



Snuggle up with Val

The combination of tackling a World Cup race run and settling down with a drink in a cosy chalet was enough to persuade avid après ski fan **ROB FREEMAN** to have a couple of nights in when he visited Val d'Isere



The view from the top of La Face with the village of Val d'Isere far below

IT was just 24 hours since the world's top ski racers had been hurtling down this precipice overlooking the French ski town of Val d'Isere. And the rock hard icy conditions that they love so much were still present, the slope slickly gleaming in the sun.

We had left the top station of the Olympique telecabine, turned left and left again past the sign saying 'experts only' and we knew the run to come was going to be more challenge than fun, with little chance of our skis gaining any sort of edge on the boilerplate of a surface.

But the object of the exercise was to see at close quarters just how awesome, not to say terrifying, was the physical and technical examination facing the madmen who risked life and limb on Val d'Isere's La Face run in one of the most testing races of the World Cup season.

Under the expert guidance of former racer Tom Saxlund, now director of the New Generation ski school in Val d'Isere, we slipped and skidded down the ferociously steep Epaule du Charvet section of the run. This is rated the steepest

course, as far as the overall average pitch is concerned, in the World Cup calendar. The racers take it virtually straight down. Ours was more of a racing sideslip, throwing in the occasional turn when the opportunity arose.

We saw the spots where the racers jumped, and where they had to make turns in mid-air. And the scary sections where they reached top speeds of about 90mph.

The course had been used the day before for a World Cup giant slalom race which was won by Ted Ligety of America. It was so tough that several racers, including Olympic downhill champion Didier Cuche, collapsed with exhaustion at the end and had to be airlifted to an emergency clinic for a check-up. Ligety said afterwards that it was 'one of the hardest races I've had in a long time'.

The group I was in took 17 minutes and 27 seconds to complete the course by the way, about 16 minutes and 15 seconds behind Ligety's time in his first run. But we did stop on several occasions to admire the view.

And at the end our physical state was such that we found it necessary to visit the Sun Bar restaurant at the foot of the run for an emergency hot chocolate and rum. But you know what? It was fun and we couldn't wait to do it again.

Tom is happy to conduct any half-decent skiers down the slope as part of his ski school's concept of tailoring the courses offered to what the customer wants, rather than the other way round. "Not that most choose to ski La Face just after a race," he said. "Val d'Isere, and the linked runs over at Tignes, has slopes for every ability and lots of cruising, not just tough stuff."

Tom added: "Ski school customers want different things and we do our best to meet their expectations - whether it's simply to turn their snowplough into parallel turns or to give them a taste of what a top downhill racer experiences."

Tom's school is one of many that have sprung up in the Alps in recent years, a good proportion of them British-run, as healthy competition has changed the face of ski teaching. The student is usually now put first, with their wishes and



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aims paramount, instead of simply joining a class and following the instructor round the mountain occasionally being told to bend this or that.

The philosophy is reflected in the services offered by the travel company Ski Power, in one of whose slopeside chalets I was staying. Ski Power boss Craig Norwood said: "We tailor the whole thing to exactly what the customer wants – just like properly-run modern ski schools do. We can organise flights, or people can make their own way to resort, we'll do whatever transfers people want – private limousines with chilled champagne ready, or shared mini-buses. In the chalet guests can pre-order what they like, flowers in the room, massages, beauty treatments, nothing is too much trouble to organise."

The skiing and snowboarding in Val d'Isere and the linked pistes of Tignes are fabulous and also high-level which virtually guarantees good snow throughout the season. The large village also has some lively après ski.

But the unlimited wine in my chalet at dinner, and cosy atmosphere afterwards, somehow lessens the need to go out on the town. And an early night can only be good for having another go at La Face in the morning.

TRAVEL FACTS

// Rob Freeman stayed at Chalet Nadine in Val d'Isere as a guest of Ski Power (www.skipower.co.uk, 01737 306029). A week's stay costs from £418 per person, based on two sharing. Price includes catered chalet accommodation (daily breakfast and a five-course evening meal six days a week), return flights from Gatwick and transfers.

// More details on the New Generation ski school on www.skinewgen.com, 0844 4843663 (UK) or 0033 (0) 479 010318 (France).

// For more information on Val d'Isere log on to: www.valdisere.com

News from France

LES ARCS: The chairlift Mont Blanc at Arc 1600 has been replaced by a new, bigger and faster chairlift which provides direct access to "Les deux têtes" area.

A 1,000 sqm spa has been opened in the resort. It has been divided in to various sectors which include treatment rooms, hammam, cold water waterfall, a spring and body scrub room, four water ponds and an ice cave – very cold – and dragon cave – very hot.

There's also a beach space for resting after a treatment, a swimming pool with balneo and an outdoor sauna chalet.

LA PLAGNE: There are plenty of celebrations and events planned to mark La Plagne's 50th birthday this winter. The big day itself is 21 December 2011 when the resort plans a celebratory evening of entertainment and a live show.

After the show a big firework display will take place on the Plagne Centre snow front.

ALPE D'HUEZ: Two new luxury accommodation properties will be open this winter. HMC Hotels & Resorts have a new luxury chalet hotel in the Bergers area, 250m from the ski lifts. It will contain 27 rooms and luxury suites most with ter-

race and lobby with central fireplace. It contains a restaurant, bar, outdoor heated pool, Jacuzzi, sauna and fitness area.

The second new property is the four star Le Cristal de l'Alpe, a new CGH residence built by MGM Construction. It is located in the heart of the resort, close to the shops and leisure facilities.

It has 71 apartments, with two to five rooms in each and the residence has a heated indoor pool, sauna, steam room, Jacuzzi and fitness room.

CHAMONIX: The lift tickets are being simplified by cutting the former three levels of choice to two. The two passes are now the Chamonix le Pass - covering all lifts in Chamonix up to 2800m (not les Houches) and costing €210 for an adult ticket for most of the season; and the Mont-Blanc Unlimited covering all of Chamonix Valley and Courmayeur in Italy (as well as Verbier in Switzerland for 6 day passes and above).

This costs €255 Euros for most of the season (discounted before Christmas).

The pass that has gone is The Ski Pass Mont-Blanc which covered 800km of terrain including the slopes of neighbouring Megeve, St Gervais, Les Contamines and others.



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