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**Top choc**

Ski season is under way on slopes across Europe, and while snow quality and the variety of slopes are crucial for some, many eagerly anticipate snuggling by the fire in a cosy alpine lodge, savouring the quintessential winter indulgence: Hot chocolate.

Lindt UK decided to find out where seasoned skiers can find the ultimate hot chocolate, analysing data from almost 300 European ski resorts. The research focused on the average price of a hot chocolate, availability in restaurants, cafes and bars and, finally, online review ratings.

The best hot chocolate can be found in Villars-sur-Ollon, which gained a Lindt Ski & Sip score of 83.5 out of 100. Nestled in the Vaud Alps in Western Switzerland, this cosmopolitan resort has welcomed skiers for 150 years and offers an idyllic setting to enjoy a hot chocolate for an average price of €4.

Based on the data, the resorts deemed the best for hot-chocolate lovers were:

1. Villars-sur-Ollon, Switzerland (83.5/100)
2. Crans Montana, Switzerland (81.5/100)
3. Madonna di Campiglio, Italy (80/100)
4. Cortina D'Ampezzo, Italy (80/100)
5. Breuil-Cervinia, Italy (79.5/100)
6. Tignes, France (79.5/100)

The ski resort that scored the least was Mont des Brumes in Belgium. Located in the Ardennes region, the resort offers limited skiing options compared to those in the Alps, making it more popular among people living in the region rather than visiting tourists. This was reflected in its limited offering when it comes to hot chocolate, scoring only 32 in the overall ranking.

These were the bottom five resorts for hot-chocolate lovers:

1. Mont des Brumes, Belgium (32/100)
2. Risoul, France (37/100)
3. Val d'Arly, France (39/100)
4. Bad Gastein, Austria (39.5/100)
5. Lech, Austria (40/100)

Ski resorts in these countries are the most expensive when it comes to buying hot chocolate:

1. Austria: €7.95
2. France: €6.88
3. Switzerland: €6.28
4. Norway: €5.43
5. Sweden: €5.22

The beautiful village of Bonneval appears to have sprung straight from the pages of a fairy tale.



FRANCE

# Living the high life in the Alps' best-kept secret

Families spoilt for choice in ski resort of Val Cenis

WORDS  
THOMAS HAWKINS

The large grey-white shape lopes across the road in front of us in the dead of night.

It is pitch black and we are just leaving a snow-covered Val Cenis in France's pristine Haute-Maurienne Vanoise area in the Northern Alps.

"Is it a deer?" I ask Nadia Tourt, the Haute-Maurienne Vanoise press officer who is kindly giving us a lift to the airport for an early-morning flight. As we draw level with the shape, which has ghosted into the trees on the left side of the road, I notice another one to the right – and it is watching us. The bright lights of the car's headlights briefly flash across its face and for a moment we see a pair of orange eyes flame in the darkness. A wolf.

No, two wolves. The one that has just crossed the road and this other, silently waiting for us to pass before it does the same. Two wolves making their way through their territory in this gloriously wild and naturally bountiful part of the world. My heart is racing and I am left feeling exhilarated – not for the first time on this family holiday.

We are in Haute-Maurienne Vanoise, a high-altitude valley of which Val Cenis – where we are staying – is one of the villages. The area is one of three main valleys in the Savoie department of the French Alps, home to the sprawling Vanoise National Park that stretches across the border with Italy. In those vast unspoilt mountain reaches, ibex and chamois roam alongside marmots, eagle owls and, yes, even wolves. But before our



● Coffee on Val Cenis slopes.

encounter with the wild predators, we get face to face with their tamed cousins.

We are staying at Les Chalets de Flambeau, a four-star chalet complex that is fantastically situated within about 20 feet of the ski lifts.

After being kitted out at the Dalcin ski hire shop right beside our apartment, we ride the lifts up to Mont Cenis.

The snow is coming down in huge powdery flakes but for the moment we are not going to make much use of our newly acquired ski gear, which is organised for us by ski holiday specialists Peak Retreats, because we are joining a dog-sledding ride.

The dogs are whooping and barking, clearly excited to see our family of four arrive.

We wade to the sled through the waist-deep snow and in no time are hauled up the mountain at breakneck speed. Whizzing through the billowing drifts, we marvel at the power of the dogs, a cross between huskies and some sort of pointers. Huskies are great for long distances, our

musher explains, but these crossbreds excel when it comes to racing.

We round the shoulder of the mountain and are rewarded with breathtaking views of Mont-Cenis Lake and back down to Val Cenis.

It is a magical start to our trip and it only gets better as we clip into our skis and take the most gentle of runs, the aptly named Escargot – at 10km Europe's longest green route – back down the mountain. Escargot follows the road that in summer connects France and Italy and is ideal for our young kids to gain confidence in their skiing – and indeed for us parents not having to worry about one of the kids shooting off the side of the mountain.

