

my kind of place **Val Thorens, France**

Head in the clouds

Catherine Cooper travels to an altitude of 2,300 metres and discovers one of Europe’s very finest skiing destinations

Why Val Thorens?

As the highest ski resort in Europe (the village is at 2,300 metres; the six highest peaks in the ski area rise to more than 3,000 metres), Val Thorens is the place to go to be sure of some decent snow. As part of the Trois Vallées region, with more than 600 kilometres of pistes and six glaciers, you can happily ski for a week and barely ski the same run twice. Within Val Thorens itself, you can also try out the six-kilometre toboggan run, go ice driving at the Alain Prost ice track (www.icedrivingacademy.com) or ride down the pistes on a mountain bike after the skiers have left for the day. In recent years, some fabulous hotels have sprung up here.

A comfortable bed

Val Thoren’s first five-star hotel Altapura (www.altapura.fr, 0033 4 80 36 80 36) has everything you could want from a ski hotel. Built with lots of wood, stone and fur throws, it’s luxurious and comfortable, while the jumper-clad staff and quirky touches like an old telecabin in the lounge give it a hip and relaxed feel. It boasts a 1,000-square-metre spa with an indoor/outdoor pool, huge, comfy bean bags for relaxing and three restaurants – the buffet in particular is spectacular. Rooms are large, luxurious and well-equipped – each with its own Mac Mini. Double rooms, including breakfast, from €292 (Dh1,468).

Koh-I-Nor (www.hotel-kohinor.com, 0033 4 79 31 00 00) is Val Thoren’s newest five-star hotel – its name aptly translates as “Mountain of Light” – the hotel is built largely of wood and light glass with a luxurious interior including two pools and an 800-metre spa. Its huge terrace offers spectacular views over the ski area and two-Michelin-starred chef Yoann Conte heads up the restaurant. Koh-I-Nor also has 35 apartments for those who want the luxury experience on a budget and with the greater flexibility of self-catering. Doubles from €340 (Dh1,712) per night, apartments from €685 (Dh3,448) per week.

Le Fitz Roy (www.hotelfitzroy.com, 0033 4 79 00 04 78) has been refurbished for this season to win a fifth star and is now an intimate, chic hotel with a family-chalet atmosphere (albeit extremely luxurious). After a day’s skiing you can relax in the library with a book, snuggle up by the fireplace, enjoy the south-facing terrace or



Val Thorens in the French Alps is Europe’s highest ski resort. It boasts several fantastic hotels and top-quality restaurants Pascal Lebeau / OT Val Thorens

relax in the spa. Bedrooms have wood panels, chiselled-slate sinks, mountain views and come complete with every mod-con – you can even hire iPads loaded with films and music. Doubles from €331 (Dh1,666) per night.

Find your feet

The Place de Caron is the main centre for skiing, shops and restaurants and is the hub of the resort. The sports centre is also here. Some of the more upmarket accommodation is at the lower end of the village, while most of the tour operators’ catered chalets are in the Plein Sud area. You can walk (and ski) between the sections, but there’s a bus that links them every 30 minutes and most hotels away from the centre also have shuttles.

Meet the locals

Towards the end of the skiing day (or any time after lunch on bad weather days) almost everyone – visitors and locals alike – heads for La Folie Douce (www.lafoledouce-valthorens.com), with a daily DJ and

fire eaters, for a few hours before skiing the rest of the way down just before the light goes.

Book a table

Chalet de la Marine (www.chaletmarine.com, 0033 4 79 00 11 90) is one of the best places to eat on the slopes. Downstairs offers hearty, well-made, self-service food, while upstairs serves a more formal (and much pricier) menu. In the evening, you can book a dinner party in the restaurant’s romantic Mongolian yurt. Upstairs, typical menus include mushroom soup with white truffle shavings (€29 [Dh146]), followed by steak tartare with fries (€26 [Dh131]), while downstairs features pasta, burgers and pizza.

