

■ THE BIG RESORT GUIDE { Val Thorens }

Chilling in the Alps

What do you do at a ski resort when skiing is off the table? Bandaged-up writer **Florence Derrick** makes it her mission to find out in Val Thorens



PHOTO CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK

Val Thorens

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“Val Thorens has just been named the world’s best ski resort”



It's sod's law. Two weeks before I'm due to fly to Geneva to go skiing in the French Alps, I've broken my wrist and – unsurprisingly – careering down an icy mountain on a pair of skis is strictly forbidden by my doctor. As my taxi edges

up the winding road to Val Thorens between roadside piles of shovelled snow, I'm praying there will be enough to do at the resort to stop me from concealing my casted arm in a thick jacket and hitting the slopes regardless.

At 2,300m, Val Thorens is Europe's highest ski resort. Up here, the weather's too harsh for trees to grow, save a few skeletal specimens clinging between rocky crags. It's 15 degrees colder than Geneva, and in these inhospitable conditions, you'd better hope that the resort's hotels can

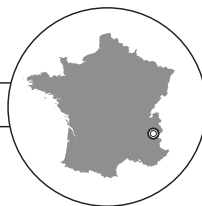
keep the chill out. They do more than that. Val Thorens has just been named the world's best ski resort by more than a million voters at the World Ski Awards, and not just because of its early-season snow and epic ski runs which link to the world's largest ski area, Les 3 Vallées.

Recuperation is why I'm here, and, happily, Val Thorens has partnered with stress-management expert Dr Philippe Rodet to publish *My Serenity*, a wellbeing method outlined in a leaflet available from the tourist office. “Val Thorens has all the ingredients for eliminating stress and recharging the batteries,” says Rodet. “The sports, the people and the scenery are perfect for finding the keys to happiness.”

The resort used to be known for its affordable and lively après-ski, and while the *rue de la soif* (the main strip of bars nicknamed ‘thirsty street’) still heaves with twenty-somethings and club La Folie Douce pumps out electro in the afternoons, partying is not the resort's main offering.

Clockwise from above: Guests at the Hotel Pashmina strike a tree pose as they warm up on the slopes with some yoga; Alpen Art is part gallery and part healthy dining and part calorie conscious breakfast buffet at Hotel Pashmina

PHOTO CREDITS: GERARD COTTET, CYRIL CATTIN, THIBAUT LOUBERE, ALAMY, SNOW BIKE FESTIVAL / NICK MUZIK



At the five-star Hotel Pashmina, I'm introduced to the new 'wellbeing circuit' – a breakfast buffet packed with a range of muesli, fruit juices and a milk bar that adds soy, oats, coconut and rice to the dairy staples. Next comes a yoga class, while skiers practice their own warrior poses in full gear in the snow during a 'Zen Yogi' warm-up session.

Taking care of mind, body and soul is at the heart of several new businesses in Val Thorens. Health-conscious cuisine has reached the mountains, providing alternatives to traditional heavy fondues and cured meats. "It's a challenge in a region where everyone expects *saucisson*," says former pro-freerider Amélie Simond, who is behind Supernova, Val Thorens' first organic vegetarian restaurant and concept store selling streetwear alongside cold-press fruit juice and vegan quiche on bamboo plates. "It's my job to show people vegetarian food is just as tasty and they can still leave with a full belly." In fact, the restaurant offerings across Val Thorens go far beyond mountain fare. Seafood is delivered to the resort daily and many places mix a clean-eating philosophy with Asian flair: La Rotisserie, the restaurant at hotel Fahrenheit 7 serves beef tataki, sesame-crusted tuna tartare and Thai prawns with rice noodles.

Also pushing the wellness trend is new eatery-cum-art gallery Alpen Art, where local painters' canvases are sold in a space decked out in Scandi-style wooden furnishings and faux-fur throws. Its vegetarian-friendly menu features European-Asian fusion and the space hosts Qigong Chinese meditation classes each Monday afternoon (€13 for an hour and a half). "At high altitude, breath work is very important," explains teacher Caroline Vincent as she guides me through a series of slow, meditative poses designed to channel energy and improve health. "It allows you to connect with



The hills are alive with events



THE ONE FOR CLUBBERS

GAROSNOW FESTIVAL (12-13 January)

Enjoy winter sports by day and electronic music by night at this festival in Les Angles – a ski resort in the French Pyrenees (fly to Toulouse). garosnow.com



THE ONE FOR CYCLISTS

SNOW BIKE FESTIVAL (18-21 January)

Head to Gstaad for the Snow Bike Festival, which combines alpine grub, fashion and cheering on the participants (fly to Geneva). snowbikefestival.com



THE ONE FOR EXPERTS

DER WEISSE RING (20 January)

Strong skiers can take part in the 50th anniversary of the White Ring ski circuit that lies between the Austrian resorts of Lech and Zürs (fly to Basel).

dasrennen.at



Left: Pampering surrounded by powder - the inside-outside pool at Alta Pura
Below: The spa at the five-star Hotel Pashmina

the harsh natural environment and helps you relax and manage your emotions.” Something that comes in handy if, like me, you’re suffering from winter sports FOMO.

But if there’s one sure way to banish FOMO, it’s with a beauty treatment at Hotel Altapura. The spa’s Pure Altitude product line uses organic plants sourced from extreme natural conditions – edelweiss flower, mountain berries and essential oils – with the philosophy that products derived from the mountains can best soothe skin exposed to the same conditions. After 80 blissful minutes of scrubs, masks, serums and creams, the pampering continues with a dip in the inside-outside pool with a view of skiers. It’s on a par with the Hotel Pashmina’s sauna, where a wide porthole looks directly onto a ski run, backed by an imposing rocky precipice. Ladling more water onto the baking rocks and gazing smugly at the blizzard outside, I can’t quite remember why I wanted to ski in the first place.

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My Val Thorens

Aurelie Rey, owner of gallery-bistro Alpen Art



“I was born in Val Thorens. My father was from a village nearby and my grandfather used to say: ‘You can’t stay in Val Thorens. It’s too high, too windy, there’s too much snow.’

“Better technology has made things easier. When I was little we couldn’t leave the village for a week because of avalanches. We couldn’t go to school because it was buried in snow.

“Val Thorens is very special because there was nothing here before it was created in 1972. It has a pioneering spirit because of that and solidarity among people. When someone does well, it’s good for everyone.

“I love hiking. The energy in the mountains is very beautiful. The only thing I look for when I go out on a hike is a high vantage point where I can sit on the rocks and look over the Alps. Afterwards, my favourite place to hang out is the lounge bar at Hotel Pashmina. It’s the only place other than Alpen Art in Val Thorens that supports local artists’ work.”

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