

The Mont Magic ski resort in Andorra, the tiny 'nation' between France and Spain, is wondrous for a family, says **Isabel Conway**

“**F**OLLOW the kids. They're the experts here,” urges our ski instructor, Bethol, pointing at the human streaks of lightning, who effortlessly whizz past, disappearing out of sight behind the trees. Avoiding a few icy snow bumps, we resign ourselves to bringing up the rear, at a more leisurely speed, before entering a winter wonderland, here at Canillo, on Mont Magic, in the heart of Grandvalira Andorra's expansive ski area.

Magical beings inhabit these mountains. We are about to meet some of them, in our hunt for Tamarro, the most mysterious animal of the Pyrenees. Skiers, equipped with the special Mont Magic map, must find the path to the lake where his favourite fairy awaits. Goblins and pixies, peering from strategic points on a safe, well-groomed slope, designed for fast-learning beginner skiers, deliver hints on directions.

In a forest clearing, some of us tramp through deep, fluffy snow, for a meeting with the fairy princess, invited to make a wish, whilst seated on her magic swing. The kids easily manage these manoeuvres, while some of us clumsily extricate our skis from the snowy depths.

The scenery is gorgeous. Small wonder one of the ten-most-scenic ski runs in Europe starts here, at Mont Magic (www.mont-magic.ad). The children's slope bursts with surprises and excitement.

Down a blue-graded slope, we come through the open door of a witch's cottage and we ski into her kitchen. There's a fleeting glimpse of her stirring a pot, flanked by the customary black cat and broomstick. Enough, you may decide, to make any hesitant skier lose their mojo.

But the kids, whose natural balance gives them the edge, love it all. Afterwards, everyone gathers back at the Mont Magic ski school to solve puzzles from what



The ski slope at Andorra's Mont Magic is one of the most scenic in Europe.

A family getaway on the slopes

they have seen and experienced on this terrific slope, geared to children and helping to progress their skiing with the maximum fun. And the adults among us have enjoyed it just as much.

A 'loo with a view', on one of the slopes, is, thankfully, of one-way glass, allowing us to sneakily check out other skiers' techniques and turns. It is among Andorra's many innovations, since my first and only visit, over 30 years ago, to the tiny principality that borders France and Spain, high in the Pyrenees.

Andorra shed its winter-sport 'lager lout' image years ago. If proof were needed, then look no further

than the mountain café specialising in exotic varieties of tea and cakes (they match Mary Berry's impeccable baking standards). Another sure sign that the region has gone upmarket is the arrival of the 'Iglo' hotel at Grau Roig, which takes shape with the arrival of the first big dump of snow. A stay in one of its 22 bedrooms, with thermal sleeping bags, is the ultimate, family winter-sport adventure and there's the added thrill of arriving by snow-basher or snowmobile after nightfall.

Transformed from the cheap and cheerful, small destination of my youth, where we endured the most

basic of accommodation, I arrive at an upmarket resort boasting nine hotels, most of them four-star properties geared to families.

Andorra was traditionally considered a tax haven, but, in recent years, its economy has diversified away from banking to embrace major developments in year-round tourism.

Our hotel, the stylish Piolet's Park and Spa (www.pioletspark.com), is really family-friendly and provides complimentary shuttle accommodation for the little ones and parents, and all their equipment, up the street to the ski gondola. The hotel also has a large swimming pool, with a generous section for small children. Pool and outdoor hot tub are transformed into an adults-only zone, with dimmed lights and soft music after 7pm.

Arriving at Soldeu's sports shop and bar-lined ski-station mall on the long main street, the gondola takes us up the mountain to Espiolets, at 2,250m, in no time, a big improvement on the clanking, bum-unfriendly, two-person chair-lift of the past.

Now, only a couple of 'Poma' drag lifts remain. I recognise the one I repeatedly wrestled with, to stay on board, only to fall on my face countless times. Most of them are replaced by chair lifts reputedly among the fastest in the world, speeding skiers up to the summits.

Would there be any remaining landmarks from those first few days of bruised bodies and egos, which we beginners suffered in Andorra, I wonder, as our Crystal coach traverses roads offering spectacular views, passing Pas

de La Casa, the highest resort in Andorra, now shrouded in fog?

The first-time skier's first obstacle is circumventing the ski-hire shop. Back in the day, we were handed straight skis (the curve ski

revolution was in its infancy), with musty-smelling, scuffed ski boots weighing a ton. How could we judge a snug fit and comfort? All we

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Andorra long ago shed its 'lager lout' image and is now family-friendly.

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knew was they were absolute torture to get on and almost impossible to clip shut. As for taking them off... that was a daily tug of war. Toting out of the ski shop onto treacherous, icy footpaths, it was like having one's feet frozen inside blocks of cement. Today's equipment is unrecognisable: boots that are designed for comfort and lighter, easier-to-carry skis.

Guided by one of Andorra's veteran instructors, Bethol Standeven, from Yorkshire, who arrived in 1984 and never left, we quickly found our ski-legs.

