

Skiing

Breakfast by the beach, then lunch on the piste — that's the Nice way to ski

An hour's drive from the French Riviera are great slopes where the in-the-know go, says **Tristan Rutherford**

It's 10.30am, Monday. My wife and I are on a snowy mountain top just north of Nice. By 11am we've slalomed down a curving four-mile run without seeing a soul. It feels strange to be here — especially as this morning I ate a sunrise breakfast of croissants and café au lait on the Promenade des Anglais.

To be precise, at 7.30am we hopped on an inexpensive ski bus (£3.30 each way) to Auron, one of a succession of secret slopes in the south of France. Not content with revelling in 300 days of sun per year, lucky locals have also kept these Alpine pistes to themselves. Indeed, each south of France ski resort is tailored towards pampered weekenders from Monaco, Cannes and Nice. Which means super-fast equipment changeover and excellent public transport links. It also means that outside weekends and French school holidays, the slopes are usually empty.

Sure enough, the slopes are crowd-free as we ascend the 2,474m-high Las Donnass, Auron's loftiest peak. From this powder-soft redoubt the surrounding ski resorts of Valberg and Isola 2000 are visible on the horizon. It's an amphitheatre of brilliant white. Some 42 pistes — totalling 135km — wind down to the medieval village of Auron. Skiers predominate, although gentle snowboarders are welcome; poseurs head to Isola 2000's acclaimed snowpark.

Auron built its first ski lift in 1937. It was

a petrol-powered, lift-button-between-the-bottom-cheeks affair. But the resort's popularity grew when the likes of Sacha Distel and Jacques Chirac started swooshing down the slopes. It remained *une affaire française* until recently. Riviera regulars including Russians and Italians then began making day-trip discoveries from the coast. Yet, despite up to 25 daily flights from the UK to Nice, British voices remain rare.

On day two we explore Auron's northern slopes from the 2,453m-high Cime de Chevalet. We glide down a 12-mile blue-run circuit (Bouchlet and Alpages). It's a magic carpet through an Alpine Eden. When we stop we can hear birdsong. Deer tracks stud the snow. Lunch on the slopes is spent in the company of Alpine snowshoers and Nordic skiers. A shared platter of vegetables and potatoes dauphinoise, plus cheeseboard and lager, is €15 (£12) each.

That afternoon we take the chair lift again to Chevalet. We ride near-continuous reds (Riounet, Fournet and Puy) back to the base. It's hard to believe that this ski station, only 55 miles north of Nice, gets so much snow: there was a 25cm powder fall on the higher slopes the night before our visit. But the Alpes-Maritimes resorts usually open from early December until April 27, their northwesterly alignment holding the snow cover.

Our eight-hour powder surf ends with us careening through the family ski enclosure (packed on weekends, empty now). I thump the children's punch bag as I glide past, while my wife rings the mini-club bell.

Yes, our limbs hurt on the 5pm bus back to Nice. The sun had set when we pulled into Nice airport at 6.30pm, as some passengers hopped off for their flight home. But we took solace in the fact that Auron flips into being a summer resort from June onwards, as mountain bikes replace skis on the pistes.

We'll be back for another round of downhill punishment then.

The ski resort of Auron is just over an hour from Nice, below



Need to know

Auron (auron.com) is connected to Nice train station every morning (several times daily at weekends) by the No 740 Ligne d'Azur ski bus (lignesdazur.com, £3.30 each way). The route also calls at Nice airport. Reserve online, then show your printed PDF ticket to the driver.

Where to stay for less in Nice

Hotel Windsor (hotelwindsornice.com) has rooms decorated with modern art and is about 500m from the station and the Med; doubles are from about €80 (£63).

For something a bit fancier, try the Beau Rivage (hotelnicebeaurivage.com), which is where Matisse once stayed, with rooms from about €100 if booked in advance. If you would like to stay in Auron, the village-centre Hotel le Savoie (00 33 493 23 02 51, hotelsavoie.com) offers two nights' half-board with gourmet five-course dinners, plus a three-day lift pass, for €205pp midweek. This is good value, as regular three-day lift passes cost €87.50pp. The hotel has a pool, sauna and steam room. Room prices rise at weekends and during the French school holidays.

Ski hire

For boards, skis and clothing see Ziggy at Zen

Altitude (00 33 493 03 27 23, ziggyshop.fr). Three-day ski hire starts at £31.

Getting there

British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com) offers six-times daily flights from London to Nice from £77.50 return.

French Riviera resorts

Isola 2000 (isola2000.com) is the closest ski resort to Nice (allow an hour from Nice airport by car). It's also the busiest. As large as Auron (with 120km of runs over 42 pistes), it's sunnier and more snowboard friendly, with a massive dedicated snowpark to boot. A wealth of non-ski activities is also available, including snowmobiling, ice driving plus daredevil ski paragliding and speed skiing. Take Ligne d'Azur's No 750 daily ski bus (lignesdazur.com, £3.30 each way) from Nice.

Valberg (valberg.com) is a shade smaller than Auron with 90km of runs, but just as family friendly. There's a family ski park, beginner's snowboard park and plenty of Nordic ski routes. Ligne d'Azur's No 770 ski bus (lignesdazur.com; £3.30 each way) runs from Nice railway station and Nice airport every morning.

Val d'Allos (valdallos.com) is the serious Riviera ski resort. Regular winter snow falls on 230km of pistes over two deep valleys at heights of up to 2,675m. Take the Saturday-only ski bus (haut-verdon-voyages.fr, £37 return) at 1.30pm from Nice airport (three hours) or drive (two hours).



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