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Maximum altitude

The French ski resort of Val Thorens high up in the Alps offers multiple options for skiers and snowboarders of all skill levels

TED DAVIS

TAKE a deep breath, because you may need it. The sleek resort village of Val Thorens sits at an impressive 2,300m in the French Alps, well above the tree line.

In fact, it is the highest ski resort in Europe. The ski lifts reach even higher, up to an altitude of more than 3,000m in many cases amid seemingly unending powder snow.

That is not the only reason to store some oxygen in your lungs. The scenery will take your breath away, as the winding, switchback road to the top rounds a final corner for the big reveal.

Spread out in wide-angle panorama are snow-blanketed mountains that surround and seem to cradle the village. So immense is the view that the chair and gondola lifts are barely visible, as are the tiny moving dots on the white carpet.

Expressions of admiration escape skiers and snowboarders — including myself — who have weathered the twisting mountain road climb to get here.

Alpine opportunities

After retrieving our jaws from the ground, we started considering the enormous range of activities.

At Val Thorens, there is a wide selection of open bowls, narrower trails and steeper drops (78 marked runs and five terrain parks), with plenty of options for beginner, intermediate and expert downhillers.

The slopes face north and north-west, ensuring shaded conditions to best preserve the late afternoon and late season white powder.

There are ski lifts almost everywhere — a total of 32 — with the highest off-loading at 3,000-plus metres. There are four “funitels” — cable cars that hang from twin cables, reducing the effect of wind on the cars.

Visitors should reserve their accommodations well in advance. The rooms here are taken up briskly even before the ski season starts, but there are more vacancies after the European school breaks in March. Ski season lasts until early May.

Sunny guides

The bright, warm spring sunshine at this altitude makes Val Thorens an attractive winter sport destination even after the height of winter.

The sun beams down with surprising intensity, bronzing happy faces and forcing us to bring out our lighter layers.

The downside is that the snow gets wetter and heavier as the day proceeds, making it harder to initiate turns — resulting in awkward tumbles for some.

We benefited from our guides’ instructions, knowledge of the terrain and ability to source the best runs, and ended each day exhausted, but elated.

Spoilt for options

At this altitude, Val Thorens was not one of the traditional European alpine villages that were built to support agriculture.

The purpose-built community was founded in 1971 with an infrastructure to fully support winter sports.

Many hotels and resorts have ski-in/ski-out locations. They are situated next to downward sloping laneways in the village that have been designed specifically for skiers and boarders.

Guests can exit their hotel, clip on their gear and enter the adjoining laneway to slide down to the lift of their choice. At the end of the day, they simply ride the laneway back to their accommodation, clip out and relax.

Some hotels maximise this part of the day for their guests with welcome-back parties, complete with deejay-driven music and servers handing out drinks. It is a tradition that is easy to like.

After changing their clothes, many head to the village to eat, shop or continue partying at a pub or club.

Val Thorens has pedestrian-only roads lined with eateries, drinking establishments and stores, most of which specialise in ski gear, accessories and fashion.

For those who wish to stay indoors after a day out on the slopes, some resorts offer dine-in options and après-ski fun.

But in the end, it is the skiing and snowboarding that draw visitors like a magnet.



Top: Val Thorens has many options for skiers and snowboarders of all skill levels. Above: The French Alps loom over the hotels and clock tower at Val Thorens. PHOTOS: C.CATTIN OT VAL THORENS, TED DAVIS

GUIDELINES

The most convenient way to access the Les Trois Vallées region and Val Thorens is by flying into Geneva Airport, which is 160km away.

A fun and healthy alternative to skiing, shopping and imbibing is to visit the Val Thorens Sports Centre. It offers a wide range of activities in a 7,500 sq m building, and is open seven days a week from 10am to 10pm. Activities include tennis, squash, badminton, table tennis, volleyball and basketball. There are fitness facilities, two swimming pools, saunas and jacuzzis.

Warm-weather activities await at the resort of Peisey-Vallandry, about two hours by car from Val Thorens. The area has walks and hikes as well as full-on ascents of the peaks in the area.

More adventurous visitors can try paragliding. Tandem flights and lessons can be arranged.

Val Thorens has won the World’s Best Ski Resort title at the World Ski Awards for the last two years.



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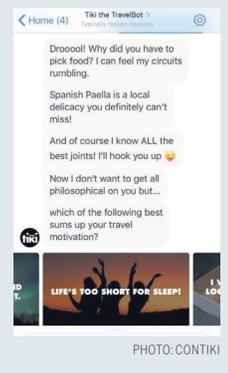


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