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From grunge to glamour, Graham Bell reveals how Val d'Isère changed skiing



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The Ski Sunday presenter charts the 130-year history of the popular French resort



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By **Graham Bell**

9 NOVEMBER 2018 • 2:46PM

Val d'Isère has shaped my life as a skier more than any other

V resort. It is where, in 1982, I skied my first downhill course, on the Oreiller/Killy (OK) run. Named after local racing legends Henri Oreiller, a double Olympic gold medallist in 1948, and Jean-Claude Killy, a triple Olympic gold medallist in 1968, the run got easier with practice, but at 16 years old it felt terrifyingly fast to me.

Val d'Isère is also where I competed in the 1992 Winter Olympics on the notorious La Face, and where I have skied my most memorable off piste, such as the Couloir des Pisteurs. It was a home from home while racing on the World Cup tour in the Eighties and Nineties, and it's where I met my wife Sarah while she was working as a chalet girl in the mid-Eighties.

Barely a season has passed since without me skiing its mountains. Val d'Isère helped to change me as a racer and skier, but the resort has also mapped the entire skiing zeitgeist of each of the past four decades.

At the time of that first downhill run on the OK I was with the British junior team, and we stayed in Sixties-built apartment blocks in La Daille – ugly, tired-looking boxes. Now any new build must be stone-clad with a pitched roof in traditional style.

We couldn't help noticing back then that the resort's lift system was very much in need of serious regeneration, too. The Solaise cable car, built in 1940, was still clunking up the mountain from the village to Solaise, one of Val d'Isère's main areas. And the La Daille gondola might have looked like Sixties chic, but fitting four big downhill racers into a cabin was a tight squeeze, even in Lycra catsuits.



Graham with his racer brother Martin and their mother

Investment in infrastructure from the Eighties on has been phenomenal. The opening of the Funival underground funicular in 1987 was the beginning of the transformation and since then there has

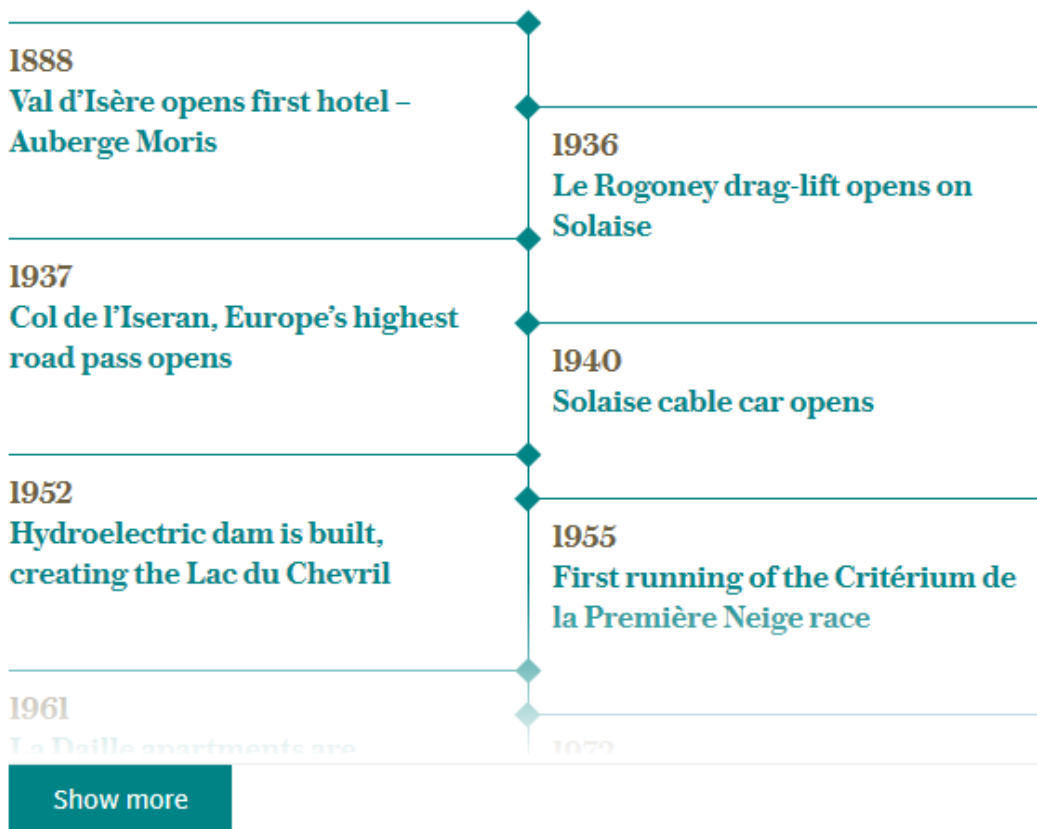
hardly been a new lift that's not state of the art, from a sleek 10-person gondola for Solaise to the [ongoing £170m regeneration](#) that includes underground moving walkways in town and an American-style day lodge on the mountain.