She and her husband are among a band of vastly experienced instructors from Soldeu's English-language ski school, which is renowned for the quality of its instruction for beginners and intermediate skiers.

In the mists of time, I explored little beyond those tortuous beginner slopes, followed by plenty of après ski and late-night discos. An afternoon's dog-sledding and a snowmobile lesson presented Andorra in a whole new light this time, offering plenty more speed and rushes of adrenaline... and not just from the huskies streaking across the crunchy snowfields, pulling our sled behind.

Just as I knew all those years ago, my ski medals for Ireland would be won at the bar rather than at the ski school's end-of-week race.



The Mont Magic ski school is geared towards children, who have natural balance.

Snowmobiling turns out to be a tricky learning curve. Within seconds of lift-off, I've almost turned the 800 CC Artic Cat over.

"Straddle the seat, be dynamic, and move your bum around for balance on your turns," our instructor, Declan Reid, advises. Please

don't install another 'loo with a view', so someone else can watch my pathetic stab at snowmobiling, down here in the valley, I silently pray.

THE ESSENTIALS

■ Andorra's Grandvalira

skiing terrain includes 215km of well-groomed, interlinked slopes from Pas de La Casa (great for singles, with some off-piste action, plenty of restaurants and bars) and quieter Soldeu (attractive village, ideal for families and beginners, good range of hotels) to Arinsal (inexpensive, awesome views, also ideal for learners and intermediates) and El Tarter (peaceful, ski in-ski-out convenience, stunning scenery).

■ Andorra enjoys a great snow record. Your money goes further than other ski destinations, with super-value lift passes (check out free lunch and child, 6-11, go-free deals), equipment and tuition; lively après, with drinks as cheap as €1.50 and no rip-off

at its mountain restaurants. There is, however, a transfer time of three hours plus.

■ Crystal ski holidays (crystal-ski.ie) from as little as €863 for seven nights, pp sharing half-board at luxury Park Piolets hotel, Soldeu; all prices include return flights, Aer Lingus ex-Dublin to Toulouse. See www.crystalski.ie, or your local ITAA travel agent.

■ Deals for the new season include: Buy-one-lift-pass-get-one-free on selected dates in December, January, and February, across Crystal ski destinations in France, Austria, Andorra, Italy, and Germany. Travelling January 20, Euroski Resort El Tarter, Soldeu half-board, seven nights for two adults and two children, from €2,513. Including ski hire and

lift passes for 2 plus 2, from €3,667. Complete beginners can avail of a much cheaper lift pass of six days, covering 2/6 of the Grandvalira ski area.

■ Andorra also has plenty to entice non-skiers, like dog-sledding and snow-mobile rides (see www.rocroi.com), visits to Caldea, Europe's biggest spa, with lagoons, pool, saunas and even a grapefruit pool that is supposed to do wonders for one's skin, plus duty-free shopping in its capital, Andorra la Vella, where a litre bottle of Irish whiskey, to make hot toddies, set me back €10.80 last winter, and high-quality ski wear was half the price of neighbouring France. See www.crystalski.ie, 01-6533504, www.skiandorra.ad, www.grandvalira.com

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TRAVEL DIGEST Barry Coughlan



Stay and park

Passengers leaving Cork Airport have an option to stay and park in two on-site hotels, the Cork International and Cork Airport hotels. The deal is suitable for those with early morning departures, so the hotels provide room and breakfast, free parking and offer a courtesy coach to the terminal building. Check out prices on corkinternationalhotel.com or corkairportotel.com

Bespoke tours

High-end customised trips to Ireland have been the main part of business for Adams and Butler this last decade. The company that organised the holiday visit of Michael Jackson to this country continues to offer bespoke breaks to Ireland for the rich and famous, but now extends expertise to specialised tours abroad. These will be expens-

ive packages and prices will be based on wish-list requirements. Information on www.adamsandbutler.com

Fly and sail

Marella Cruises, part of TUI, is to become an all-inclusive fleet from next summer, and Irish customers will be given the choice of linking flights from Cork, Dublin, Belfast and Shannon. For summer 2019, three ships from the cruise fleet are available from Ireland, one sailing from Corfu with connecting flights from Dublin and Belfast, and others operating from Palma linking with flights from all four airports. A week in May costs from €1,022. www.tuiholidays.ie or call 1850 45 35 45.

Christmas get-away

Flynn Hotels, the Newpark Kilkenny and Cork's Imperial have Christmas packages for between two and four nights this year. In Kilkenny, after-

noon tea will be served on arrival, dinner is provided each evening and breakfast will be served with champagne. Prices range from €549 to €789. Cork packages are set at two nights and are priced from €318. Information on www.newparkhotelkilkenny.com and www.imperialhotelcork.com.

Spooky Town

The Fota Island Resort is to embrace Halloween with a Spooky Town event, open this year from October 12 to November 4. Priced between €10 and €16.50, children under two go free. The resort combines the event with an option to have a Halloween stay-over. A two-night break for two adults and two children in a Fota Island self-catering lodge with tickets for all to Spooky Town is priced from €590. Contact (021) 488 3700, spookytown@fotaisland.ie or see www.fotaisland.ie