



# PISTE & GOOD WILL

*Caroline Phillips dreaded her annual family skiing holiday until she turned up at Sainte Foy*







**I** ski with my mouth open like a crevice, bottom out and legs akimbo. I suffer from acrophobia, loathe the cold and find the idea of sliding down a mountain with bits of plastic strapped to my feet nothing more than a quick route to A&E.

Contrastingly, my husband likes hurtling down black runs faster than an avalanche, with a precipice-sized smile on his face and our two daughters overtaking him. Indeed, one child deems parallel turns a waste of time. Why ski from side to side when you can go straight down? she reasons. But as long as I can wear silk long johns, a fur-trimmed Spyder jacket costing more than the holiday and count the seconds until après-ski, I'm happy, in the name of family unity, to hit the slopes every year and be the butt of their tiresome jokes.

We've had six ski holidays. There must, I hear you say, be some madness here. But even more crazy, surely, is to reveal the world's best-kept ski resort secret. I'm talking about Sainte Foy Tarentaise (pronounced Sante Fwuh, in the manner of an aristocrat sneezing) in the Haute Savoie region of the French Alps. Created in 1990 in the style of a traditional Savoyard village, it's a tiny seven-lift resort which has long been filled only with canny off-piste guides from nearby Val d'Isère. Indeed Sainte Foy, one of the world's youngest ski resorts, was virtually unknown until the *Sunday Times* listed it as numero uno in the planet's top ten skiing spots. Now it has been officially born as a really sweet and quietly luxurious retreat for families.

We go with Venture Ski, an English company offering bespoke luxury (including flexibility on arrival and departure dates) at credit crunch prices, including ski-hosting and as much food and wine as you can manage. Our kids' excitement levels reach Mont Blanc heights when we're met at Grenoble airport by Venture Ski's co-owner Mark Livesey and they realise that after only a two-hour drive, we'll be in winter wonderland.

We arrive in the Isère valley with its spectacular scenery and village full of Universal Studio-style chalets with pitched slate roofs, wooden balconies and wooden columns. Even the shop signs are of wood. There's little more than a café, two restaurants and a small supermarket selling Reblochon and Tomme de Savoie cheeses alongside sheepskin slippers. It's one of the most beautiful, quietest Alpine villages in the Savoie.

Scrutinising a 'plan des pistes' (which is the closest someone as apprehensive as myself ever gets to a black run), I discover plenty of mountain for our money: base camp at 1,550 metres, a chair lift two minutes from the Venture Ski chalet door and black slopes at 2,620 metres – plus three blacks, eight reds, four blues and one green... colours which

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all sound like a good card game, and my life would be simpler if that's what they were. However, those in the know inform me that this is skiing that at every level is 'superbe', as they say locally. So I am going to be brave.

We go to ZigZags ski shop, where the friendly French owner, Alyette, kindly shares her oysters with us. Slurping molluscs, the staff pull out boots and skis for us – the sizes and makes of which Mark (along with pre-organising our lift passes and lessons) has already specified in advance.

The next day, the children hop onto the Magic Carpet (which takes beginners to the top of the nursery slope) then speed off to the nearby chairlift. Venture Ski nannies will drop them off with their English-speaking instructors at the excellent École du Ski Français. Otherwise, the smallest tots play cheerfully in the chalet's well-equipped crèche, entertained by cheery

English and Antipodean nannies who take them swimming, tobogganing, mountain walking, as well as overseeing High Tea.

Instead, showing immense bravery and wearing fashion-forward sports garb, I hit the lower slopes (the powder blue ones) while my children become speed freaks at high altitude.

Whether it's the powdery snow, the sunny day, the stunning surroundings or the excellent teaching, I surprise myself by thoroughly enjoying the morning. Afterwards we discover that, amazingly, Venture Ski has created dining tables and seating from snow. Here we have a charming ▶

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picnic of vin chaude, saucisson and local cheeses, while watching people slaloming down the slopes.

Back at Les Sapins – our comfortable chalet for 18 guests and neither phones in the rooms nor locks on the doors, wood-clad walls, rustic marble floors, leather sofas, open fires and antique armoires – we relax in our own mosaic and marble bath, the chalet's swimming pool and communal Jacuzzi overlooking snow-capped mountains. 'Isn't this wonderful?' says a fortysomething guest from Venture Ski's neighbouring chalet, in a fluffy white towel and moon boots. Then, one-time *Eastenders* actress-turned-masseuse, Anna Tomlinson, gives us Swedish massages with rose-scented wax. I'm beginning to warm to this skiing lark.

At dinner afterwards at a communal table, one of my daughters sits next to a squillionaire from Manchester and the other chats to someone from Chelsea Football Club. The food is 'absolument superbe' – every day there's a hearty English breakfast followed by home-made tea and cakes after the slopes and a three-course dinner (including dishes like foie gras and truffle pâté and oxtail ragout) that starts with canapés and ends with Scrabble, drunkenness and giggling. The food is prepared by chefs like Aaron Bailey, from Cornwall's well-known and much-televised Porthminster Café, and other Venture Ski cooks who have been trained at the world's first Mountain Chef Ski School in Milton Keynes. (Did you know that water boils at a lower temperature at altitude? And what do you do when you can only get UHT cream? That's the sort of thing you learn at Mountain Chefs' School.)

