

Courmayeur

Snowflakes and designer duds



by MARTIN SYMINGTON

THIS is skiing with a dash of real Italy, or an Italian weekend laced with some skiing. Either way, you can drive to this enchanting little mountain town of cobbled piazzas and slate roofs in the lee of Mont Blanc, in little more than an hour from Geneva or Turin airports.

A giant, 130-person cable car swings up from the edge of town to Plan Chécrouit, the main ski lift centre. Here you can leave your belongings at lockers in the ski hire shop to collect on your way down. Another cable car connects from Entrèves, next to the Mont Blanc tunnel entrance.

Skiing is on the Colle Chécrouit and Val Vény valleys and not extensive, though there are enough red and blue runs to keep an intermediate happy for a weekend. The few black runs are short, but the lure for experts is the off-piste routes reached by cable cars up to Cresta Youla, Cresta d'Arp and the Vallée Blanche.

For these you need a mountain guide; £138 per day (Scuola di Sci Monte Bianco, 00 39 0165 842477).

Back in town there are fashion boutiques, delicatessens hung with salamis and local cheese, fragrant cafés frothing with cappuccinos, and more bars and restaurants than you would believe. Between skiing and dinner, fur and Gucci-clad Milanese parade in a nightly *passaggiata*, along pedestrianised Via Roma.

WHAT ELSE?

Heli-skiing: a single drop costs £90 per person, including a mountain guide (0165 842064, www.guidecourmayeur.com).

For more sedate skiing, there are 35kms (22 miles) of gentle cross-country trails along the Aosta valley floor.

The six linked cable cars over Mont Blanc to Chamonix in France comprise perhaps the most spectacular cable car journey in the world (£41 round trip).

The indoor Forum Sport Centre (Via della Stadio) has a huge skating rink (£5.50 an hour including skate hire); and curling (£34.50 per piste, per hour). Also indoor tennis, squash, golf driving range, climbing wall, gym and sauna.

WHERE TO STAY

With boots and skis left up at Plan Chécrouit, a few minutes' stroll through town to the cable car is no hassle, wherever you are staying. **Three-star Hotel Bouton D'Or (00 39 0165 846729, www.hotelboutondor.com) is a small B&B run by Andrea and Patricia Casale Brunet; rustic decor, baths, fantastic views.** Four-star Royal and Gulf (0165 831611, www.ventaglio.com) has luxurious rooms, sauna, Turkish bath, fitness centre and outdoor hot tub.

FOOD AND FUN Maison Vieille (3280 584157) is a cosy, piste-side mountain refuge with a roaring log fire and steaming plates of polenta and local sausage served by Giacoma, the effusive owner. Cristiania (0165 843572) at Plan Chécrouit has an igloo bar, plus hot pasta and pizza.

Pierre Alexis (0165 843517) provides Courmayeur's leading gourmet experience: £75 for a six-course "Hunters' Menu" for two people.

Après ski begins on Via Roma with freshly squeezed orange juice and vodka amid loud music at the American Bar, or cocktails and free canapés in the back room of the Caffè della Posta.

The best nightlife is 3km up the valley at Palud by the Mont Blanc tunnel entrance, £4 by taxi. Jimmy's (Strada La Palud, 23), in Hotel Astoria, is loudest, open latest and attracts the 18-30 crowd; Maquis (Strada della Brenva, 10) plays 1970s and 80s music.

In Courmayeur centre, the latest and liveliest disco is Poppy's (Via Circonvallazine, 48).

NEED TO KNOW

Momentum Ski (020-7371 9111, www.momentumski.com) offers three-night weekend breaks at the Bouton D'Or for £349 per person based on two sharing, including scheduled flights to Geneva or Turin, car hire and B&B. The Royal and Gulf costs £485 for the same deal.

Swiss International (0845 6010956, www.swiss.com) flies from Heathrow to Geneva from £77 return. Friday to Monday "Meet and Greet" chauffeur parking at Heathrow costs £64.40 (0870 0134505, www.bcponline.co.uk). A three-day lift pass costs £64. Courmayeur info: www.courmayeur.net

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