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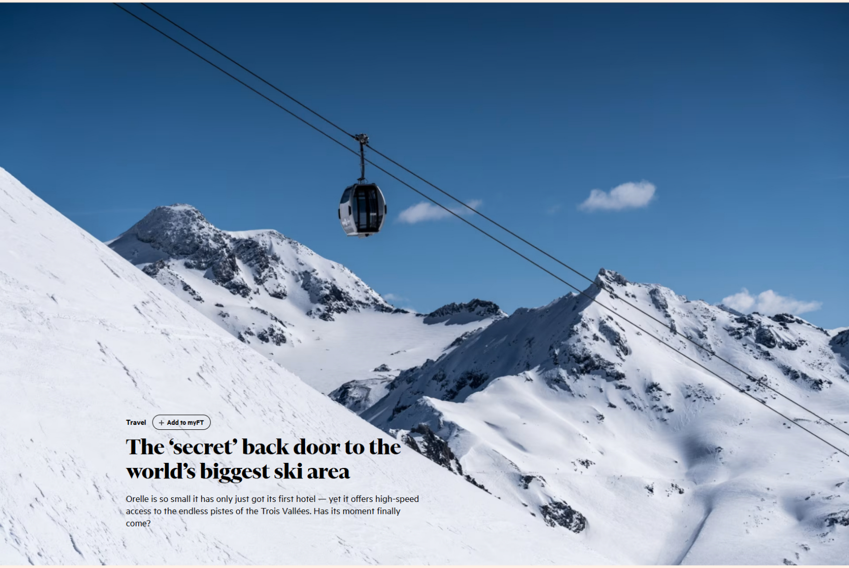

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# The ‘secret’ back door to the world’s biggest ski area

Orelle is so small it has only just got its first hotel — yet it offers high-speed access to the endless pistes of the Trois Vallées. Has its moment finally come?

The lift from Orelle to Cime de Caron, where a new summit station opens this week © Paul Besson

**Tom Robbins** JANUARY 25 2025

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Secret is one of travel writing’s most abused words — but humour me for a moment. Even if you’ve never skied, you’ve probably heard of Courchevel: the world’s most lavish ski resort, with five Palace hotels (only Paris has more). Perhaps you’ve heard of its neighbour in the next valley, Méribel, founded by a Scottish colonel and long a rowdy favourite of British skiers. Up and over the ridge to the west and you’re in Val Thorens, thriving in these less snow-sure times given its distinction as the highest ski resort in Europe.

Their three valleys, linked by ski lifts and pistes, make up another superlative: the world’s biggest ski area. Les Trois Vallées has 162 lifts, and 600km of pistes, all fully connected. It is so well known that it’s easy to be blasé about those remarkable statistics. Consider that the biggest ski area in the US, Park City, has just 40 lifts; a big hitter like the Espace Killy, comprising Val d’Isère and Tignes, can only offer 78, half the tally of the Trois Vallées.

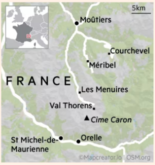
The secret, then, or at least the place you’re much less likely to know, is Orelle, a community of 330 people over the next ridge — the famous ski area’s unadvertised fourth valley. Orelle, actually not one village but a collection of 10 hamlets scattered at the bottom of the steep-sided valley, hides in the shadow of its neighbours’ reputations, and is as modest as Courchevel is ostentatious. Where Courchevel boasts a dozen Michelin stars, the only restaurant in Francoz, Orelle’s main hamlet, is an ageing pizza van, parked beside the only bar (pointedly called “Les 4 Vallées”).

The Orelle hamlet known as Le chef-lieu, about a kilometre from its main hub, Francoz

Orelle nightlife: 'Les 4 Vallées' bar . . .

. . . and the ageing pizza van © Tom Robbins

I arrived with my family just after Christmas, as Orelle marked a key milestone — the opening of its first hotel. We travelled by train, leaving London at 8am, connecting in Paris and Lyon, reaching the little town of Saint-Michel-de-Maurienne at 5.30pm, from where it was a 10-minute taxi to the hotel, the Hob Orelle. Though Francoz is at an altitude of just 890 metres above sea level, the streets were deep in snow, the dark forests rising up the valley sides smothered in white. The kids ran out to find a slope to slide down, resisting calls to put on jackets and gloves as they gleefully froze their hands making snowballs.



In the morning, we set out to try Orelle's key asset, installed in 2021 — what must rank as one of the world's great ski lifts. For skiing with kids, convenience is everything and from the door of the Hob's boot room, we walked less than 100 metres on a snowy garden path to reach a little square, around which cluster the village's one ski hire shop, the bar, pizza van, a tiny souvenir shop, the ticket office and the lift station.

