

SKIING GREEN IN THE ALPS

Zoë Smith takes the train to the slopes and discovers the alpine ski resorts of Les Arcs and Peisey-Vallandry, where world-class skiing and off-piste adventures go hand in hand with sustainable tourism

From the 3,226m mountain-top of the Aiguille Rouge, the highest point of the Les Arcs – Peisey-Vallandry resort area, the horizon stretches out before us in an ocean of alabaster peaks. Jagged silvery cliffs etch out the skyline against an azure blue sky, beneath which pearly white ski slopes tumble down into the valleys, crisscrossed with cable cars, ski lifts, and throngs of skiers, the buzz of activity somehow harmonious with the stillness of the snowscape.

“Can you ski down *that*?” one of our group asks Céline, our tour rep, pointing at the near-vertical descent onto the resort’s highest black run.

“*Bien sûr!*” she replies. As if on cue, a band of intrepid skiers begin to plunge themselves one by one off the icy precipice, zig-zagging down to join the legendary 7km piste that winds down to Villaroger at 1,200m. “What about down there?” I gesture to the vast expanse of untouched glacier stretching between the ski runs. “*Bien sûr!*”

We’ve only been in the Alps a few days, but this has fast become the catchphrase of the trip. The mountains, we’ve learnt, are the place where anything is possible. Fancy venturing off-piste for a ski touring excursion (a mix of backcountry hiking and skiing) or hooking up your skis to a galloping horse (*ski joëring* is the new ‘must-try’ activity)? No problem! What about skimming the mountaintops on a 130kph zipline or spending a night cosied up in an igloo? Go right ahead! Or – the ultimate challenge for our group of four non-skiers – learning to ski despite having never set foot on a ski slope? *Bien sûr!*

ECO-CONSCIOUS SKIING

As we gaze out from the panoramic viewpoint of La Passerelle, the mighty peak of Mont Blanc is an omnipresent reminder that mountain adventures don’t come without their dangers: the highest mountain in Western Europe claims multiple lives each year, and sparks dozens of rescue operations. But it turns out that falls and avalanches are far from the biggest menace in this snow-covered wonderland. Mont Blanc has her own nemesis to contend with: climate change.

The iconic summit has shrunk more than 2m in height over the past 15 years, and the surrounding landscapes are following suit, with global warming leading to melting glaciers, thawing permafrost, and reduced snowfall. For ski resorts like Les Arcs and Peisey-Vallandry, there’s a palpable sense of urgency when it comes to protecting the environment, spurred on by France’s nationwide push for sustainable tourism and further heightened by this season’s soaring energy prices. But can a mountain resort that draws in millions of annual thrill-seekers really be transformed into a paradise for sustainable skiing? *Mais bien sûr!* In 2020, Les Arcs became the first Savoie resort to receive the prestigious Flocon Vert (Green Snowflake) certification, awarded to ski resorts with the highest standards of sustainability. »

“THE ENTIRE PARADISKI AREA IS NOW POWERED BY 100% GREEN ELECTRICITY. BY 2040, IT AIMS TO BE FULLY CARBON NEUTRAL”

The entire Paradiski area, which includes the ski stations of Les Arcs, Peisey-Vallandry, and La Plagne, is now powered by 100% green electricity, with the goal of self-producing 25% of the resort's electricity by 2030. By 2040, it aims to be fully carbon neutral. Pioneering technologies and renewable energy systems lead the way: solar panels are installed on rooftops and gondolas, heat produced by motors and pipes is recycled, bathrooms run from harvested rainwater, and ecological street lighting and zero plastics policies are in place throughout. GPS weather-monitoring ensures artificial snow-making is employed as minimally and efficiently as possible (at least 70% of the area's snow is still natural). Most importantly, both car-free resorts can now be reached by train – there's even a direct route from London.

With free shuttle buses between resorts and 425km of interconnected piste to explore, where to stay is a



5 OFF-PISTE ADVENTURES

Whether you're bringing non-skiers along or just want a break from the slopes, there are winter activities suitable for the whole family.

1. SNOWSHOEING

Slide your boots into a pair of snowshoes and bring the whole family along for a leisurely *balade en raquettes* through snow-covered forests. ESF (www.esf-peiseyvallandry.com) at Peisey-Vallandry and Arc Adventures (www.arc-adventures.com) at Les Arcs 1800 offer guided excursions.

2. ZIPLINING

Dare to ride the new Les Arcs Zipline, starting from 2,630m and soar over the ski slopes at speeds of up to 130kph. For the biggest adrenaline rush, swap the sitting harness for a headfirst Superman-style flight. en.lesarcs.com/to-do-in-les-arcs/activities-all-year-round/all-the-activities/zip-line-les-arcs.html

3. SLEDGING

Grab a toboggan and rediscover the fun of sledging down the 900m Luge 1800 sledge run, culminating in an atmospheric light-and-sound tunnel; or tackle the 3km Luge 2000 sledge run. en.lesarcs.com/winter-sport-activities/sledging.html

4. REINDEER SLEIGH & DOG SLEDGE RIDES

Choose a Nordic sledge ride pulled by a team of 10 dogs or settle into a horse-drawn or reindeer-pulled sleigh for a romantic ride through the snow. Book through the Tourist Office at Peisey-Vallandry.

5. E-SCOOTING

Hop aboard a Tirotrix all-terrain electric scooter and scoot through the snow on a guided tour: Evolution 2 (evolution2.com/en) offers tours at both resorts.

matter of preference rather than practicality. In Peisey-Vallandry, where we start our trip, snow-hatted wooden chalets dot the hillsides, providing a cosy, more traditional ambience, and it's easy to venture off-piste in the surrounding Vanoise National Park.

