again, but at 2,500 metres stopped to pull pink dry suits over our clothes to try ice floating. Resembling cartoon lobsters, we plunged into an ice hole to take tea, bobbing around in brilliant sunshine as if we were in the Med.

We adjourned to the new Rene restaurant, adjacent to its sister, the famous Edelweiss. It's not often I'm served an amuse bouche on the slopes, but Rene is a cut above. As we gazed through floor-to-ceiling windows, a ski paraglider performed a soaring 360. "People here are so cool," sighed one of our group, perhaps forgetting how minutes earlier she was dressed as a dayglo crustacean.

We turned back and I delighted in discovering our group's best skier, Will, was actually the worst cyclist. You can't be good at everything, eh? He wobbled and plunged into deep powder snow: cue a slapstick episode as we retrieved him unhurt and laughing helplessly. He neatly illustrated one advantage of winter fatbiking; fall off a mountain bike in summer and it'll hurt. Fall into deep snow and it won't.



Gary swaps skis for two (fat) wheels in the snow

We snatched a final few hours' skiing the next morning before leaving. I was chasing Will down a red run when my ability failed to keep pace with my ambition and I tumbled, losing both skis. The piste was steep and smooth and I couldn't plant poles in the hard morning snow to slow my speeding body, nor dig in my heels. Despite being alarmed, (I like to think) I styled it out as I hurtled 100 metres downhill on my back screaming Will's name.

Eventually I gained traction when the snow at last softened and others kindly retrieved my kit for me, but the gradient meant not being able to refit my skis, leading to a "walk of shame" down to a flat area to start again. Only my ego was bruised, but it proved a point to me – you might be king of the hill in your luxury chalet, but in a place like Val d'Isere, it's the mountain that's really in charge.

HOW TO BOOK IT

Ski France offers Chalet Jupiter for seven nights next season from £5,499 to £17,798, depending on date and whether a la carte or contactless catering is selected. Contactless catering means meals are delivered to you, including breakfast, afternoon snacks, dinner and nibbles – guests heat food as required. A la carte prices do not include food or drink, but dishes can be prepared by a chef and other food is chosen from a shopping list at local supermarket rates.

Destinations

Europe

Luxury

Ski And Snow