The 10-person gondola climbs above the tree line, in about 12 minutes, to the Plan Bouchet, a mountain mid-station at 2,350 metres. There you can either get out, hop on a chairlift and start skiing, or continue, changing to the second stage of the new gondola which rises all the way to the Cime de Caron at 3,193 metres. It is a discombobulating change of perspective — to go in 20 minutes from sleepy village streets to a high alpine peak, looking across to the bulk of Mont Blanc, the rock towers of the Aiguilles d'Arves and the white expanse of the Vanoise glaciers.

Looking down from the Cime de Caron over the ridge that separates Val Thorens and Orelle. The village of Val Thorens is visible on the left, with Mont Blanc on the horizon behind it © Paul Besson

That 2,300-metre vertical ascent dwarfs many of the most celebrated lifts on the planet — Jackson Hole's "tram", for example, graces T-shirts, caps, fridge magnets and even has a band named after it, but only manages 1,261 metres — and yet like everything about Orelle, this lift comes with little fanfare.

We headed over the far side of the ridge, skiing down to Val Thorens where, it being New Year's week, the runs were busy but the snow, this high up, the best the kids had ever experienced. You could, if fast and determined, ski all the way to Courchevel. We contented ourselves with a few runs before a long lunch at a piste-side restaurant, the Chalet de la Marine, then a slightly anxious rush to catch the last lift up to the ridge in order to make it back to Orelle.

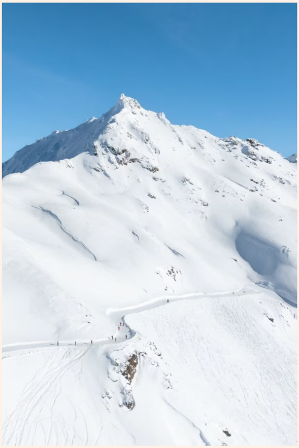
Miss it, and get stuck in the wrong valley, and you are looking at a two-hour, €450 taxi to get home. Catch it by the skin of your teeth, like we did, and you're rewarded with being the last ones on the mountain, skiing alone down a long, blue run as the setting sun turns the snow pink — I removed my glove and gleefully froze my hand filming the kids as we went.

The low-cost Hob hotel, which opened in December, is a welcome addition at a time the sport risks becoming the preserve of the very wealthy

The reputation of the Orelle gondola and the Cime de Caron might soon start to grow. On Tuesday this coming week, a new summit station opens, with a restaurant and the highest wine bar in the Alps. Next week it hosts the Freeride World Tour, the first time the extreme skiing competition has come to the Trois Valleés.

There's also a new covered walkway joining the Orelle gondola with the older, existing cable car up from the Val Thorens side. Just as with the new Matterhorn Alpine Crossing that connects Zermatt and Cervinia by cable car, part of the idea is to diversify away from the snow-dependent ski market and allow non-skiers and summer visitors to also make the journey over the mountains from Orelle to Val Thorens, stopping at the top for lunch and to take in the view. Unfortunately, the launch has been marred by an accident involving the Val Thorens–Cime de Caron cable car during pre-season maintenance in November; eight workers were injured and the lift will be out of action all winter.

Nevertheless, combined with the new hotel, plus a new beginner's area and "magic carpet" lift at Plan Bouchet, the message, at least according to the tourist board's bumpf, is clear: "Orelle is ready to play in the big leagues."



The Lory blue piste, which descends back towards Orelle

Trying the 'snake gliss', a sort of train of connected sledges, one of the 'animations' organised by the village tourist office

The surprising thing is that, given its privileged access to some of the Alps' highest slopes, the village has remained "the best kept secret in the Trois Vallées" for so long. The first lift opened in 1996 (skiers could get over to Val Thorens using a chairlift from Plan Bouchet to a lower point on the ridge). Yet accommodation options remained limited to some privately rented houses until, in 2007, a self-contained complex of cheap and cheerful holiday apartments with its own restaurant and small shop, Le Hameau des Eaux d'Orelle, opened just up the hill above Francoz. Even today, counting every apartment, private let and the new hotel, Orelle can muster only 1,300 tourist beds, not one per cent of the Trois Vallées' total.

At the end of the day, almost everyone catches the gondola down from Plan Bouchet to the village but, though there's no piste, it is possible to ski. I tried it on our first afternoon, following a snow-covered road that winds through the forest and ends up at Bonvillard, highest of Orelle's 10 settlements. From there, basically lost, I alternated bits of skiing, skirting gardens and dodging brambles, with walking, skis on shoulder, though a succession of the rustic hamlets, past pretty stone chapels, a still-in-use communal bread oven, and along streets silent except for the drip of melting snow from the roofs.

Finding fresh tracks above Orelle © Arthur Bertrand

A chapel in La Fusine, one of Orelle's 10 constituent hamlets

If not a ghost town, Orelle is much quieter than it once was. In the 1920s there were more than 1,200 residents, the economy driven by an electrochemical factory down by the river. Its decline, before final closure in 1991, caused depopulation but the commune has been cautious about embracing tourism as an alternative, the mayor, in office since 1993, keen to preserve its traditional character.

