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How to ski Val d'Isère the easy way



The Val d'Isère

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A crisp morning on the slopes of Val d'Isère and I'm trying my hardest to visualise a golden orb, into which I mentally place the number 1,888,948. Slowly, I shrink the sphere to the size of a ping-pong ball and move it towards my heart. I try not to imagine how silly I look to everyone hurrying to catch the ski lift; I am now programmed to be a super-hot skier.

I'm with Bernard Chesneau, who combines life coaching with ski coaching. "This is not just a lesson, it is an outlook — a way of life," he tells me, before asking what I want to achieve from the afternoon and revealing the "magic number". My list is simple: not being scared of moguls, ice on the slope or the scrunch of a snowboarder behind me. Really, not being scared of skiing in this particular French resort.

Val d'Isère has been my skiing *bête noire* since I visited five years ago and was nearly mowed down several times by 14-stone men thundering down the slopes. Its world-class runs and world-class snow (a gift of altitude) make it a magnet for both the top ski set and ski daredevils — not wusses like me. Even the best skiers admit that Val is a "challenging resort" with misleading piste gradings: a green called Verte, which runs down to the bottom of the resort, is anything but verte, while many blues leading down the mountain are accepted as "commercial blues" that would be a red run anywhere else. After my last visit, I swore that in future I'd stick with Switzerland's wider, calmer pistes.

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Yet here I am again, in perhaps the busiest week of the season: February half term, which coincides with France's school holidays. Of all the weeks I could have chosen, this one was perhaps the silliest. The word busy doesn't begin to describe the sea of ski helmets at the meeting point for ski lessons, or the 45-minute wait for a burger in the self-service queue of the Sun Bar. As one ski instructor put it: "It's carnage out there."

But this time I have Bernard's magic number to help me; though I'm unclear where exactly it comes from. That's because Bernard, who can talk for France and Canada (he is French Canadian), never seems to have a quick, easy answer for anything. He talks us all the way over a series of ski lifts to the far side of the mountain, away from the crowds. There is a lot about how we need to rise above life's problems, whether that applies to work, relationship problems, or being scared of moguls or ice on the slope.

After many questions, I establish that when his marriage broke down, he studied life coaching in Montpellier and now applies it to skiing. Here (I summarise) it's all about putting your problems to ground by properly feeling the mountain beneath your skis and exhaling on your turns.

"Start by choosing yourself rather than worrying about everyone else on the mountain," Bernard tells me. "You have to see the mountain for what it is and not a series of problems. You are on a date with the slope." To show this, he produces a small red wooden heart and makes me lean towards it as far as I can. We watch different ski styles on the slope, then I try skiing blind down the piste with only Bernard's hand to guide me (scary), before I embark on a series of exercises to get me to exhale properly and to stop strangling the "eagle chicks" that are my poles (embarrassing).

All this is accompanied by lots of new-age spiel ("I ski to reclaim my spirit from a conditioned world that is always seeking to limit my being") but the basic message is about self-confidence and how I am capable of anything . . . as long as I recite the magic number first.

Bizarre. But even without Bernard's magic number, I'm finding that Val is actually growing on me. The key is to go high in the mountains and to resist skiing the home run, taking the cable car or funicular down to the resort, thus avoiding the narrow, hard bottlenecks where inconsiderate skiers pour through.

Up among the mountain peaks, I discover quiet, easy slopes with Fiona Easdale, the E from ski company YSE, which only operates in Val d'Isère, so is an expert in the resort. It seems as though we have the corduroy, white pistes to ourselves until a couple of other skiers overtake us. "I'm almost annoyed we have to share the piste with them," Fiona says.

The slopes are wide, white and wonderful. Whoever said Val d'Isère wasn't for beginners and intermediates? As John Yates-Smith, Fiona's business partner, says: "So long as you accept that in Val a green is anyone else's blue and a blue is everyone else's red there are miles of easy runs high in the mountains."

While I'm happy pootling around at the top of the mountain, my nine-year-old son is taking the more extreme way down. Too cool for school, he's taking part in race training and has a tiger cover on his helmet to prove it.

The racing, which is good for technique, is wrapped up in lots of fun, from playing human dominoes to talent competitions on skis. He's being taught without realising it and he returns every afternoon, bubbling over with the day's events. The day he races down the double-black

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run called La Face, there's no containing his delight. It couldn't be further from traditional "bend ze knees" teaching if it tried.

So we are both happy for different reasons when we return, exhausted but exhilarated, to Chalet des Neiges — one of 20 run by YSE in Val d'Isère — at the end of every day. Better still, there's always an amazing tea laid out for us, followed not so long afterwards by canapés and surprisingly impressive three-course meals. The food in our chalet, rustled up by cheerful chef Amy, is definitely a huge cut above normal chalet fare. Forget spag bol and lasagne — here a typical meal starts with goat's cheese salad and then moves on to beef wellington and chocolate and rosemary tart.

Refuelled after dinner, we head out for some sledging down the adjacent piste. We thunder down way faster than I'd thought, and as our sledge gathers speed, I suddenly find Bernard's magic number flashing through my head. As it does, we capsize into the snow. Did it fail? Not a bit of it — we emerge, spluttering with laughter.

Need to know

Jane Knight was a guest of YSE (01935 816550, yseski.co.uk), which has a week's ski trip in the comfortable Chalet des Neiges from £790pp, including flights and transfers, chalet board with wine at dinner, and free ski or snowboard carriage. The chalet sleeps up to 15 and has a private ski locker for each room.

Ski lessons

Ski lessons with Bernard Chesneau (00 33 6 14 27 15 60, ski-mastery.com) start from £133 for an afternoon for one person, to £163 for groups of five or more. Group lessons for children (including racing) from Progression Ski (progressionski.com) start from £296.58 for five days, from 9am-1pm.

More information

A six-day Espace Killy lift pass costs £ 192 (valdisere.com)

Ski and boot hire from Snowberry (snowberry-valdisere.com) starts from £35 for six days.

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