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Piste de resistance

Aine Fox embarks on her very first ski holiday in the French Alps

Taking to the slopes as a rookie is more nerve wrecking than I imagined — a fact which didn't go unnoticed by my ski coach. "You're a bit like Bambi coming down there," says my instructor, a lovely and incredibly patient woman. And she is right.

But after a little more than two hours of lessons, I am skiing — albeit on the beginner's slope — all on my own. Having Patsy, an instructor with 40 years' experience, shouting words of encouragement and directions is a huge help.

My holiday is to be a "soft-ski" break — combining ski with other activities, including a spa visit and lots of excellent bars and restaurants. Demand for this kind of holiday has grown, Joanna Laforge, a travel and ski enthusiast and commercial director of holiday firm Ski France, tells me. Families and friendship groups will usually be made up of people who like to ski and others who want to enjoy some downtime with alternative activities.

SELECTING THE PERFECT SKI SLOPE
Meribel, in the Three Valleys, is a two-hour drive from Geneva airport and is suitable for all abilities, with nursery slopes, red and even black runs.

The road narrows as we spiral upwards and the scenery becomes more impressive. Looking out the minibus window, I am greeted by a picture-postcard view of snow-capped trees, homely chalets and fairy lights.

The three-star Hotel Le Mottaret is exactly

as I pictured a ski hotel to be, and I enjoy living out my fantasy of sipping a hot chocolate by the fire and people-watching as skiers come in from their day's adventure.

The hotel has rooms for couples, families and groups of friends, a cosy lounge and bar area, and — perhaps my favourite — a Jacuzzi out the front, where guests can enjoy a sparkling beverage amid the bubbles while surrounded by snow.

IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT SKIS

Strapping on a pair of snow shoes can be a gentle way to take in the snowy sights, walking through the freshly fallen powder. A milder than average winter sees us struggling to cross a slushy stream towards the lake in Tueda Nature Reserve.

I return with frozen shoelaces after having to step into the water, but the Narnia-like scenes make the experience entirely worthwhile.

The area also offers hiking trails and even paragliding. For the fashionistas, there is plenty of designer gear to look out for, even if just window shopping in nearby Courchevel, and Meribel-Mottaret has a cinema, bars and restaurants for some downtime.

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH THE SLOPES

Heading out for my first ski lesson is exciting, but as anyone who has ever donned a pair of ski boots will know, walking becomes a bit of a challenge. Feeling like RoboCop, I side-step my way, very slowly, down to the bottom of the beginner's slope, raring to go.

By the end of two morning lessons I have done well, but am about average, the Scottish instructor concludes.

The ideal age to start skiing is at around three years old, I am told, so I've missed the boat by a good 27 years. But, Patsy adds, it's never too late to learn. One tip for a beginner? "Try to be relaxed and not tense up," she says.

FINDING WAYS TO RELAX

There are plenty of great ways to relax after a day on the slopes — including the apres-ski at restaurant and bar La Folie Douce. As the snowflakes begin to fall high up the mountain, people dance on the tables, and the resort's reputation for being 'Ibiza in the Snow' begins to make perfect sense.

It is a whole new holiday experience for me, and one I want to repeat — hopefully more Arctic Fox, less Bambi next time.

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

- Return flights from London Gatwick to Geneva cost from £50pp with easyJet (easyjet.com).
- A two-night stay in a superior room in the Hotel Le Mottaret (hotellemottaret.com) costs from £124 per person per day on a half-board basis. Book through Ski France (skifrance.co.uk).
- Lessons with Patsy Duncan are priced at 75 euro per hour. For more information visit maisonsport.com



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