BBC commentator Matt Chilton, who first skied in Val d'Isère in 1985, is a particular fan of the powerful Olympique gondola, built in 2002, which accesses the slopes of Belvedere from close to the centre of town. "I'm fortunate to have skied all over the world and I'm convinced that the Olympique is the finest ski lift on the planet," he says. "In terms of speed, capacity and vertical uplift, nothing comes close."

The Eighties saw a boom in the [British catered-chalet holiday](#), with Val d'Isère a key destination. My wife Sarah was working at Le Clos, one of the larger Mark Warner chalets, when we met. There were 12 chalet girls (no boys), dinner was served in large dishes at 7.30pm prompt, with one guest being 'mother'. The family trip we took last Easter, staying at Inghams' Chalet Hotel & Spa Le Savoie, is a good example of how the roles of resort staff have changed, as Sarah notes: "Clean rooms and mixed staff in smart uniforms – such a contrast to the baggy tops, leggings and cowboy boots we wore in the Eighties."

Val d'Isère timeline

The changing face of Val d'Isère over the past 130 years



My first experience of the luxury end of the chalet market came in the

late Nineties at Le Chardon Mountain Lodges, with champagne and canapés, gourmet meals and an outdoor pool. Throughout the 2000s the high-end market boomed, with openings such as the splendid Eagle's Nest, and Chalet Husky with its indoor climbing, archery and rifle-shooting. The luxury sector continues apace, including five-star boutique hotel Le Refuge underway on Solaise.

This demand for high-end service extends to the high street. Susan and Jock Dun set up their first hire shop in Val d'Isère in 1991 and now run Snowberry rental. "Our customers have certainly become more demanding over the past 30 years," says Susan. "Most people in Val d'Isère realise the importance of decent equipment that's properly serviced and correctly adjusted, but they expect top-quality equipment and service at a value-for-money price."

Other Val d'Isère stalwarts have witnessed and prospered from the evolution. Founder of YSE chalet holidays, John Yates-Smith's first job in the resort, in 1976, was washing dishes at the Fjord hotel. As he recalls, "I was paid £5 a week, while my brother Dick was paid £12 as a rep. He had a room and I slept under the ping-pong table. Val d'Isère was rather a hairy-chested place then – accommodation was basic and hot water a luxury. Après consisted of four sleazy nightclubs playing Johnny Hallyday and frequented by Parisians in leather trousers."



