

TAKE THE PLUN



Photo: VAL D'ISÈRE TOURISME

THE CLASSIC FRENCH ALPS RESORT OF VAL D'ISÈRE IS TRULY A DESTINATION OF DISTRACTIONS. BY LESLIE WOIT

Drysuit, dry mouth. Full rubber face mask, moon-landing screw-on gloves. With a final thumbs-up, I clamp my legs around the

instructor like a cheap hooker and sink to my fate, slipping lifelessly beneath a frozen lake.

A spot of ice diving was kindly

arranged by my private concierge at Elephant Blanc, the luxuriously appointed chalet in Val d'Isère by the British tour operator Consensio. Its deep sofas, crackling fires and bottomless supply of Laurent Perrier suddenly represented a far superior option to a cold bath in Lac Tignes. Yes, it's true; a beautiful underworld of lava-lamp bubbles did boil and bounce within this icy netherzone—

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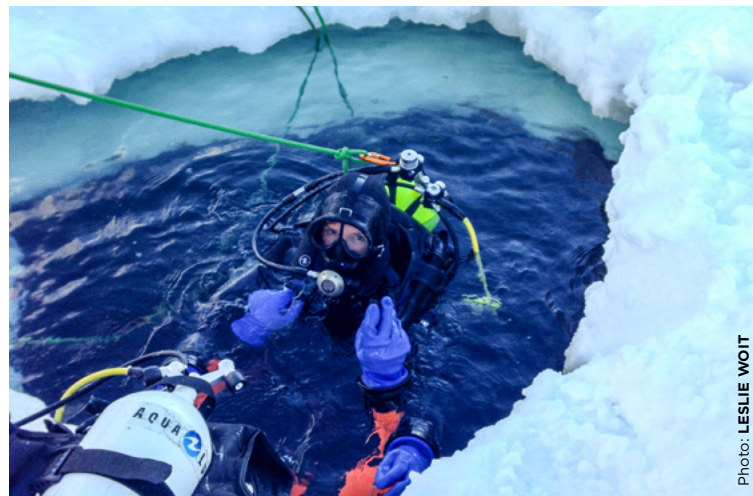


Photo: LESLIE WOIT

the land of snow, sun and the ski domain of Espace Killy. Sometimes you just have to take the plunge. Other times, you should stick to more normal après-ski activities.

For skiers, jumping into the big mountains of Val d'Isère—300 km of groomers, endless off-piste and the spiritual home of Olympian golden boy Jean-Claude Killy—is an even more rewarding prospect. Hard on the heels of last winter's record-busting snowfalls (more than three metres fell in January alone), Val's giant slice of the Savoie dishes up unfurling peaks and guaranteed snow from late November until May. Long a classic alpine destination sprung from an 11th-century village, Val is currently undergoing a flux of self-improvement, well into a \$300 million redevelopment plan that includes new hotels, 100 private chalets and an underground moving walkway to the lifts.

France's highest hotel, Le Refuge de Solaise (2,551m), opened its dorm and apartment accommodation this winter. But next autumn, what was

plete with a memorable restaurant and glorious sundeck swirling in a 360-degree sweep of Espace Killy.

After evenings spent in sauna, massage and five-course luxury, we skied each morning from the door of Elephant Blanc on high-powder alert. Just tipping over off the edge of the pistes here is a slice of shin-deep heaven, and despite heavy snowfalls and corresponding risk of avalanche, our guide found gentle-grade stable slopes. From Solaise, to Le Fornet, to Grand Motte's tippy-top of 3,546m (this season it features new glass-bottom gondolas), by 3:00 p.m. our thighs were throbbing with joy. That's lucky, since soon our heads were throbbing, too, with the unmistakable tschoonk-tschoonk-tschoonk of dance music pulsing across the peaks. If it's French après-ski, it's gotta be La Folie Douce.

"Après-ski is relatively new in France," says Kely Starlight, artistic director at La Folie Douce, whose half-dozen mountain restaurant-bars have emerged as the adult Eurodisney of French après-ski after starting in Val d'Isère 12 years ago. "We have to teach the people here how to drink and have fun." And he's off, sashaying down the catwalk among hundreds of alfresco revellers, his beanie and his booty bobbing to the beat.

La Folie Douce's La Fruitière restaurant serves excellent and stylish lunch fare, alongside signature magnums of rosé. (Don't worry, this season there's a new escalator to pour

you back into the gondola.) Dining in Savoie, as in all France, is serious business. And here, perhaps more than any other department, one of its primary ingredients is cheese. Fondue, raclette and tangy tartiflette are sacred staples of the devoted. Each winter, Val d'Isère's restaurants serve an estimated 300,000 fondues—roughly 10 elephants' worth of cheese. At Hotel Avancher you'll find the best. One of Val d'Isère's recent magnificent makeovers, Hotel Avancher has been beautifully updated and polished after 60 years on the main street. Intimate wood-lined ambience holds all 21st-century indulgences, including a panoramic spa and a seriously sought-after wine and fondue menu.

For a dip into alpine history with your Beaufort, choose a table at The Ski Gallery and Fondue Factory. On display, The Killy Family collection of vintage skis, boots and ephemera spans a century of *le glisse*. The concept of Dimitri and Mick Killy, nephew and younger brother of Olympian Jean-Claude, this aromatic address combines industrial chic with a night at the museum. It's just one good choice in a resort that's full of them—whether at the top of the mountain, the bottom of the lake or the beating heart of its famous *centre-ville*. If you've never been or haven't been lately, it's time to take the plunge. After all, you have to love a place whose mantra comes straight from the cheesy heart: In Tartiflette We Trust. ☘

“ We have to teach the people here how to drink and have fun. ”

but after about 10 minutes of my newly discovered paranoid claustrophobia, I was happy to pop back into

once the oldest lift station in the country (built in 1942) reimagines boutique, five-star splendour com-