Restaurant Jean Sulpice (www.en.jeansulpice.com, 00 33 4 79 40 00 71) is named after its two-Michelin-starred chef, who, as the father of a five-year-old, sometimes makes lunch at the resort’s local crèche. Despite the high-concept food with matching prices, the restaurant has a relaxed feel. The menu is inventive and unusual – such as agnolotti (snails, herbs and lemon caviar;

€46 [Dh226]), followed by pigeon baked in a salt crust with camomile (€70 [Dh352]). The chef also runs cookery classes.

La Cabane (www.restoleil.com/la-cabane.html, 0033 4 79 00 83 84) is a great place to sample traditional Savoyards dishes, such as raclette and fondue, in a cosy setting with a fireplace. Starters are mainly salads (from €12 [Dh60]), which is all you’ll want before the hearty, often cheese-heavy main courses, including la raclette grand tradition (local cheese which you melt yourself to pour over potatoes and cold meat; €25 [Dh125]), fondue bourguignon (raw beef to dip in hot oil, served with various sauces and fries (€25 [Dh125]), or pierrade (similar, except that the beef is cooked on a hot stone; €25 [Dh125]).

Shopper’s paradise

There are two malls in Val Thorens selling sports clothes, ski equipment and usual ski resort goods, but it isn’t really a resort known for its shops. The upmarket hotels have more upmarket ski shops, but if you’re after designer

boutiques, ski over to Courchevel on the other side of the Trois Vallées.

What to avoid

Try not to travel on a Saturday – most package holidays run Saturday to Saturday, so the roads can get busy, plus Saturdays on the pistes tend to be quieter.

Don’t miss

Val Thorens has just opened Europe’s highest zipwire at 3,600 metres, 250 metres above the glacier. It takes two minutes from one side to the other, with a maximum speed of 100kph. and costs €50 [Dh250] per go, with a minimum age of 10.

Go there

Etihad (www.etihad.com) flies direct from Abu Dhabi to Geneva, and Emirates (www.emirates.com) flies direct from Dubai to Geneva, from Dh3,000 return including taxes. The flight takes six hours and transfer by road to Val Thorens takes three-and-a-half hours.

hotel insider **Iniala Beach House, Phuket, Thailand**

Unique taste of Thai luxury born from tragedy

The welcome
Nervily delighted. This hyper-luxe, over-the-top little beach complex of three, three-bedroom villas and a penthouse opened in mid-January, so the staff have yet to get blasé about guests checking in. The owner, Mark Weingard, an ex-derivatives trader who made a squillion in Asia, abruptly changed his life after his fiancée was killed in the Bali bombings. In tandem with setting up Iniala, he founded Inspirasia, a Bali-based charity into which he is funnelling 10 per cent of Iniala’s revenue.

The neighbourhood
The quiet, casuarina-lined, seven-kilometre-long Natai Beach in Phang Nga on the west coast of mainland Thailand, on which Iniala is set, is off the radar compared to the nearby island of Phuket across the nearby bridge. But that will change as Iniala becomes better known – as it’s sure to among people looking for five-star Thai luxe, who either stay or check out the excellent Aziamendi restaurant. Or, when it opens later this year, visit the adjoining Iniala beach club, cafe and bakery,



The Owners Suite at the Iniala Beach House in Phuket. Kurt Heck / Matt Thorpe

showcasing the scrumptious breads, croissants, cakes and pastries. There’ll be a market for those among the wealthy villa-owners in the area.

The scene

Staying here means that you get the use of a vehicle and driver (as well as a full-time butler and six hours of spa treatments per day in your private spa). “But why I go anywhere?” shrugs a Russian TV

arts personality who is lounging in the cool, dark-slate pool and waving a manicured hand in the direction of the private 22-seat cinema, the games room, with a Thai boxing ring and a Swarovski-studded pool table, and the children’s hotel, decorated with a fort and treehouse, where children can spend a staff-supervised night.

