

Travel

Val Thorens: experience the Alpine high life



The Tyrolienne - the world's highest zip wire

by **Hanna Tavner**

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The world's highest zip wire

Francis, our ski guide, brings us to an abrupt stop next to a little wooden hut on the edge of a mountain. "Now we will go over there," he proclaims, gesticulating across the expansive, white valley below.

Yet there is no lift, nor a piste. Just the equivalent of a giant steel washing line stretching from one peak to another.

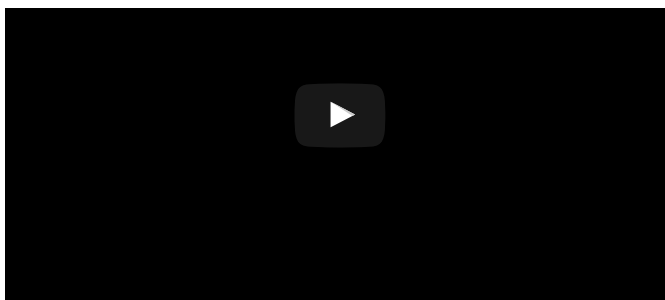
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Turns out this is the Tyrolienne -the world's highest zip wire. At 3,230m, it goes from the top of the Bouchet chairlift in Orelle to the top of the Funitel de Thorens in the Val Thorens ski area.

The "flight" takes about 1 minute 45 seconds, reaching speeds of between 65 and 105kph. For €50 (£42.50), anyone aged eight to 88 can have a go.

Though sadly not today. A strong wind suddenly picks up and all "flights" are immediately cancelled. Still, Francis, used to the sudden change in weather, is quick to provide an alternative adrenaline fix and takes us offpiste to ski in stunning spring powder.





Easy journey to the Alps

The day's buzz is a far cry from our sedate journey to the French Alps 24 hours ago. We travelled to Paris by Eurostar before taking the high-speed TGV to Moûtiers, a 45-minute drive from the resort.

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Val Thorens is the highest ski resort in Europe. Sitting at 2,300m altitude, it has a long season (26 November to 1 May) as well as a fantastic snow record – an important factor considering the poor snow conditions that have affected Christmas and New Year breaks the past few seasons.



Resort renaissance

Once the destination of choice for large student groups, the resort has undergone a renaissance and now has a glut of luxury hotels and fine dining restaurants.

Like most purpose-built resorts from the Seventies, it's not overly attractive. But what it lacks in charm, it makes up for in convenience, facilities and some of the best skiing in Europe.

Largest ski area in the world

Part of the 3 Vallées, the largest ski area in the world with more than 600km of runs, Val Thorens is an ideal base for skiers of all levels. It's easy to head over into Méribel and Courchevel for the day and take advantage of the different terrain.

Both resorts offer stunning skiing, though some links between the resorts can get quite busy towards the end of the day. To avoid the queues, we head to Orelle. Often referred to by locals as the "fourth valley", we enjoy empty, wide-open slopes before stopping for a drink in a deckchair to catch some rays.



The ski area is situated in a vast natural cirque overlooked by six glaciers and there are a multitude of itineraries available. So when it's a "bluebird day", take full advantage of the weather and plan your day in advance to avoid being in the shade.

Exceptional views

On such clear days it's worth taking the Cime Caron cable car for some exceptional views from the top, notably the grandiose spectacle of the Glacier de Pécelet – "the most beautiful view in the Alps", according to the Michelin Green Guide: a breath-taking panoramic view over more than 100 Alpine summits (French, Swiss and Italian).

With natural scenery so breathtaking, the concrete and wooden structures of the resort below pale into insignificance.



Luxury mountain refuge

We are staying at Hotel Pashmina Le Refuge, which opened last season. Designed as a luxury mountain refuge, it is supremely comfortable and welcoming for a hotel of this class. Rooms are large, with plenty of storage for all your ski kit.

There's a lovely spa area – perfect for using in the early evening when families go for an early dinner. Enjoy the indoor pool, sauna and steam room or brave the weather and use the outdoor jacuzzi under the stars.

The hotel has two restaurants: Le Base Camp, where a fabulous breakfast and dinner (included in the halfboard package) are served; and Gastronomique Les Explorateurs, managed by Chef Josselin Jeanblanc, with the help of Romuald Fassenet, Meilleur Ouvrier de France which has just been awarded its first Michelin star in the new Michelin guide.



It's a few minutes walk into the heart of the semi-pedestrianised resort. It's easy to navigate and you'll find the usual selection of supermarkets, ski shops, gift shops, restaurants and bars. What stands out is the choice on offer, with something available for all budgets – from students to holiday-makers with bigger wallets.

Freestyle fun

Back on the slopes the next day, we head to the Snowpark. Located on the Plateaux sector, the park offers skiers and snowboarders the chance to improve their freestyle skills. It's made up of tables, rails and boxes and it's great fun.

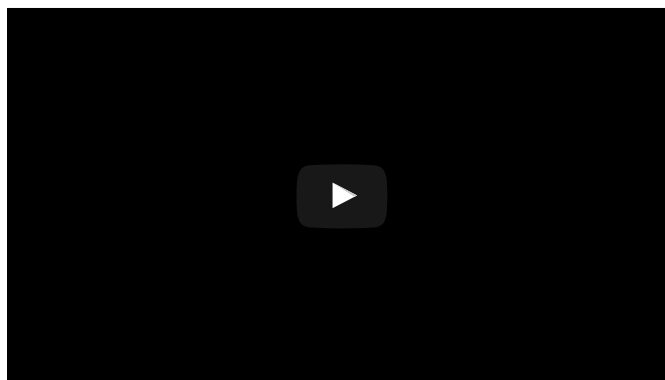
You can also attend, and even enrol in, freestyle competitions. It's also a great spot to watch others attempt moves you wish you could do yourself.



We, however, are more suited to the Fun Slope, a family-friendly course strewn with obstacles including snow tunnels, bridges, spirals and banked turns. It's the perfect place to bring out your inner Dave Ryding and compete against one another.

The longest toboggan run in Europe

For more competitive opportunities, try the toboggan run – the longest in Europe. The 45-minute descent starts at the top of Péclet glacier and guarantees a good laugh.



Sumptuous Savoyard lunches

But, for all the adventure and fun on offer, Val Thorens also has plenty of traditional alpine charm – such as Chez P  p   Nicolas, an absolute gem of an alpine restaurant.

Located on the “La Chasse” slope between Val Thorens and Les Menuires, it’s open for lunch and dinner but you must book in advance.

We have a perfect mountain lunch, where you can happily settle in for hours – partly because of the sublime Savoyard food and service, and partly because of the magnificent view of the P  clet Polset glacier and the Lac du Lou valley.



As we sit there utterly content with life, we listen to guests at the next table eulogise about their flight on the Tyrolienne that morning. Turns out it was every bit as fabulous as we’d thought. Never mind. Next time

For Eurostar tickets, visit: [eurostar.com/uk-en](https://www.eurostar.com/uk-en)

For rail tickets from Paris to Moutiers, visit: [uk.voyages-sncf.com](https://www.uk.voyages-sncf.com)

7 nights half-board at 5* Hotel Pashmina Le Refuge with Ski Collection from £1,610 per person, based on two people sharing an Excellence Room in March, accommodation only ([skicollection.co.uk](https://www.skicollection.co.uk)).

To book a table at Chez P  p   Nicolas, visit: [chezpepenicolas.com](https://www.chezpepenicolas.com)

For more information on the resort: [valthorens.com](https://www.valthorens.com)

