

# The joys of a satellite resort

Saint Martin de Belleville is happy playing second fiddle to Courchevel and Méribel, says **Clover Stroud**

Even non-skiers have heard of Courchevel and Méribel. Both are as famous for their high head-count of celebrity fans as they are for their world-class skiing and excellent après-ski. So if Courchevel and Méribel are the rock stars of the Trois Vallées, then Saint Martin de Belleville, a tiny village tucked away between Val Thorens and Les Menuires but with easy access to all that the Trois Vallées has to offer, is the shy but talented singer-songwriter.

I visited with my children, Jimmy, 11, and Dolly, 8, last season. Between us our ability ranged from highly proficient and daredevil (Jimmy) to only slightly more sedate (me), to definitely more interested in hot chocolate (Dolly).

After an initial morning at ski school, both children really enjoyed the long, red run, Jerusalem, back into the village from the top of St Martin 2 lift. Dolly could easily have gone up and down this run for at least a week, but Jimmy wanted to venture farther afield, so after I'd packed Dolly off for more lessons, we took the cable car and then the chairlift to La Tougnette to ski down to Les Menuires and Méribel.

This proved a popular route for us both during the week, as from Les Menuires we could access runs at Le Mont de la Chambre that thrilled Jimmy but didn't terrify me. And feeling more adventurous towards the end of the week, we skied cross-



Happy Vallée: the ski area, above, and Saint Martin de Belleville, right

country through the muffled pine forests of Vallée des Belleville, to Le Bettex and Saint Marcel.

Remarkably, Saint Martin de Belleville, whose very name sounds like the peel of church bells across a snow-muffled valley, has maintained a strong sense of itself as a rural community, despite the proliferation of skiers clomping into the chemist for Rescue Remedy and ibuprofen. After the visual assault of day-glo ski wear on the slopes, we were charmed by the sight of a handful of cows being walked through the village by an elderly farmer, Gitane hanging from his lower lip and a weary expression on his weather-beaten face.

The fact that Saint Martin de Belleville has a strong tradition of farming also accounts for the proliferation of traditional "Savoyarde" restaurants in the area.

My experience of skiing with children is that by the fourth day, everyone wants a change for the afternoon.

In St Martin de Belleville we explored the Baroque church and lost an hour in the museum; later, inspired by the museum's exhibition about the development of farming locally, we drove five minutes to the farming hamlet of Le Chatelard, near the start of the Encombres Valley, avoiding the hot-shot off-piste crew who favour this area. The warm, rich animal smell of farmyards drew us to La Ferme Auberge de Chantacoucou, where a handful of black hens scratched around a yard, and huge-eyed cows provided yet more milk for Reblochon cheese. Beside a roaring fire we ate tartiflette, while a chance conversation with a local skier told me picture-pretty Saint Martin was the setting for the Marquis de Sade's notorious work, *Les 120 journées de Sodome*.

I mused on this surprising piece of information as we drove back to the village, just in time to catch enough light for a final run back down Jerusalem.



## Essentials

### GETTING THERE

EasyJet (0905 821 0905; easyjet.com) flies from Gatwick to Lyon and Grenoble, both roughly two and a half hours from Saint Martin de Belleville. British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) and Flybe (0871 700 2000; flybe.com) flies to Chambéry (chambery-airport.com), which is closer at just over one and a half hours, though it can be affected by bad weather.

### PACKAGE

Peak Retreats (0844 576 0123; peakretreats.co.uk) offers seven nights' self-catering in a two-bedroom apartment at

Les Chalets du Gypse from £289 per person, based on five sharing, with a FlexiPlus Eurotunnel crossing for one car and passengers. Peak Retreats has a week's lessons from £91 for adults and £87 for children.

### RESORT COSTS

A six-day adult pass for the Trois Vallées cost £260/£211 (passes for the immediate area are cheaper); Ski and boot hire at Twinner Ski Shop (0033 4 7900 6845; twinner-sports.co.uk) costs from €111.80/£91 for seven days. Five half-day lessons with New Generation seven nights' self-catering in a (com) cost from €399/£324.

### THE BEST ACCOMMODATION

#### Hôtel Le Saint Martin €€

A comfortable, rustic three-star hotel with a good restaurant and small spa with treatment rooms and hamman (0033 4 7900 8800; hotel-stmartin.com; from €105/£83 per person per night).

#### Chalets Cocoon €€€

Six stylish chalets situated in the hamlet of Saint Marcel, five minutes from Saint Martin de Belleville by free shuttle bus. Beautifully run by Jean-Paul and Maud Delettire (7922 3300; chaletscocoon.com; from €1,160/£920 per week).

#### Le Chalet du Gypse €€€

Very comfortable and spacious chalet beside the slopes, with shared pool and steam rooms (7909 4500; cgh-residences.com; from €1,022/£811 per week).

### THE BEST RESTAURANTS

#### Corberley €

One of the nicest restaurants on the slopes, with excellent and generous desserts, at the top of St Martin 1 lift, on the right-hand side (7908 2578).

#### Le Grenier €€

At Hôtel Le Saint Martin and only open during the ski season, serving hearty

traditional Savoyard and good French food (7900 8800).

#### La Ferme de la Choumette €€

Charming farm restaurant moments from the village, to which you can also ski, serving excellent Savoyard food. Children will enjoy visiting the cattle in the barn below the restaurant (7940 0042).

### OTHER SATELLITE RESORTS

There are several other low-key options for the Trois Vallées, such as Brides-les-Bains, La Tania and Orelle. Further information on these and other resorts at les3vallees.com.