

The peak of perfection

Top terrain, serene slopes and not a queue in sight - *Claire Sharrock* discovers snow utopia in the French Alps



SNOW-ONE AROUND: It's not unusual to find you have the slope to yourself... but mind those cliffs!

The snowy slopes of anywhere seem a million miles away as we enter the stifling UAE summer. But if you're a winter sports fan, now is the time you need to be planning your next alpine escapade - especially if you have kids in tow and want to travel during school holidays.

And what better way to get yourself through these muggy months than to put a mountain date in the diary? If your idea of snow heaven is slopes with space, top terrain and a charming resort where you never have to queue for a ski lift, it does exist - even in the famous French Alps.

The relatively small, but perfectly formed resort of Sainte Foy in the Tarentaise valley may not be the most famous in the region, but it does boast all of the above.

Just down the road from mega-resorts Val d'Isere, Les Arcs and Tignes, this quaint village may just be the area's best-kept secret. It was described to me, pre-visit, as a hidden gem. As a rule, you find that most places don't live up to this billing. They are either not that well hidden, or not that much of a gem.

But Sainte Foy really can claim to be both. It only opened in 1990, a few miles up the valley from the original village of Sainte Foy Tarentaise. But there's no concrete monstrosities here. Instead the purpose-built chalets are constructed from local timber and stone and building is strictly controlled to keep it this way.

Initial research might have you thinking that a resort with only four main lifts is going to be pretty small and likely to run out of challenges for anyone but beginners.

But on exploring the Sainte Foy slopes on day one, we soon discovered some of the best terrain we'd ever boarded.

For snowboarders and those skiers who relish off-piste, it offers everything you could want - from tricky tree runs to playgrounds of powder features. And the icing on the cake - and the reason it does justify true gem status - it really feels like you have the mountain to yourself.



In neighbouring Val or Les Arcs it's like rush hour on Sheikh Zayed Road coming down the lower runs for lunch.

And any off-piste is tracked out within hours of fresh snow. In a no-show snow week - that results in hard, icy pistes and rock-hard, nobbly off-piste - just uncomfortable and frustrating on a snowboard.

In Sainte Foy - especially if you go exploring - you can go hours without seeing another soul.

No surprise then that this is the resort the instructors and locals choose to ski on their precious days off.

For serious boarders and skiers there are some extremely challenging off-piste runs - the famous North Face of the Fogliettaz is not for the faint-hearted but a real favourite of thrill-seeking daredevils.

With only one of the latter in our party of two, we opted instead for the more accessible, but absolutely stunning, off-piste route that leads to Le Monal.

This tiny hamlet, which dates back to the 18th century, is only inhabited in the summer - as it can only be reached in the winter after a hefty trek on snowshoes or from above, on a snowboard or some fat powder skis.

Gliding over pristine snow surrounded by majestic peaks as far as the eye can see is a breathtaking experience - and a thrill for any winter sports enthusiast. This fairly gentle route is the perfect introduction to real back-country skiing, accessible to more than just the experts or the crazies.

And at the end of it, one of the most pictur-

SAINTE FOY MUST-DOS

VISIT CHEZ MERIE

Do not visit this resort without booking yourself in for dinner at this superb restaurant, hidden in the tiny hamlet of Le Miroir, a 20-minute drive from Sainte Foy. It's housed in a large, traditional Savoyard chalet and as you step inside, you feel like you're entering someone's cosy sitting room. As you browse the menu by the roaring open fire, your dinner could well be being cooked right in front of you as huge joints of meat sizzle in the open hearth. Think traditional Provencal cuisine with a twist and a sprinkle of home-cooked magic. Owner Marie (yes, Marie Merie is her name) is still the head chef at the restaurant and can be spotted bustling in and out of the kitchen on most evenings.

HIRE A GUIDE

To make the most of the area's off-piste and certainly if you want to take on any of the real

back country outside of the ski area, you should hire a guide for the day. These guys know the mountain like the back of their hand so they'll not only help you discover the most challenging and enjoyable terrain it has to offer but will also help keep you safe and in areas that suit your level. We spent a fantastic day with funky Frenchman, Philippe Troubat, discovering Le Monal (pictured) - it was absolutely exhausting but worth every minute.



BOOK A MASSAGE

Through Ste Foy chalet specialists, Première Neige, you can book masseuse Sarah, who will come to your chalet and sort out your aches and pains - which will be many if you've made the most of your time. A truly welcome end to a tiring day.

INDULGE IN A DOUGHNUT

Filled with oozing warm chocolate - a snack shack at the top of the second lift serves these. Grab one with a gluvine - the ultimate pit-stop.

esque views anyone could imagine - a tiny village hibernating amid a winter wonderland. For those who like to stay firmly on the piste, there are plenty of options here too - and of course a beginner's area if you're just starting to learn or want to leave your kids to do so while you enjoy the higher slopes.

The quiet nature of the resort makes it a safe choice to make your first turns.

What Sainte Foy has in character and space, it does lack in nightlife. No clubs or streets of bars here - just a handful of charming, traditional restaurants and friendly bars.

But if you've got any energy left after a physically challenging day exploring this mountain, a party is not too far away with Val and Les Arc just a short taxi ride away.

However, we found the sensational cuisine and luscious local red wine served up in the cosy eateries of the village were the perfect way to round off our slope adventures - and re-fuel us for the challenges of the next day.

claire.sharrock@7days.ae



A Première stay...





If you want to enjoy all Sainte Foy has to offer, Première Neige will make it happen. The company, which is based in the resort, has a wide-range of catered and self-catered accommodation for you to choose from with some truly stunning chalets on its books.

If you'd like to make sure you do not have to lift a finger on your holiday, Première Neige's catered options are the ultimate ski retreats - luxurious mountain living for up to 14 people that includes your own private chef.

There are also self-catered options for those who want quality and flexibility. We stayed in apartment Le Petit Paradis. Two minutes from the first lift, its location was perfect and its wonderful log fire and under-floor heating much-appreciated, as we had temperatures of

-10C to -20C during our week's stay. Première Neige will take care of your airport transfers and organise a welcome hamper for you so you don't have to pop to the village supermarket immediately you arrive. The team will also arrange delivery of fresh bread and croissants each morning of your stay.

The company also books your ski passes and equipment and any other activities you might want to enjoy.

Its attentive and friendly concierge service is there for any other queries or requirements you might have and if you're travelling with young children, crèche facilities are also available.

I can honestly say I have never dealt with a friendlier or more accommodating holiday company in all my travels - the staff really can't do enough for you.



FANCY A TRIP TO SAINTE FOY?

For bookings and a truly memorable winter holiday experience, visit www.premiere-neige.com, email snow@premiere-neige.com or call the booking line in the UK on +44 (0)870 383 1000. Sainte Foy can be reached from Geneva, Lyon, Grenoble or Chambéry airports. You can fly from the UAE to Geneva with Etihad or Qatar Airways.