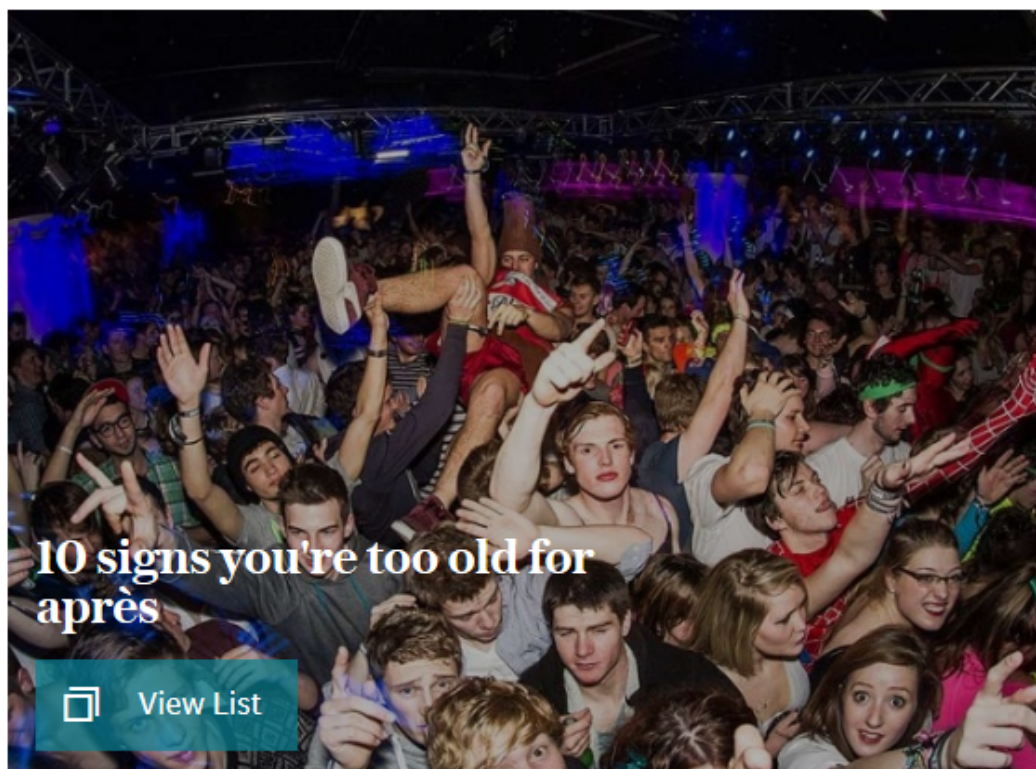
Flat-roofed Val in the 1980s

John Yates-Smith's brother Dick opened Dick's T-Bar in 1979. It started with little more than a dry-ice machine and a tape recorder but it became the place on the World Cup tour for a post-race party.

Val d'Isère was a lot more punk back then. An old haunt of mine featured a bubblegum wall, with every inch covered in used gum, stuck on by the clientele on their way out. One throwback that has stood the test of time is the Moris Pub. Matt Chilton was its manager for a season

in the early Nineties. “It is possibly the last remaining link to the Eighties,” laughs Matt.

On the mountain, the Folie Douce, at the top of the La Daille cable car, hired Kely Starlight as artistic director in 1996, and Austrian-style après was given an Ibiza twist. The partying has not stopped since.



In town, Dick Yates-Smith sold his bar in 1997 and it has undergone a number of makeovers. However, the regeneration plan for the heart of the resort, called Le Coin de Val and adding 900 extra guest beds, will see Dick's T-Bar knocked down and relocated completely.

Jim Adlington first skied in Val d'Isère in 1992, working his way up from pot-washer to professional freeskiier, and set up Planks Clothing to reflect the swing in popularity from snowboarding to freeskiing. “When I arrived in the resort there were loads of ski bums and snowboarders from all over the world living a hand-to-mouth existence, just so they could ride every day. It's impossible to be in Val d'Isère for the winter now and not work.”

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Another change is the increasing number of people who come to Val d'Isère just for the après. Jim's not complaining, though: "We should thank places like Dick's for partying all night because fewer people, especially the seasonaires, are skiing off piste. So it keeps all those classic lines free on a powder day."

Last season saw an abundance of powder days in Val d'Isère, as good as any I can remember. Yes, the resort may have changed, but the mountains remain as challenging and awe-inspiring as ever.

The essentials

[Inghams](#) offers seven nights at five-star Chalet Hotel & Spa Le Savoie in Val d'Isère centre from £1,085 half-board, including a choice of complimentary wines, return flights from Gatwick to Geneva and transfers. A six-day lift pass costs from €285 per adult and €228 per child (age 5-13). For more information on Val d'Isère, visit [valdisere.com](#).