But it isn't just downhill skiing that makes Haute-Maurienne Vanoise so appealing. There are miles and miles of cross-country tracks available to those most athletic of visitors, while ice climbing and the Via Ferrata (a vertigo-inducing rope walk over the mountain) are also among the many outdoor attractions. Nature lovers, meanwhile, have endless opportunity to explore the national park, while the alpine rollercoaster in Villardoin-Bourget to the south of Val Cenis is a perfect thrill ride for the children.

We, however, head further north. Local guide Karine Routin collects us from our apartment after sunset and takes us higher into the mountains, to the neighbouring villages of Bessans and Bonneval-sur-Arc.

The faintest of snowfalls

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● From top: A dog-sledding ride around the mountain; watched from afar, inset; the gentle slopes of the aptly named Escargot route, Europe's largest green run; the girls hide out in a snow cave.







● Val Cenis is much less densely populated than nearby mega resorts.

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begins as we arrive in Bonneval, filaments of ice catching the light in dazzling iridescence against a deep cobalt blue sky that is filled with twinkling stars.

My two girls spot some local boys jumping off a low roof. With the approval of Karine, we watch them join in, landing waist deep in the soft powder and instantly creating memories that will last long after the snow has melted.

The ancient village is locked in deep snow and while I have been told that Bonneval is France's prettiest village, I wasn't prepared to be so firmly captivated.

It is like something out of a fairy tale, dozens of traditional stone and wood buildings buried in snow with paths cut to allow people to walk around. One false step, however, and you are quickly hip-deep and scrambling to return to the compacted pathway.

Doorways, and in some cases windows, are dug out to allow homeowners out – and some natural light in. Visiting at night, the warm glow from open fires inside flickers and dances invitingly on the snowy paths. It is all we can do not to knock on one of the doors and invite ourselves in for a hot drink.

Mercifully, for the locals at least, we have reservations at La Lodze, a converted 17th-Century barn in Bessans. There we have the most wonderful traditional Alpine dinner while Karine regales us with stories of local culture, wildlife and even spooky tales about devils.

Back in Val Cenis, our two-bedroom apartment overlooks the bottom of the ski area and has a wide balcony that is perfect for a coffee when the sun peeks over the mountain in the late afternoon.

Being so close to the ski lifts means it is also just feet from the ski school meeting point – anyone with young children will appreciate the joy of this proximity. It is also a few steps away from the small supermarket, boulangerie, ski shop and restaurant.

However, it is much more than just a good location. Les Chalets de Flambeau has its own swimming pool and spa – ideal for easing aching muscles after a day on the slopes.

And one of the great joys, for

me anyway, is having the option to order fresh croissants and baguettes to be delivered straight to our apartment every morning.

The ski area in Val Cenis is excellent, especially for us here in the UK who don't get enough time to practise our ski skills. There are loads of gentle green slopes, like the aforementioned Escargot, as well as excellent blues and red runs plus a few blacks for those who have the skills.

Val Cenis really stands out, however, because it is significantly quieter than its bigger, noisier neighbours. While the slopes of the nearby mega resorts like Val Thorens, Val d'Isere and Tignes are rammed with people, Val Cenis is much less densely populated.

In fact, it is mostly local French tourists visiting the resort, mainly because prices here are noticeably lower than in the bigger resorts.

Of the very few UK tourists we meet, one couple jokingly plead with us not to tell anyone how good the Haute-Maurienne Vanoise is.

"We've been coming here for years... and we'd quite like to keep it to ourselves, thank you very much," they laugh.

In an area so rich in natural wonders and fabulous family skiing, I can't say I blame them.

## Factfile

A preserved destination, at the heart of the Vanoise National Park, the Haute-Maurienne Vanoise counts six resorts: Valfréjus, La Norma, Aussois, Val Cenis, Bessans and Bonneval-sur-Arc. [www.haute-maurienne-vanoise.com/en/](http://www.haute-maurienne-vanoise.com/en/)

Seven nights self-catering in a two-bedroom apartment at the four-star Les Chalets de Flambeau starts from £280pp based on five sharing. Price includes return standard Eurotunnel crossing, with a free FlexiPlus upgrade (except some school holiday weeks), with Peak Retreats. [www.peakretreats.co.uk/winter/ski-resorts/maurienne-valley/val-cenis/les-chalets-de-flambeau/](http://www.peakretreats.co.uk/winter/ski-resorts/maurienne-valley/val-cenis/les-chalets-de-flambeau/), 023 9283 9310.

Peak Retreats can organise ski hire, lift passes, ski school and transfers to make your trip hassle free, visit [www.peakretreats.co.uk](http://www.peakretreats.co.uk)



● Left to right: Dave and Caroline with Francis; White's Tavern, Carrickfergus from the sky; Belfast City Hall.

# Belfast is out of the shadows and into the light

WORDS  
DAVE LORD

In the shadow of the wall that divides the city, bullet holes on Boundary Street tell one story. But the beaming, brave people of bustling Belfast tell quite another. The city may have had its troubles in the past (both with and without a capital "t") but the sense of progress is overwhelming.

Everywhere one looks the scars of previous tragedy are being replaced by the promise of future triumph. It makes for a remarkable visitor experience.