The room
A suspended bed and gold-

domed private spa here; a floor that undulates like sand there. Eleven idiosyncratic designers worked on this place, clearly keen to outdo each other. The Irish master builder Joseph Walsh worked in curved and carved wood, producing a unique bed for one villa. In the Collector’s Villa, the Brazilian Campana brothers retaliated with walls studded with broken china and swathes of pale leather wrapping bucket chairs and a bizarre lounge-type thing that’s shaped like an octopus. The Spanish designer Jaime Hayon has outdone both with his luminously beautiful, all-white-with-flashes-of-jade Owners Suite, which has an exceptionally large and lovely white-marble bathroom.

The service
Exemplary. Smiling, quick, intuitive.

The food
Celestial. In Aziamendi, directed by the three-Michelin-starred Basque chef Eneko Atxa, dinner is of the Ferran Adrià/El Bulli school: delectable and visually astounding. Egg yolks injected with foie gras; a bonsai tree decorated with edible

bark and hanging with tomatoes injected with broth. In the more relaxed, private Beach House, breakfast is the standout.

Loved
The originality; the endless extravagances to marvel at and little details to grin at. The staff, from the sweetly serious yoga master and typically delicate-looking but steel-fingered Thai massage therapists.

Hated
That repellent, pale-turquoise leather octopus lounge. And, considering the prices, the lack of space. Individual rooms are all large, but a lot has been squeezed into this small beachfront area.

The verdict
A fascinating one-off that begs to be taken over in its entirety for a family get-together.

The bottom line
Seven-night stays – including transfers from Phuket Airport, which is 20 minutes away – cost from 107,000 Thai baht (Dh12,162). (www.iniala.com; 0066 76 451 456).

★ **Adriaane Pielou**

in brief

Spring offers with Emirates Holidays

Emirates Holidays has released a series of spring offers for package trips to destinations including Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Malaysia, Mauritius and the Seychelles, and family trips to Disneyland Paris and Legoland parks in London, Copenhagen and Johor, near Singapore.

A four-night trip to Sri Lanka includes return flights from Dubai to Colombo, accommodation with breakfast, and internal transport with a chauffeur-guide taking you to places including Udawalawe National Park, Mirissa and Galle.

Trips cost from Dh4,510 per adult and from Dh2,750 per child, based on two people sharing per room. To book, call 800 5252 or visit www.emiratesholidays.ae.

Yoga in Brazil ahead of the World Cup finals

If you want to visit Brazil this year but aren’t into football, a yoga holiday at the Butterfly House in Bahia, in conjunction with Brazilian holiday company Yoga Body Rio, could be the solution.

From May 2 to 9, Ashtanga Escapes promises to “take guests on a journey of self discovery and enlightenment” through traditional Ashtanga yoga. Surrounded by pristine beaches, freshwater lakes and world-heritage listed rainforest on the Maraú Peninsula, a week’s stay at the luxurious Butterfly House is hosted by the Brazilian yoga teacher André Meyer.

The holiday costs from US\$1,950 (Dh7,162) per person, including seven nights’ accommodation, twice-daily yoga sessions, transfers, group excursions and activities and organic meals, but excluding international flights. For more information, visit www.butterflyhousebahia.com.

Spectacular Goa Carnival in Panaji

On March 1, a four-day festival attracting thousands of tourists will start in Goa’s capital city, Panaji. The annual carnival covers the entire state of Goa and the festivities include a parade of colourful floats and troupes of masked revellers in gorgeous costumes singing and dancing to lively music (that is usually performed live).

The party’s origins, the Goa department of tourism says, are “apparently the hedonistic feasts of ancient Rome and Greece. It made its appearance in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, where it metamorphosed into the very Latin bouts of song, music and dance. The carnival is presided over by King Momo, who, on the opening day, orders his subjects to party.”

An associated Carnival Food and Cultural Festival will start on February 28.

★ **Rosemary Behan**



The Goa Carnival starts next week in the Indian city of Panaji. Image Broker / Rex