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SNOW BUSINESS

Hitting the slopes doesn't have to cost the earth at these skiing hotspots

SOLDEU

ANDORRA

WHY GO? Soldeu and its neighbour El Tarter in the tiny principality of Andorra make up one of the best beginners' ski resorts in Europe. Part of the wider Grandvalira region and with access to over 200km of piste, it's a wise choice if you're embarking on your first ski holiday - and far less spendy than many other resorts.

Soldeu ski school has earned a great reputation thanks to the super friendly instructors who put nervous novices at ease. With a large nursery area on the Pla dels Espiolets, progress can be quick and within a week most first-timers are confident enough to tackle some of the blue runs from higher up the mountain.

One of the loveliest is the Gall De Bosc. Soldeu's longest run, its five-mile route is achievable even for newbies and gives you the chance to enjoy a full descent from summit to base. Taking in lots of gentle straights, there are also a couple of sharp bends that will test your new ski legs, but you're rewarded with a gorgeous glide through a sheltered forest trail near the bottom.

You'll end up at the base station of El Tarter, where you can refuel at L'Arbarset before getting the shuttle bus back up to Soldeu.

More advanced skiers can take advantage of the Grandvalira ski pass and traverse the whole area. Take it off piste in

Grau Roig, or speed down to Soldeu village on the Llebre or Avet runs.

Families are well catered for too, with a nursery for tots and a Snow Garden where little ones can play games and have lessons. Children aged six to 11 can join the kids' ski school, which runs alongside the main one.

It's well worth downloading the free Crystal Ski Explorer app to help you find your way around the slopes. Its features include a route planner and up-to-the-minute slope information so you can plan your day before you even get out of bed!

APRÈS-SKI Soldeu is fairly dinky in ski resort terms, but there's still enough to keep you entertained along its main street and among the narrow uphill streets.

Fat Alberts is a lively spot in a 300-year-old barn, which gets packed to the rafters. Aspen and The Villager are good all-rounder pubs or head to the more chilled Bar Code, which puts on acoustic gigs most nights.

For traditional mountain dishes with an awe-inspiring view, check out Sol I Neu snack bar next to the main gondola in the

centre of the village. Its spacious terrace is nestled at the foot of the slopes, so you can watch brave souls hurtle down to the bottom while you rest your legs.

WHERE TO STAY Soldeu offers an abundance of four-star hotels to choose from and Hotel Piolets Park & Spa is a great option a short walk or free shuttle bus from the main gondola.

Many of the elegant rooms have lovely views of the mountainside - you can't beat a hot chocolate on the balcony after a day on the slopes. The plush Mountain Spa boasts an indoor pool, sauna, steam room and - if you can brave the dash from the door - an outdoor hot tub.

The self-service meals, cooked by chefs in front of guests, are a cut above the usual buffet fare, with a huge selection and daily changing menus.

Crystal Ski Holidays (crystalski.co.uk) offers a week's half board at the Hotel Piolets

Park & Spa from £803pp, including flights from Gatwick to Toulouse and transfers, departing on 18 March 2018. Departures from all other major



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UK airports are available at a supplement starting from £25.

VAL-D'ISÈRE

FRANCE

WHY GO? There's a reason the Savoie town of Val-d'Isère is the wintersport destination for the majority of Brits - including Jamie Oliver. The extensive ski area, guaranteed snow and picturesque village all add up to one of the most perfect resorts in Europe, if not the world.

The ski area, Espace Killy, is shared with neighbouring Tignes and spread across an impressive 300km. Offering snow-sure slopes during the long season (end of November to the first week of May), everyone from the total novice to the most advanced skier will find a challenge to suit their ability.

From the base of the slopes, hop on the Solaise gondola - complete with heated seats and Wi-Fi - which will whisk you to the spectacular, €16 million redeveloped area of Solaise.

Stepping off the gondola, you will find the American-style day lodge and picnic area, complete with microwaves and vending machines - great for keeping daytime spending to a minimum.

At the far end of the resort to the west lies Le Fornet, accessible from the pistes of Solaise or by the free ski bus from Val-d'Isère. This large area is an intermediate skier or snowboarder's heaven. Beneath the 3,488m summit of the Pointe du Montet, you can also make your way to Pissailas glacier, which is ideal for spring and summer skiers who just don't want the season to end.

Back in the valley, take the Olympique gondola to Bellevarde on the other side of the resort

and admire the glorious scenery, then set off on one of the slopes that head back towards Tignes in one direction, or Val in the other. Or attempt La Face, a steep black run, at your own risk.

Finally, there's La Daille on the eastern approach of the valley. Only a short ski bus away, you can

head up on a gondola to Tignes or jump on the world's fastest ski lift, the Funival underground funicular, which will take you through the mountain to the top of Bellevarde.

A six-day lift pass starts at €278 for an adult and €225 for a child. Visit valdisere.com.

APRÈS-SKI Fun-seekers will be spoilt for choice when it comes to après-ski, from Michelin-starred dining at Atelier d'Edmond to the infamous Dick's Tea bar.

If your idea of fun is partying in the mountains and dancing on tables, then a trip to legendary La Folie Douce is a must. It usually starts rocking around 3-5pm and is found near the Daille gondola, a sensible option for getting down from the pistes after a few drinks.

The Cocorico may be lower down at the base of the slopes but it certainly doesn't lack atmosphere. Live music, DJs and entertainment

are a daily treat. La Baraque, La Grande Ourse and the Table des Neiges are also a good shout for eating out.

WHERE TO STAY Situated in the lively centre of the town, the Alpina Lodge is an excellent choice for those looking for a self-catering option. These traditional chalets are only a short walk from the slopes and

are great if you're on a budget.

A week's stay, during the 2017/18 season booked through [Ski France](http://skifrance.co.uk) (skifrance.co.uk), costs from £293.50pp for two people sharing a studio apartment. ■

**ANNA BAILEY &
STEVE DOBSON**



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Rooms at Hotel Piolets
are cosy and sleek



Brave an
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