As a first-time visitor to Belfast I was unsure what to expect. My wife had been before many years ago but was immediately struck by the signs of expansion and progress as we left the city airport for the short taxi ride into the town centre on a dreich Friday night (the proximity of airport to city is among the myriad factors that make this such a terrific destination for a short break).

Our weekend itinerary was a packed one so it was great to discover that our base was slap bang in the middle of Belfast. The Ten Square Hotel is on beautiful Donegal Square and our generously proportioned room offered a terrific view of the majestic City Hall.

We were under strict instructions from the natives to try out The Crown Liquor Saloon so headed there for a quiet pint prior to dinner to whet our appetites. Dating back to the early 19th Century, the pub is fitted out accordingly and it is clear to see why it enjoys such worldwide fame (even if we did shun Guinness in favour of lager – oh, the shame...).

A further glimpse into Belfast's past came courtesy of dinner at White's Tavern. Established in 1630 it offers

plenty of atmosphere, with live music to supplement the mouthwatering pub grub.

Saturday brought a visit to the Titanic Museum. The ship was among several luxury ocean liners built by Harland & Wolff, whose majestic crane still dominates the city's skyline.

But this impressive attraction is anything but an austere stroll down memory lane. It is a vibrant, lively and interactive deep dive into the history of local industry, culminating in the infamous tragedy. The headsets on offer are well worth picking up, as the narrative provided is as succinct as it is informative.

A recent £3.4 million expansion has seen the addition of a section which aims to leave the visitor with a feeling of optimism, following the inevitable trauma of witnessing tributes to those lost. Focusing on lessons learned from the tragedy, it represents yet another example of just how this remarkable city, while shaped by the troubles of its past, is determined to move forward with an air of gratitude and even joy.

While in the area, one would do

well to visit the Titanic distillery. Situated in the pumphouse next to the city's huge dry dock, it once again shows how the past is being harnessed to embrace the future.

The building has been thoughtfully refitted, the stills sitting among the ageing industrial equipment of the pumphouse.

And again one cannot help but feel the sense of renewal and optimism. Northern Ireland's whiskey trade was plunged into a deep depression when prohibition effectively killed off its largest market, but here we see evidence of a bold new chapter – leaning on a difficult past to forge a brighter future.

Yet perhaps the most remarkable and inspiring part of our stay was still to come.

On the Sunday we took a tour with "the Belfast Lad" – a cab drive which sets out to explore the city's conflicting stories. Francis Higgins, shot at as a child but now working with people on both sides of the religious divide, was a phenomenal host. Knowledgeable, brutally frank – not to mention a fantastic raconteur

– he made us laugh and cry during an unforgettable tour of the city's most infamous trouble spots. The story behind every mural was explained with unflinching honesty.

But yet again this was no pity party. Francis spoke with incredible pride about the city – his city – and the hopes he has for its future. It was impossible not to be enthused.

He even had time to drive us to Carrickfergus, where expert George McGrand held us spellbound with tales of the Ulster Scots – not least the controversial US president Andrew Jackson.

It is tempting to say no trip to Belfast is complete without a visit to the Titanic Museum. I probably thought that myself and, don't get me wrong, it is well worth a visit.

But there is so much more to this fantastic city.

Given its history, one might expect the people of Belfast to be of the hardened variety.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth. In fact quite the opposite. Perhaps shaped by the kind of experiences that would shake lesser



● No trip to Belfast is complete without a visit to the Titanic Museum.

P.S.

White's Tavern proudly lays claim to being the oldest tavern in Belfast, having been established in 1630. It is located in Winecellar Entry, an old trading alley in the heart of the city.

## My Scotland

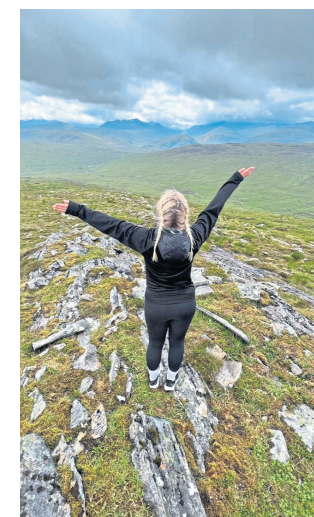
Cosy corners and iconic movie locations with Essi Eskelinen.



### Ben A'an

The perfect wee hike close enough to Glasgow offering some of the most stunning views of Loch Lomond from the top. Without question, it's one of my absolute favourite hikes in Scotland.

### Corroul



You might recognise this spot from the iconic *Trainspotting* movie. Corroul is perfectly in the middle of nowhere. Stepping off the train into absolute silence, with only a handful of people around, makes it the perfect place to unwind and reconnect with nature.



### Isle of Skye

I absolutely adore the Isle of Skye, but if I were to highlight just one gem there, it would be The Skye Inn, a charming B&B tucked away in a quiet corner of Portree. It is the perfect base for exploring as well as the loveliest place to relax, whatever you might be looking for.

For more travel tips, follow Essi @essieexplores on Instagram.