

piercing cries and waved their paws frantically in warning. It was quite a scene to witness and only a few feet away from where we were standing.

It is fairly easy to spot wildlife in the national park where there are strict rules – including a ban on dogs even on a lead – set in place to protect the environment.

No ski lifts or infrastructure are allowed, meaning nature reigns supreme.

However, while they protect their wild places, the French also like their comforts as we discovered when we walked to a refuge called La Lavey. We expected a basic mountain hut but found a jolly scene with tables, chairs and parasols set out in front of the old stone building while hikers enjoyed the homemade soup, omelettes made with fresh herbs grown in a little kitchen garden, tarts, wine and coffees. Even more remarkable was that prices seemed low although the place must be supplied by helicopter as there are no roads and it is nearly a two hour walk to get there.

Closer to Les Deux Alpes, where we stayed in a lovely, spacious self-catering Peak Retreats apartment with a balcony offering scenic views, is La Moliere, another mountain restaurant that can be reached by car or via a tranquil walk. Here they serve the best burgers we have ever had, as well as a mouthwatering goats' cheese salad dressed with a little honey from the nearby hives.

A touch of honey with goats' cheese and walnuts appears to be a local delicacy as we sampled it again in a

galette in a very good creperie called Les Sagnes in the resort itself and on an excellent pizza at a restaurant called Tribeca.

Also at the resort is a fantastic open air swimming pool as well as spas, golf, crazy golf, and many other activities designed to keep families entertained such as skateboarding, rafting, summer tobogganing, canoeing, road cycling, gokarting, fishing, tennis, badminton and climbing.

A pleasant place to relax is the lake where many French families unwind after work and school, picnicking, swimming, sunbathing and playing petanque. The water is wonderfully refreshing after a hike or morning's skiing on the glacier.

Apartments are reasonably priced in the summer and there are flights from Scotland to Geneva, a two and a half hour drive away. What's not to like? ■

For more information about the resort go to www.les2alpes.com. Seven nights self-catered in a two-bedroom apartment sleeping up to six costs from £399 per apartment, accommodation only, with Peak Retreats (www.peakretreats.co.uk; 023 9283 9310). An early booking discount applies if booked by 30 May. The price for the same style of apartment including a return midweek Dover to Calais crossing with P&O is £499.

<https://www.peakretreats.co.uk/summer/alpine-resorts/oisans/les-deux-alpes/au-coeur-des-ours>



Even at the height of summer you can hone your skiing skills

SHORT HAUL



Climbing out of your comfort zone

It has beautiful scenery and a reputation for skiing, but did you know you can ice climb in the Dolomites too? **Lauren Taylor** gives it a go

It's not dangerous – as long as you don't make any errors," says climbing instructor Roman Valentini, as he slips a rope into a figure of eight and loops it through my harness. I'm staring up at a waterfall, now a solid wall of ice, with crampons attached to my boots and an axe in each hand.

We're deep in the Dolomites, South Tyrol, in northern Italy, an area so beautiful it's been declared a Unesco World Heritage site. The landscape is famous for its rounded, boulder-like mountaintops, jagged spires and plateaus, creating views you won't find anywhere else in the world.

In winter, it's a stunning ski destination with an incredible 1,200km of slopes and in summer, the sheer mountain faces attract keen climbers.

Waterfalls that flow freely in the warmer months become frozen blocks of ice by December, right through to spring – and some are solid enough to climb up, if you're brave enough.

The sport of ice climbing is more accessible for beginners than it might look. The area around Colfosco, close to Hotel Sassongher in Corvara where I'm staying, is recommended only to those with a lot of experience, but Capanna Alpina – a short drive and a 30-minute snowy hike away – is ideal for first-timers.

Along with admiring a view of the valley and the imposing 3,000 metre peaks of the Contourines mountains,



Above right, Lauren Taylor with guide Roman Valentini after her climb; top, the Dolomites; above, the Hotel Sassongher

skiers stop mid-slope to take a curious look at the rope Roman has screwed into the ice above us as he effortlessly scaled the wall.

Then again, he's been climbing since the age of 11 and ice climbing from 15, and he once ice climbed 300 metres high, so we're in safe hands.

For anyone who's rock-climbed before, Roman says, difficulty-wise, the two are comparable, and the power you need to haul yourself up is the same – but ice poses an additional challenge. "On rock, it's easier, because you have more options, but on ice you have to make the right decision," he says. No pressure then.

The ice needs to be frozen all the way through, and therefore usually always in shade, so hearing some water trickling through isn't helping my pre-climb nerves. "You look scared," Roman smiles, as he whacks an axe into the wall so it sticks. "Now



you try!" As I attempt to lift it out, it won't shift. This doesn't bode well. You need some upper body strength for ice climbing, it turns out, as well as strong legs, a head for heights and nerves of steel.