Mark, a former senior Formula One team member, tells us about his latest daredevil heliskiing exploits in Sainte Foy. And his business partner, Peter Duke, an erstwhile army officer and combat helicopter pilot, reveals his own Boy's Own credentials. Over coffee, I read the Venture Ski Guest Book: it bears testimony to a faultless, cheerful, 'anything's possible' service and great nosh. 'The best of 19 skiing holidays we've had,' glows one entry. Afterwards we sleep as heavily as horizontal snowmen.



We ski next and every morning and also spend a lot of time up the mountain in Les Brevettes, a restaurant in a 16th-century building where punters hang their gloves and jackets to dry above the wood-fuelled cooker and where the owner sleeps behind a curtain on a platform above the kitchen. It's here that all the pistes culminate and where the chef prepares rabbit stew, gratin dauphinoise and tarte tartin.

One evening we go to La Maison à Colonnes for yummy raclette and fondue in a restaurant with antique skis and cowbells adorning its wood and stone walls and a piping hot wood stove in the corner. After dinner, jolly adults seated on plastic trays toboggan down the slopes.

When we aren't skiing or eating, we drop the children off with the chalet's English-trained nannies and go shopping in nearby Val d'Isère. Or there's snowbiking, sledding with or without huskies, snowshoeing, snowboarding, helicopter trips – or downhill chairlifting. Proponents of chairlifting (an obscure winter sport with a growing following of people like me) liken it to skiing in the sky: as you approach the top of the chair lift, you simply remain seated and head back down the mountain.



One day we snow-bike down the nursery slope, then walk 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. Another day we snowshoe with Bruno, a delightful guide who looks like a shaggy Pyrenean mountain dog and is passionate about animals and nature. We walk with racquettes on our feet, slipping vertically, jumping, sliding on our bottoms through white, untouched snow, walking alongside tinkling streams, past historical hamlets and through forest with no proof of other life apart from the occasional roe deer or white hare's tracks.

I remember what I most dislike about ski holidays when we go one day to Les Arcs – with its vast slopes, snow cannons, faceless architecture, huge queues for ski-lifts and even longer lines for self-service hotdogs and chips... As for Sainte Foy, there are no lift queues and beautiful, empty pistes. Contrary to expectation, I loved the freedom of its mountains, felt exhilarated by its beauty, snow, fresh air, delicious food and, er, skiing. I'm convinced it's not even as cold as it used to be on the slopes. So forget the fact that I ski like a concussed Bridget Jones on methadone. We're going back again this year... ■



## GETTING THERE

### ACCOMMODATION

Venture Ski offers luxury catered chalets from £660 per person 'all inclusive', with a spa, airport transfers and crèche as an additional bonus for families. 0870 242 4881; [ventureski.co.uk](http://ventureski.co.uk)

### TRANSPORT

Take the Snow Train from Waterloo to Bourg St Maurice (20 minutes away from the resort) or fly to Lyon, Grenoble or Geneva with British Airways ([ba.com](http://ba.com)) EasyJet ([easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)) or Aer Lingus ([aerlingus.com](http://aerlingus.com)). It is then a two-hour transfer to the resort. If you want a helicopter pickup, check out [helimountains.com](http://helimountains.com).

### GROUP AND PRIVATE SKI LESSONS

The Ecole du Ski Français (ESF) offers one-hour private lessons from €42 to €120 for six two-hour lessons. +33 (0) 4 79 06 96 76; [esf-saintefoy.com](http://esf-saintefoy.com)

Snocool offers private instruction and off-piste guiding from former French providers for £375 per day. +33 (0) 6 15 34 54; [snocool.com](http://snocool.com)

### SNOWSHOEING

A half day costs €19. Call Bruno on +33 (0) 6 72 91 4498 or email [lesrandos2bruno@wanadoo.fr](mailto:lesrandos2bruno@wanadoo.fr)

### TIFFANY CHARM

Not very practical, but kind of cute. Tiffany ski charm, £1,150. 00800 2000 1122; [uk.tiffany.com](http://uk.tiffany.com)

### COLUMBIA HAYWORTH JACKET

This forties-inspired jacket with Omni-Tech leaves you warm and dry all day. £200. [columbia.com](http://columbia.com)

### MOVER GORE-TEX SHELL PANTS

Carla Bruni-Sarkozy loves Mover's sexy skiwear. Shell pants, £434. [mover.se](http://mover.se)

### ERIC BOMBARD BALACLAVA

Cover up in cashmere, £53. [eric-bombard.com](http://eric-bombard.com)

## Ski chic

### NORTH FACE NUPTSE FUR BOOTS

Where else can you get away with wearing white furry boots? £79.99 from Blacks. [blacks.co.uk](http://blacks.co.uk)

### THE BENNEY GEOSPORTSTER CHRONOGRAPH WATCH

Shock absorbant and stylish? What more could you want, £475. [benneywatches.com](http://benneywatches.com)

### GIVENCHY SUNGLASSES

Super protective, £179 from D&A. [danda.co.uk](http://danda.co.uk)