



Nursery slopes: English-speaking instructors are on hand to entertain the children

ski appallingly: bottom out, terror in my heart. Indeed, I dislike heights, hate the cold and consider sliding down a mountain with plastic strapped to my feet the quickest route to oblivion. By way of contrast, my husband loves speeding off piste, usually with our 11- and 13-year-old daughters overtaking him faster than an avalanche. But I'm happy, in the name of family togetherness, to hit the slopes every year. And so we found ourselves in Sainte Foy in the French Alps, our own little ski-resort secret.

Created in 1990 in traditional Savoyard village style, it's a tiny seven-lift resort which has long been the preserve of savvy off-piste guides from nearby Val d'Isere and Les Arcs. Indeed it was virtually unknown until a newspaper listed it as the planet's top skiing spot.

We travelled with Venture Ski, a UK company offering bespoke luxury at credit crunch prices. Our excitement reached Mont Blanc heights as we arrived in the Isère valley to the best snow in 10 years, stupendous scenery and quaint chalets – Sainte Foy is arguably the Savoie's most picturesque, peaceful village.

Scrutinising a *Plan des Pistes* (the closest I'll ever get to a black run), I discovered plenty of mountain for our money: three blacks, eight reds, four blues and one green.

We got kitted up at ZigZags ski shop, where Alyette, the helpful owner, instantly produced boots and skis for us. She was just as accommodating when I returned for the sixth time to change my uncomfortable boots. Maybe, aged 49, my feet are growing.

The next day, our children sped off to the nearby chairlift faster than melting snow (of which there was none). Nannies will drop off children with their English-speaking instructors at the excellent Ecole du Ski Français. Otherwise the smallest tots play cheerfully in the chalet's well-equipped creche, entertained by its nannies who also take them swimming, tobogganing, mountain walking, as well as overseeing high tea. It's childcare that's brilliant enough to make me want to get pregnant again.

Instead, showing immense bravery, I hit the lower slopes while my children became speed-freaks at altitude. There are no lift queues in Sainte Foy, just beautiful, empty pistes, talcum-powder snow and great instructors. I surprised myself by loving it. Afterwards, amazingly, we

LUXURY ON THE SLOPES

Despite a life-long aversion to skiing, **Caroline Phillips** is won over by the child-friendly, relaxed resort of Sainte Foy

discovered that Venture Ski had created dining tables and seating from snow. Here we had a charming picnic of *vin chaude*, *saucisson* and local cheeses, while watching people slalom down the pistes.

Back at our homely chalet (17 guests, no door locks, open fires and antique armoires) we relaxed in the swimming pool and the Jacuzzi, which overlooked snow-capped mountains. Then I thumbed through the guest book, which extols its faultless service and great food. "The best of 19 skiing holidays we've had," glowed one entry.

Every morning there was a huge English breakfast, then after the slopes we'd have home-made tea and cakes, followed by a three course-dinner that started with canapés and ended with Trivial Pursuit.

When we weren't skiing or eating, there was sledding, snowshoeing, snowboarding and helicopter trips on offer. We snow-biked down the nursery slope, then walked back to the chalet off piste, sinking to our knees in snow then rolling down the silent mountain underneath clear skies with bright stars, the valley lights twinkling below. On another day we snowshoed with Bruno, a delightful guide who was passionate about animals and nature. We ploughed through powdery, untouched snow, alongside tinkling streams and through forest that offered no proof of any other life apart from the occasional roe deer or white hare's tracks.

By the week's end, I'd fallen in love with the freedom of the mountains. I'll never be an enthusiastic skier... but we're going back again in February.

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

Venture Ski (0870 242 4881; ventureski.co.uk) offers luxury catered chalets from £660 per person per week (25 per cent discount for under-13s, under-tuos free) with food, wine, spa and ski hosting included. Airport transfers £75 per person, ski passes £164 per adult for six days including insurance. Crèche £275 per child/week. **Ecole du Ski Français** (00 33 4 79 06 96 76; esf-sainte-foy.com). From €35 (£29) for a one-hour private lesson. **Snowshoeing** costs €19 (£16) for half a day. Contact Bruno 00 34 6 72 91 4498; lesrandos2bruno@wanadoo.fr