The technique sounds simple enough: find any suitable dents or holes I can hook the axes into above my head, one at a time, then take three small steps by kicking the spikes on the front of the crampons hard into the ice, lifting myself up while Roman gradually lets tension out of the rope attached to me from the ground. I know this means it's impossible to fall more than 50cm if I slip, but the reality of keeping

It takes every ounce of strength and nerve I have to get over the sheer ledge

myself attached to a sheer wall of ice is terrifying.

It feels precarious and unnatural. I'm hanging on for dear life with axes and a couple of spikes I've pelted into the ice, but I soon begin to get the hang of it – and it's an adrenaline rush on a whole other level.

But higher up, when the surface becomes completely vertical, I realise I've reached my limit. Roman loosens the rope to help me abseil down, which proves to be just as unnerving as my journey up. Once my heart

rate has returned to normal, I make a second attempt – this time 15m high to an inlet where the waterfall starts. It takes every ounce of strength and nerve I have to get over the sheer ledge that halted my previous attempt.

Legs shaking uncontrollably, there seems to be no power left in my arms to get any grip onto the ice with the axes. But thanks to Roman's never-ending encouragement and calm confidence in my limited climbing abilities, I eventually find myself at the top – at first shaking, stomach-lurching, then triumphant.

Heading back to the solid ground of historic, five-star Hotel Sassongher, I slip into the rooftop Jacuzzi; with snowy views of the town and valley, it's the perfect way to soak post-climbing legs. And I don't miss any opportunity to tell anyone and everyone about my day's impressive ice-sealing escapades. ■

Rooms at Hotel Sassongher (sassongher.it; +39 0471 836085) cost from £175 (£150) per person, per night, half board (two sharing). Ice climbing sessions can be booked through Alta Badia Guides (altabadiaguides.com) or Hotel Sassongher from €150 (£128) per person, for a three-hour session, based on three adults sharing. A Dolomiti Superski ski pass costs from €55 (£47) for one day per adult, or a six-day pass from €273 (£233) per adult.

48 HOURS IN

Galway

Friday, midday

Check into the Park House Hotel (doubles from £162, www.parkhousehotel.ie), right in the buzzing heart of lively Galway.

1pm

Tartare (<http://tartarecafevinebar.business.site>) is a bright new seafood eatery from the people behind the Michelin star restaurant across the road. Irish oysters are spiced with creative garnishes and the bone dry white wines are spot on too.

2pm

Take the pulse of Galway on Eyre Square. Sit on a bench in Kennedy Park and listen to the buskers in a green oasis that is always bustling.

3pm

Head to the Galway City Museum (www.galwaycitymuseum.ie) to learn more about the rich story of the city and the county beyond.

6pm

Hook up with Galway Food Tours (www.galwayfoodtours.com). Sheena will take you for an aperitif at America Village (www.americavillage.com), a cross between an apothecary and an understated cocktail bar with all manner of ultra-local foraged herbs and botanicals thrilling the senses.

7pm

Sheena can then take you on to The Universal (<http://theuniversal.business.site>), a hipster haunt that offers tapas style dishes (with seafood to the fore) along with local craft beers.

Saturday, 10am

The Fisheries Watchtower (tel: +353-91 564946) hosts a modest museum collection, but the real star attraction



are the views out over the city's waterways.

Midday

Enjoy Galway produce and inventive cooking at Kai (www.kaicaferestaurant.com). Savour the likes of west coast crab salad with poppyseed, cucumber, avocado mayonnaise and a cheddar scone.

1.30pm

Check out the colourful Galway Market where you can pick up quality arts and crafts, plus meet food producers from all over County Galway.

7pm

The Kasbah Wine Bar (www.kasbahwinebar.ie) is a glorious gem tucked away from the chaotic buzz of Saturday night Galway. Live music and delicious small plates await.

Sunday, 9am

Head out of the city to Silverstrand for a head-clearing stroll along the Blue Flag certified pristine sands. ■

Robin McKelvie

Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) fly from Edinburgh to Shannon (about 40 miles from Galway) with return fares starting at £127.98. The Lonely Planet guide to Ireland has a strong section on Galway. Further tourist information, www.ireland.com

BARGAIN BREAKS

It's a grand tour

Follow the Tour de Yorkshire, 2-5 May, as cyclists weave through villages, towns and cities. After a day watching the race, retire to Hotel Indigo York, located in the middle of the four routes. Accommodation starts from £53pp (two sharing) including a full Yorkshire breakfast and gratis chocolates.

Call 01904 231 333 or visit www.hotellindigoyork.co.uk

The Jewel of Jamaica

Book with Travel Republic and get seven nights' all inclusive

accommodation at the four-star Jewel Paradise Cove Beach Resort from £1,305pp (based on two sharing), plus flights from Edinburgh to Jamaica (via Gatwick) on 16 May. Call 020 8974 7200 or see www.travelrepublic.co.uk

Majorca magic

EasyJet Holidays are offering seven nights at the Playas Cas Saboners, Majorca, on a B&B basis from £802.42pp including flights from Edinburgh on 30 April. Call 020 3499 5232 or see www.easyjet.com/holidays