



LIFE OF
LEISURE

Travel

The intimate slopes of Sainte Foy

Catherine Feore follows the tracks of
Alpine wildlife... and skiers



February is one of the dankest months of the year. Christmas and the New Year are over, the cleansing month of January – and feeling virtuous – has passed and it's usually pretty cold. However, it is a good time to look forward and think about a nice break to recharge your batteries. What better than to get out into the beautifully clean air of the French Alps? There are many well-trodden spots, like Val d'Isère and Tignes, but nestled in the Haute Tarentaise is the more intimate station of Sainte Foy.

Despite its human scale, Sainte Foy has every amenity you could want. Twenty-five pistes to cater for every level of ability,

heliskiing, raquettes (snow shoes) with guides and many other activities. It is just lovely to swish down the slopes and admire the scenery, but it is difficult to get a real sense of the nature and fauna around you when you're travelling at speed.

“ THE BEAUTIFULLY CLEAN AIR OF THE FRENCH ALPS ”

A small group of us decided to do the raquettes with Jean Pierre, an experienced nature guide from ESF (Ecole du Ski Français). We saw tracks of mountain

hare, chamois (which is like a cross between a goat and an antelope), wild boar, fox, deer, black squirrel and most exciting of all, a wolf. Fortunately, wolves are scared of bipeds. I think they suspect humans of being a peculiar variety of bear.



There is a preserved mountain hamlet, Le Monal, which has not changed since the 18th century and where you can see how people used to live in this remote location. It is classed as being of great architectural, historic and geographical significance and looks out on the Massif of Mont Pourri.

We stayed in the Résidence CGH Les Fermes de Sainte Foy. The chalets were beautifully designed with two bedrooms, a comfortable sitting room and a well-equipped kitchen. Each bedroom had its own balcony. I was lucky enough to be there when there was a full moon, which made the mountains look particularly beautiful at night. You can do your own cooking, but it is possible to order traditional Savoyard dishes, at very reasonable prices, and there is also the possibility of ordering bread and viennoiseries for breakfast. All residents have access to the fitness room, swimming pool and the not-to-be-missed Ô des Cimes spa.

“ THERE ARE OUTDOOR HOT TUBS ”

An interesting figure that I was surprised to learn was that 30% of those who stay are non-skiers. CGH's facilities mean that they can offer more than most for this group. There are also other activities, such as raquettes with Tai Chi or yoga. On another day, some of our group joined an Evolution2 group to try Afghan raquettes. This is perfect

for those who really want to destress. Olivia explained that the technique of matching steps and breathing is used by Afghans who sometimes walk as far as 60 kilometres across the desert. The

combination of nature and a focus on breathing leads to deep relaxation.

Sainte Foy is particularly popular with families. There is a day centre for children and 'Le Club Piou Piou', run by ESF, which offers courses for children as young as three years old. Céline Fraissard, director of ESF's ski school, says that they can provide for all levels, from the very young to those who are very good, and can even explore off-piste



terrain. ESF, while making skiing fun, also ensure that students learn a good technique that will serve them well as they develop.

For après-ski, the Black Diamond Lodge located at the bottom of the La Bataillette piste has a wonderful cosy bar where you can listen to unobtrusive live music and enjoy a drink or two. Once you've sunk into a sofa beside the log fire and ordered some bar food, you won't want to move. There are outdoor hot tubs, if you want to soak your tired legs. The Black Diamond Lodge has more luxurious suites, each decorated in a charming way.

The picturesque hamlet of Le Miroir is home to Chez Mérie. The restaurant is perfectly decorated and is a mixture of traditional chalet with well-chosen modern elements and eclectic tableware. As you open the door, you can immediately smell the gigot d'agneau or ribs being cooked over the large fire. The menu is traditional Savoyard, with a touch of the Ottolenghi approach that uses largely locally sourced ingredients, and their puddings are legendary. The restaurant is

unusual in that it has been run by several generations of women.

Another nice local restaurant is Le Monal, established in 1888 and still in the same family. The menu is seasonal gourmet fare - and they have a great wine collection. We enjoyed a boeuf bourguignon made with cheek of beef and a wonderful dauphinois. At the end of the meal, we were offered a traditional Génépi des Alpes liqueur - it is a Protected Geographical Indication product that's made by slowly macerating the Génépi plants only found above 1,500m before distillation.

The best way to get to the Haute Tarentaise is by train. Bourg-Saint-Maurice Train Station is 15km from Sainte Foy. There is an exceptionally good offer for the week beginning 29 February, for €260/person based on 4 adults sharing an apartment in a tourist residence, including ski pass, equipment and lessons. The offer is valid while stocks last, online at www.saintefoy-reservation.com or by phone on +33 (0)4 79 00 94 15. 📍