Alternatively, if you prefer a resort humming with activity and plentiful après-ski amenities at your fingertips, the ultra-modern villages of Les Arcs, with its world-famous Charlotte Perriand-designed buildings, might be a better fit.

FIRST TASTE OF POWDER

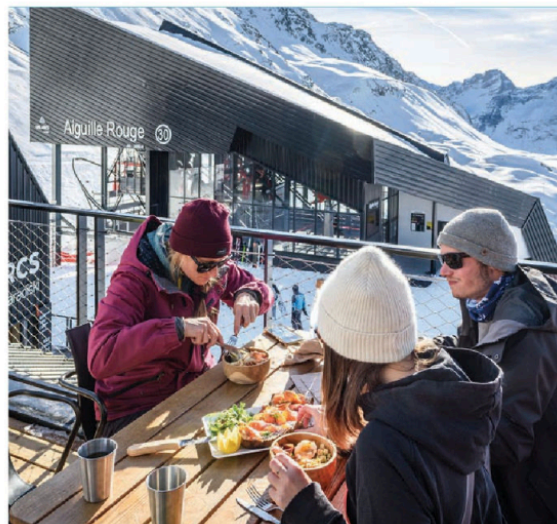
We take our first tentative ski strides on the nursery slopes at Peisey-Vallandry with the Evolution 2 ski school before honing our newfound 'skills' at Les Arcs 1800 with the ESF school. Both ski schools offer small-group or private classes for adults, which come highly recommended for first-timers.

If, like me, you've made it past the age of 30 without touching a ski, the slopes can be an intimidating place. As you shuffle across the snow to reach the piste, your first fear is being wiped out by the flurry of skiers and snowboarders whizzing past you, closely followed by the worry of knocking yourself out with your own skis, balanced precariously over your shoulders.

Next come your first clumsy tries at clipping your skis on and off, followed by your first shaky attempt to push yourself along flat ground, then the rather humbling experience of being overtaken by a snowboarding toddler as you wobble through your first snow plough, firmly gripping the instructor's hands. But, surprisingly, we all left our first lesson feeling confident, accomplished, and – dare I say it – eager to get back on the slopes.



FLOCON VERT



By the time we took our next lesson, latent learning had worked its magic, and our instructor, Hervé, was so blown away by our mastery of the sport (well, he *did* say we were quick learners, at least!) that he took us straight onto the green runs. By the end of the day, we'd proudly tackled our first blue run.

OFF-PISTE THRILLS

Our taster sessions left us longing for more, but if you don't want to spend all day on the slopes, there's a plethora of off-piste activities to try, catered towards all ages and interests.

Non-ski activities have further diversified post-pandemic (a necessity during the 2020/21 season when ski lifts were closed by government order), and we tried snowshoeing, ziplining and sledging. We also enjoyed a sunset hike along the Chemin des Chapelles de Peisey, learnt about alpine biodiversity at the Museum of Mountain Animals, and spent an afternoon unwinding at Nama Springs spa.

Whatever kind of alpine adventure, adrenaline-powered feat, or après-ski entertainment you can dream up, there's a good chance that it's on offer here. And in the greenest way possible. *Bien sûr.* **BT**

LES ARCS – PEISEY-VALLANDRY ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

BY TRAIN

Eurostar from London and TGV and OuiGo from Paris have direct routes to Bourg-Saint-Maurice station. From there, it's a 7-minute funicular ride to Les Arcs. For Peisey-Vallandry, get off at Landry station (on the Bourg-Saint-Maurice line) and take the free shuttle bus. Travelski offers various winter ski packages direct from London. eurostar.com/uk-en/train/france/ski-train

BY FLIGHT

The closest airport is Lyon-Saint Exupéry Airport. Ben's Bus (www.bensbus.co.uk) provides bus transfers, or take the train from Lyon-Saint Exupéry station to Landry/Bourg-Saint-Maurice.

WHERE TO EAT

LES ARCS

Chic Mama

Terrasse du Miravidi, Arc 1800

Tel: (+33) 4 79 07 45 13

lesarcs.com/restaurants/chic-mama.html

This cosy log-cabin-inspired restaurant has tasty dishes with a creative flair; some great vegetarian/vegan options, and an organic wine list.

La Folie Douce

Tel: (+33) 4 79 40 25 95

lafoliedouce.com/fr/les-arcs.html

Located by the Villards cable car station, this ski-in lunch spot has live entertainment and spectacular views. Fill up on self-service fare at La Petite Cuisine, book a terrace table at the gastronomic restaurant, or swing by after dark to drink and dance into the early hours.

PEISEY-VALLANDRY

EI 56

Centre commercial de Vallandry

Tel: (+33) 4 79 04 20 75

en.peisey-vallandry.com/restaurant/el-56.html

Après-ski cocktails, smoothies and tapas are on the menu at this atmospheric restaurant, but the star of the show is the traditional Fondue Savoyard. For the full, magical experience, book the 'bubble', a snowdome-shaped tent on the terrace.

La Table d'Emma

Immeuble Le Soleil, Plan-Peisey

Tel: (+33) 4 57 37 80 14

en.peisey-vallandry.com/restaurant/la-table-d-emma.html

Advance bookings are essential at this intimate restaurant, where the menu of the day offers a choice of homemade specialities, all made with local, seasonal produce.

Les Arcs Tourism Office en.lesarcs.com

Peisey-Vallandry Tourism Office en.peisey-vallandry.com

France Montagnes en.france-montagnes.com