

# Mont Valaisan calling...

The locals are proud of it, and visitors like us can't wait to explore it. It would seem the opening of the new Mont Valaisan slopes has been something of a hit

WORDS ARNIE WILSON

**I**t's all very well being a small, low-key family ski resort with plenty of charm, few crowds and little in the way of purpose-built tower blocks, but it's nonetheless hard to compete with the vast networks of major players in terms of piste mileage and terrain variety. Such has been the case for La Rosière, with the French super-resorts of Les Arcs-La Plagne and Val d'Isère-Tignes just across, and down, the Haute Tarentaise valley.

But this winter, the 1,850m resort, with its smaller, neighbouring ski station of Les Eucherts, has moved up several notches in both the quantity and quality stakes, having opened up a brand new sector: Mont Valaisan.

The extensive (and in places, steep) face of the 2,891m Mont Valaisan had only previously been accessible to off-piste skiers and snowboarders prepared to hike up to the summit. Now they can simply take a chairlift. Actually, two chairlifts, both six seaters – first the Moulins (Windmills), which starts at 1,935m and whisks people to 2,450m; then the eponymous Mont Valaisan, which accesses the resort's new top altitude of 2,800m.

No longer did I gaze enviously across the valley at Villaroger, remembering the exhilaratingly long descent down to it from the Aiguille Rouge, high above Arc 2000. I could now enjoy something just as good right here in La Rosière. The two new chairlifts give access to a network of five new red pistes, giving you a possible vertical drop of 956m in one thigh-burning hit, and adding nearly 40km of skiable terrain. The new total is just under 200km, complete with stellar views of Mont Blanc thrown in.

Apart from significantly increasing the resort's skiable terrain, the €15 million expansion also gives La Rosière – aka 'La Roz' – a more dynamic gung-ho image.

The area to skier's left remains largely ungroomed, so freeriders now have easy lift-access to an off-piste zone that, aided by La Rosière's above average snowfall (11 metres in the winter of 2017-18), can compete with the ever-popular freeride zones of neighbouring resorts.

▲ Easy lift access to Mont Valaisan's off-piste zones makes this one serious ski area

new lifts to head up for another go, or continue further down the valley to the Petit Bois lift in Le Vaz (1,515m).

La Rosière is one of those rare resorts that never attracted huge commercial interest during its humble beginnings. By and large the locals have stayed loyal and remained in the village. The culture is one of traditional family endeavours, rather than profit-seeking corporations.

Another feature that sets La Roz apart is that it has been linked, since 1985, to the Italian resort of La Thuile, in the Val d'Aosta. Simply cross over the Petit-Saint-Bernard pass (as, some say, Hannibal did back in 218 BC while crossing the Alps en route to the gates of Rome) early morning and you can be supping a Peroni and chowing on homemade meatballs and spaghetti by midday. We opted for Pepita restaurant, located in La Thuile village. I was torn between pizza and truffle pasta. No contest really – the truffle pasta won. How nice it is, when staying in La Rosière, to be able



choose between Italian and French food depending on your fancy (and also somewhat on the weather).

Back on French snow, we celebrated the official opening of the new Mont Valaisan steeps. At night. More than 100 of us, some with blazing torches, others with battery-operated Star Wars-style light-sabers emitting flashing rainbow lighting, skied in a seemingly never-ending snake-like formation right down to the village where an impressive fireworks display followed. It's something that the resort lays on every Monday throughout the season – well, minus the fireworks and with a slightly less challenging descent – where all intermediate skiers are welcome to join in.

The next day cloudless blue skies had switched to near-whiteout. Not a good day for an excursion into Italy, so instead I decided to stay local. Mont Valaisan was calling. I had teamed up with a local ski instructor Clemence Mathieu to show me the best spots.

Clemence tells me over lunch – risotto with porcini and smoked filet mignon – at the delightful Antigel mountain restaurant (located on the lower slopes of the Tetras run on Roc Noir and rebuilt in 2013 from old materials) that when she was a teenager she came third in the French Youth Speed Skiing championships in Vars, with a speed of 85mph.

Luckily for me, she showed no sign of approaching even half that speed as she shepherded me down the winding Combe run from Mont Valaisan's summit in poor visibility. I noticed she was constantly peeping back at me as I skied, but in order not to give me a complex about my skiing, she reassured me this was a habit of hers even when skiing with fellow instructors...

With conditions as they were there was sadly no real chance to ski off-piste from Mont Valaisan all the way down to Le Vaz. That long descent would have to wait until next time.

## FACTFILE

Arnie stayed at Chalet les Marmottons with Peak Retreats ([peakretreats.co.uk](http://peakretreats.co.uk); 023 9283 9310). Seven nights self-catered starts from £213pp (based on five people sharing a two-bedroom apartment), including a return Eurotunnel crossing with a free upgrade to Eurotunnel's FlexiPlus class. Ski equipment, lift passes and transfers also bookable.



## WHAT THE LOCALS SAY

So what do the older generation of skiers think about the opening of the new Mont Valaisan slopes?

"We're very proud, it's fantastic," says Michel Folliet, 65, legion d'honneur, a senior instructor, and founder of the Students' Race Ski School. "Make no mistake, it puts us on the map as a serious ski area, not just one for families."

"For half a century the Montvalzanais (inhabitants of La Rosière in the commune of Montvalezan) were aware of the potential for tourism, which led to the construction of the first ski lifts and the eventual link with La Thuile."

"The new runs follow nature's course, and are truly enchanting. It's wonderful to see the immense panoramas stretching out in all directions. From the new Mont Valaisan slopes, we are now able to rediscover, from a different angle, the likes of Mont Blanc, the neighbouring Aiguille des Glaciers, and Mont Pourri."

"Many of our Italian neighbours are coming here to visit the Valaisan summit and share the new skiing and scenery too."

▲ More than 200km of skiable terrain is there for the lapping

## SKI LA ROSIÈRE WITH CLUB PARTNERS

Residence Les Chalet de la Rosière with Sunweb Luxury, traditional-style apartments spread across six chalets – all just a ski pole's throw from the slopes.

\* 9 March 2019

\* £489 for two people, self-catered, including lift passes  
\* [sunweb.co.uk](http://sunweb.co.uk); 020 3170 8206

Les Cimes Blanches with Erna Low  
Beautiful apartments – complete with an indoor pool – just a five-minute walk from the Eucherts chairlift.

\* 23 March 2019

\* £1,274 for a one-bed apartment, up to four sharing, including a return Flexiplus Eurotunnel crossing  
\* [ernalow.co.uk](http://ernalow.co.uk); 020 7584 2841

Chalet l'Aiglon

New five-bedroom luxury chalet featuring a spa, located 500m from the resort centre.

\* 30 March 2019

\* €213 per night, two sharing, B&B (inc. 15% discount)  
\* [chaletaiglon.com](http://chaletaiglon.com); +33 (0) 7 50 27 92 28