The best value way to ski the Three Valleys this season

Our ski expert reveals the most affordable apartments, cut-price lessons and (almost) free lunches that make swishing around Val Thorens on a budget possible

Val Thorens attracted 20,816 skiers on its opening weekend in November

Sean Newsom | Wednesday January 08 2025, 12.01am, The Times

Over the past three decades I've seen a lot of ski accessories. GoPro cameras, follow-me drones, AI bots that clip to your boots then — with the help of your smartphone and a pair of earbuds — analyse your technique and coo compliments into your ears: they've all had their moment in the sun. None, however, has had me quite as excited as this year's essential skiing extra, which I've just tested in the French resort of Val Thorens.

Sausages.

In Savoie, the mountain region in which Val Thorens is set, they're known as diots and the best of them can be bought from La Belle en Cuisse, a little deli on the pedestrianised Rue de Caron. These fat, meaty fingers of pork and ground nutmeg retail at £2 a pop (or £5 for four in the local Spar supermarket nearby) and the idea is that you pack them into your rucksack at the start of a sunny day. Then, when you've spent three hours blasting around Val Thorens' snowsure slopes, you ski down to the piste-side Hôtel Marielle and barbecue them for lunch on a sundeck packed with your fellow snow fiends.

In Savoie sausages are known as diots, as Sean Newsom found out

TOM HERBST

The Marielle provides the big circular grills, well stocked with wood, as well as a feisty garlic sauce and plenty of fresh baguettes from which you can make a diot sandwich when the meat is done. From start to finish mine took 30 minutes and tasted magnificent, not least because everything — apart from the sausages — is free. All the Marielle asks for in return is that you buy your drinks at its bar.

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“I’ve always enjoyed confounding expectations,” says the Marielle’s manager, Grégoire Le Solleuz, who launched the barbecues last spring. “And in a ski resort, where the price of everything is elevated, what could be more surprising than a lunch that costs almost nothing?”

Yes, he realises the move is annoying some of his fellow hoteliers and restaurateurs. But no, that’s not going to stop him. To add to the mould-breaking atmosphere he’s also running lunchtime pétanque tournaments. That’s the game the old geezers play in southern France, lobbing steel balls across their village squares in the evening sunlight. Only here, in Val Thorens — at the eye-watering altitude of 2,300m — you play it on the snow, to a bubbling and irresistible soundtrack of 1970s jazz-funk.

Val Thorens's reliable snow conditions are a big draw

ALAMY

Just be sure to ring up the hotel before you buy your meat to check that it's a barbecuing day. Le Solleuz doesn't run his parties in a blizzard.

He isn't the only one shaking up the lunch scene here. The snowboarder Julia Griffiths is another. Raised in London, she travelled the mountains for ten years, longing the whole time for a taste of her Vietnamese grandpa's food back home. So last winter she decided to cook it herself, in a tiny takeaway called Sk'Ewok. It's just across the street from the Belle en Cuisse deli and it serves the best mountain lunch you never thought you'd need: Vietnamese chicken soup, followed by egg noodles with chicken and crispy onions. The soup costs £6.50, the noodles £12.50, and the soup in particular is a revelation. Made with a fiery red curry paste, it hits you with an instant sour slap of lime juice, lemongrass and coconut milk, before mellowing into something deep, soft and meaningful. No wonder Griffiths and her small team are working 70 hours a week to satisfy their fans. *Saisonnière* workers, local skiers up from Chambéry, students on a university ski club week: as soon as she opens at midday, they come piling in with their tummies rumbling.