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So the opening of the Hob, built and owned by the Mairie (so in effect the village itself) and leased to an operating company, is a huge deal. The concept seems a good one: low cost, inclusive, fitting the village and much needed in a sport that risks becoming the preserve of the very wealthy. The name Hob is a contraction of *hôtel* and *auberge* (inn or hostel) — there are six double rooms, six family rooms and eight dormitories for up to six people. The dormitories — or *dodos* — have curtained bunks with their own light and storage, and the whole room can be "privatised" by a group of friends or a family. The prices are, for the Trois Vallées, startlingly low: doubles from €94, family rooms from €114, dorm beds from €32.

Initial impressions were good. The building is bright and colourful, the open-plan restaurant and bar has floor to ceiling windows looking out on a snowy terrace. The mattresses were comfortable, our family room spacious, with a balcony and big bathroom.

The restaurant at the new Hob hotel

Another tourist office 'animation', in the square beside the Orelle gondola on New Year's Eve

Sadly, there were, it has to be said, issues. Our visit was only a fortnight after opening and the staff had yet to find their feet. We asked for towels, finding we had only two for the four of us, and were promised more would be sent up. They were, eventually, but only after four more days of requests and empty assurances. Service was slow and random — order a glass of Mondeuse, receive a pint of lager — and I fell asleep and woke every day to the sound of the slamming door between kitchen and restaurant, exactly positioned one floor below my bed.

The main problem for us was at dinner: though Orelle and the Hob are in many ways ideally suited to families, there was no children's menu, little or sometimes no choice of dishes on our half-board menu, and no chance of eating early. We sat down when the restaurant opened at 7pm but it could be 9.30pm before pudding arrived.

These are quibbles — and of course you can't expect five-star service on a hostel budget. By now, I'd hope the staff have upped their game, and surely they've fixed the soft-close on the kitchen door?

On the last day there was fresh snow. The village was dark and under a thick layer of clouds but the lift took us up above them, so in sunshine we looked down over a cotton-wool sea. Previous days had taken us on forays to Val Thorens and beyond to Méribel, but today we stayed in Orelle, gradually working up to taking the kids to the highest point of the whole Trois Vallées at 3,230 metres. From there, we set out on their first proper off-piste run, a glorious long powderfield just beyond one of the pistes.

Then it was back down for a drink in the village square and one of the tourist office's regular *animations*, tonight a performance by an elderly man with a flat cap and a barrel organ. For those seeking nightclubs, shops, glamour and society, Orelle is probably the worst resort in the Alps. For anyone looking to combine big skiing and little village life, it could be rather special.

## Details

Tom Robbins was a guest of L'Association Les 3 Vallées (*les3vallees.com*), the Orelle Tourist Office (*orelle.net*) and the Hob Orelle (*evihob.com*). Reaching Orelle by train will become easier from April, when the Fréjus tunnel (currently shut since a 2023 landslide) reopens, meaning direct trains will restart from Paris to Milan, stopping at nearby Modane. A note on equipment rental: in the morning on peak holiday weekends, day-trippers who arrive by car can cause queues at Orelle's only ski hire shop, so it is better to collect equipment the evening before if possible.

## More 'backdoor' resorts

© Alamy

**Warth, Austria** — *Population: 170; pistes: 300km; lifts: 85*

Reputedly the snowiest spot in the Alps, little Warth (*pictured above*) was connected to the storied Arlberg ski area in 2013 by a new 2km-long gondola. Visitors can ski to glitzy Lech and on to boisterous St Anton, enjoying some of the Alps' best off-piste descents, then return to Warth's cluster of hotels. The Hotel Steffisalp has doubles from about €330, half-board; *steffisalp.at*

**Thyon, Switzerland** — *Population: 191; pistes: 410km; lifts: 71*

Is it possible to have a reasonably priced ski holiday in Switzerland's Four Vallées ski area? Probably not at its most famous resort, Verbier, a celebrity favourite where double rooms at the W Hotel start at around £1,100 per night. But at the far side of the area, at the low-key resort of Thyon on the northwestern flank of the Val d'Hérens, the new SwissPeaks Resort has modern apartments for a family of four from about £975 for a whole week. See *swisspeakresort.ch*

**Vaujany, France** — *Population: 354; pistes: 250km; lifts: 65*

Alpe d'Huez is renowned for its extensive, intermediate-friendly slopes. Purpose-built and set high above the tree line, it is not known for the attractiveness of its architecture or cosiness of its streets. Those in search of a more traditional village feel should head to Vaujany on the ski area's northern fringe. Tour operator Ski Peak (*skipeak.net*) has been arranging chalet holidays there for 35 years, or try Peak Retreats (*peakretreats.co.uk*) for a range of self-catering apartments.

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