



A hidden gem with skiing for all the family

There are three ski resorts in the southern French Alps that are within striking distance of Nice and Nice Airport (namely Valberg, Auron and Isola 2000) and Valberg is the nearest one to the Cote d'Azur capital.

It's also the smallest one and it's barely an hour away from the runway of Nice Airport by hired car and a bit longer by the regular bus service. This little village last year celebrated its 80th anniversary of its existence as a ski station and it cuts a relaxed and welcoming presence as you enter.

Both the small size and convenience are strong advantages: Large resorts are all very well but unless you're planning on skiing every hour of the day for about 10 consecutive days, do you need 500km of pistes? Also, Valberg's size means that it's an overwhelmingly French and very family-oriented ski resort. What it lacks in size, therefore, it more than makes up for in authenticity.

So unlike some of the Trois Vallées resorts or the likes of Les Arcs at certain times of the year, you really don't forget that you're in France and not some outpost of a British young men's drinking contest.

The atmosphere is pleasant and friendly and it's still large enough to have all you might want — decent skiing for all levels, plenty of places to eat and drink and a good line in peripheral activities.

We happened to arrive at the lowest snow-cover point — three weeks after the previous snow fall and only a week before the next thick covering of natural snow.

I had always wondered just how a ski resort copes

when there's a lack of snow about the place. I was to find my answer here.

They seemed to be coping extremely well with the situation. It was a strange sight when you got up on the higher slopes to see mostly brown earth, green trees and rock in the countryside all around you, while the pistes and the areas surrounding the ski lifts were still covered in a thick blanket of snow.

This is how well the snow machines work. What's more, at Valberg, they do a really good job of maintaining the surface of the piste, the man in the hire shop told us with great pride.

We tried out a number of them, mostly blue runs, and they were all in perfect or near-perfect condition; something you can't always say for resorts where they have a full coverage of natural snow.

Between the celestial snowfalls and the human snow machines, the resort guarantees snow coverage on 85% of their slopes.

From Valberg's highest point (Dreccia 2,011m), there's a very scenic red piste and from here you can look at the spectacular combination of views of Alpine mountains and the azure Mediterranean Sea.

There are 56 pistes in all, covering 90km.

There are plenty of other facilities too, such as the Snow Park, the Family Park, the Video Zone of the Family Park and the Big Air Bag (in French, they call it 'Le Big Air Bag').

With the latter, you can practice your jumps, safe in the knowledge that as you mess it up, you won't hurt yourself with a big inflated airbag to break your fall.

Valberg also does a unique Planetary Trail in

If you're looking for a family-friendly place to ski that won't break the bank, then Valberg is the place, says **Conor Power**



Valberg in the southern French Alps: Valberg's size means that it's an overwhelmingly French and very family-oriented ski resort.

the heart of the resort. It adds a bit of variety to the exploration of the mountains and it's particularly popular with children. There is a good range of shops (one good supermarket and various other tabacs/newsagents and gift shops), a cinema, restaurants and pubs. There's even an 'Irish' crêperie called L'Irlandais — just in case you're homesick and in need of the comfort of a Hibernian pancake. I wasn't there long enough to sample many of

them but I can vouch for the quality of food at Le Chalet Suisse. It's a very fine-looking Swiss-style hotel, with maximum use of timber and a lounge area that you can lounge in all evening long. The food is superb too and the owners turn out a great standard in cuisine and service. The accommodation is excellent too — at the upper end of the 3-star range and it's right beside the main ski lift. There's a decidedly non-competitive vibe at Valberg. There are no posers, no

gangs of crazy drinkers, no pumped-up party animals and no rudeness (at least I didn't see any but I was wearing goggles most of the time). It's relaxed — a bit of skiing followed by a bit of eating and drinking. There was also a comedy festival on at the same time (le Festival du Rire en Montagne). I did ask around and it was apparently very good — with a mixture of nationally-famous talent and young up-and-coming acts putting an

extra smile on the faces of everyone there. Extra-curricular activities include some superb spa treatment at the Centre 1700 Wellness Centre, as well as the Motoneige (snowmobile) place. We had to try this one out. Joel the owner took us through a brief and boring-but-necessary safety drill before taking off up the slopes at brilliant breakneck speed. It's the best money you'll spend and you can even do overnight adventures where

you sleep in a yurt up the mountain as part of the deal. At breakfast the morning after our first day on the slopes, our ears picked up the familiar sound of Irish accents emanating from the table next to us. It was a family from Dublin who were holidaying on the Riviera coast and who had been tempted to take the stunning winding road into the Alps. So someone else had discovered Valberg? We asked

them if it was their first time to the place. It turned out that they'd known about it for years. "We love it," said their 20-something daughter. "It's a great spot to get a bit of skiing and to chill out ... you can even purchase ski insurance on a daily basis." And there we were thinking that we were the first ones to discover such a gem. Why didn't someone tell us sooner?

GETTING THERE

How to Get There:

Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) is the only airline that currently operates a year-round direct service to Nice from Dublin. Take bus no. 770 from either the airport or Nice itself for €4 return if you pre-book on www.lignesdazur.com or €5 if you pay on the bus.

Staying There:

We stayed at the irresistibly comfortable and friendly Le Chalet Suisse, right on the main square. It looks like an Alpine hotel should look and is steeped in generations of catering.

Shopping:

There are a few shops worth checking out for their charm and where you'll pick up something nice that really speaks of the French Alps. Try "Le Chalet" on the Place du Quartier — a décor and souvenir shop that has examples of fantastic local craftsmanship you'll be hard pressed to find anywhere else. Boulangerie La Miche on Route de Péone, meanwhile, is the best of the traditional boulangeries in Valberg.

More Information:

www.valberg.com
www.visitcotedazur.travel



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