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And if that sounds unlike any ski resort you've heard of, that's because you don't know Val Thorens. Since it opened in 1971 it has been challenging perceptions of what's normal for a winter sports hub. Back then its mountain bowl was thought to be too high, too cold and too avalanche-prone to host holidaymakers. Its multistorey apartment blocks quickly developed an eyesore reputation too. But now, in an era of less reliable snow at lower altitudes, people are flocking to it. This winter, on its opening Grand Première weekend (November 23-24), it attracted 20,816 skiers. Two weeks later it was buzzing with thousands of Spaniards, who'd leapfrogged the Pyrenees to feast on its snowy, intermediate-friendly pistes during their Constitution Weekend holidays. They weren't just there for the skiing. In the midst of a storm that was blowing the snow horizontally across the slopes, I found several hundred of them crowded on to the terrace at the famous Folie Douce après-ski venue. It was a tough day to be dancing on a table in your ski boots, but they were determined to give it a go, huddled against the weather like a colony of Emperor penguins.

The piste-side Hôtel Marielle

FABRICE RAMBERT

The Brits are just as keen. “Val Thorens’ reliable snow conditions have always been a major draw,” says Robert Dixon of the winter sports specialist Skiworld. “But recently its reputation for good après and the quality of its skiing has become better established. This season we’re seeing particularly strong demand for our catered chalets in the resort, with 100 per cent chalet occupancy so far.” No doubt the fact that Val Thorens is also part of the vast and typically expensive Three Valleys ski area deepens the appeal.

Not surprisingly prices have risen of late. In part that reflects the resort’s rising profile but it’s also a product of a universal trend in skiing, revealed last month by the 18th annual Post Office Ski Resort Report. Compared with its figures for 2013, it showed that the price of a six-day lift pass, as well as group ski lessons, lunch and a selection of drinks, had more or less doubled in 11 years across a broad range of European resorts. This year Val Thorens was just over halfway up the price chart with a cost of £878.41 for a week (not including travel and accommodation) — far above cheap and cheerful Bardonecchia in Italy (£543.82), but below its high-altitude French rival Tignes (£968.77) and well short of ritzy Zermatt in Switzerland (£1,345.76).

Thank goodness Le Solleuz and Griffiths are showing us there’s another way.

Fahrenheit 7 is a spirited ski-in, ski-out hotel

Fancy joining in the fun? Given how popular Val Thorens is right now you might have to wait till March. But that's exactly when Val Thorens comes into its own. This season the Cime Caron cable car is out of action following a preseason accident that left one of its cabins wedged into a pylon at 3,200m. Even so, several of its other lifts rise above the magic 3,000m mark so its pistes remain soft and grippy when the spring sunshine is turning lower resorts to slush.

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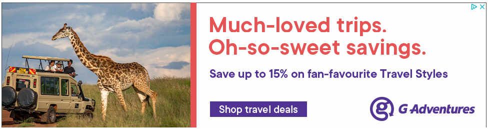

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Admittedly you won't see a thing when it's snowing. All the local slopes are above the treeline, so, when the clouds come down, everything turns milky white. But that's just one more reason to join a group ski lesson or hire a private instructor — so you can follow someone who knows the way. Fortunately four afternoon lessons with the friendly multilingual ESF are a reasonable £141pp. In Courchevel 1850, part of the same Three Valleys ski area, five morning lessons cost twice as much — £282pp.

Val Thorens is the highest ski resort in Europe

With your technique sharpened you'll be ready for the moment when the clouds roll off the mountains to reveal the slab-sided 3,561m peak of Aiguille de Péclet, frosted white like a giant Christmas cake. At times like these, with the pistes in peak condition, it feels as though you're skiing on the roof of the world.

Meanwhile, down at resort level, Val Thorens' eyesore architecture houses an unusually broad range of accommodation. Fahrenheit 7, where I stayed, is a spirited ski-in, ski-out hotel that honours Val Thorens' 1970s origins with its scalloped headboards, old-fashioned orange telephones and a buzzing cocktail bar. With the tour operator Crystal seven nights' B&B departing on March 30 costs £1,531pp, including flights (crystalski.co.uk). With Peak Retreats a self-drive, self-catering week from March 29 in the piste-side Balcons de Val Thorens apartments starts from £390pp, including LeShuttle crossing (peakretreats.co.uk).

