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travel & days out

“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.

It’s my first foray into a world people seem to either love or hate.

I have heard people gushing that there’s nothing like it, others say it is overrated and too much like hard work - with one friend recalling breaking down in tears as she fell in the middle of a blizzard after becoming separated from her group.

Needless to say, I am a mix of excitement and nerves as I set off for the Three Valleys, the largest ski area in the world.

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



Skiing in Meribel



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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 mini-bus 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 shoe-laces 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.



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Getting to grips with the slopes

Heading out for my first ski lessons 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.

Just as I am learning how to click my boots into place on the skis, a child aged around five or six whizzes past me with the confidence of a pro. Surely this can't be so hard?

How quickly one takes to skiing is all to do with fear levels and natural co-ordination, Patsy tells me.

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.



cluding 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.

For those after a less nightclub-themed vibe, the newly opened Aquamotion in nearby Courchevel ticks every box. The enormous water venue features a range of pools, slides, saunas, a spa, a surf machine and a large outdoor Jacuzzi with the Alps as your backdrop.

While I chill in the outdoor pool, enjoying the contrast between the hot water and cool air, I reflect on my newfound skills on the slopes. It is a whole new holiday experience for me, and one I want to repeat - hopefully more Arctic Fox, less Bambi next time.

How to get there

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 Motaret (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 maison-sport.com

Finding ways to relax

There are plenty of great ways to relax after a day on the slopes - in-



Meribel slope