If you do go, please remember to pack this season's other must-have ski accessory in your suitcase: an apron. Even in freewheeling, party-loving Val Thorens, garlic sauce on your ski jacket is not a good look.

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Sean Newsom was a guest of Val Thorens (valthorens.com) and Fahrenheit 7, which has seven nights' B&B for two from £1,770 (fahrenheitseven.com). Fly to Geneva or Chambéry, or take the train to Moûtiers

Book a stay

How to ski for less in France

By Sean Newsom

Val Cenis

The Maurienne Valley may lie just south of resorts such as Val d'Isère, Courchevel and Méribel but it has none of its neighbours' A-list allure — or their sometimes astounding prices. Val Cenis is its best resort. Here a feisty, mid-sized collection of pistes plunges down cold, north-facing slopes that hold their snow well and offer a good mix of skiing above and below the treeline. What's more, the resort's six-day lift pass unlocks several neighbouring ski areas — including the incredibly remote village of Bonneval — so it's best to bring a car to shuttle between them all. Stay at the Chalets de Flambeau apartments, close to the lifts and ski school meeting point.
Details Seven nights' self-catering from £318pp, including Eurotunnel crossing (peakretreats.co.uk)

Les Sybelles

Les Sybelles is the big French ski area no one has heard of. Set above the Maurienne Valley, it has gathered six villages and 190 miles of pistes into a sizeable, easy-skiing area that's well-suited to beginners and intermediates provided they ski it before mid-March, when spring's thaws start to bite. La Toussuire, at an altitude of 1,750m, is its highest place to stay and home to the ski-in, ski-out Hauts de Comborcière apartments, which have their own indoor pool.
Details Seven-nights' self-catering from £484pp, including flights (crystalski.co.uk)

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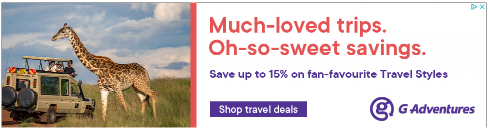

Val d'Isère

Yes, everyone's favourite French resort for steep slopes and parties is home to catered chalets that can cost more than £100,000 a week to rent in peak season. But it's also home to a branch of the brilliant UCPA, the French sport-for-all organisation whose mission is to make skiing more affordable. Yes, accommodation is for the most part in four-person bunk rooms. But buy a week here and almost everything — food, ski hire, lift pass and lessons but not travel — is included in the package, along with the company of bright-eyed enthusiasts who are just as delighted as you to have found such a good deal.
Details Seven nights' full board from £1,073pp (action-outdoors.co.uk). Fly to Geneva or take the train to Bourg St Maurice

Serre Chevalier

Serre Chevalier's smooth and rippling ski area encompasses 155 miles of pistes, and several steep and spectacular top-to-bottom runs that will have athletic intermediates whooping. The resort also offers an online booking service that packages up basic local apartments with lift passes — and in the quieter weeks of January and March they're a steal, including a six-day lift pass (worth £270). That might leave you with enough budget to buy a private guide for a day to

unlock some of its playful, entry-level off-piste (£93pp, ski-school-villeneuve.co.uk).
Details Seven nights' self-catering from £314pp (booking.serre-chevalier.com). Fly to Turin

Flaine

Grilling your sausages isn't the only way to save money on the price of lunch. Check into a full-board hotel such as the ski-in, ski-out Club Belambra Panorama in Flaine, and big buffet lunches as well as drinks are included in the price. The hotel also has its own kids' clubs should you need them. Set in the sizeable Grand Massif ski area, Flaine best suits adventurous intermediates, who will have the stamina and the technique to explore the full extent of its far-ranging pistes.
Details Seven nights' all-inclusive from £1,022pp, including flights (crystalski.co.uk)

Book a stay

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