

BORDERLINE SKIING

Michael Cranmer skidaddles to an as yet hardly known skiers paradise - the French Cottian Alps

Maybe you've skied the 'Big'Uns': The Three Valleys, Tignes/Val d'Isère, Paradiski. With eyes (and credit card) watering, you've paid the price for access to those endless kilometres. But - and here's the rub - how many of the pistes you paid to use have you actually been on? My guess is only a fraction.

So, time for a reality check. Quality v Quantity.

Remember the old adage, big is not always better? We all want more for our money whilst not compromising on quality. In the course of my job I get to ski a vast range of resorts and countries and here's my Top Tip for a mid-price, but definitely not mid-quality, resort that has got pretty much all you could want.

Where? Where? Answer: Montgènevre.

Unh?

Now some of you will have heard of it, but I'm guessing most won't. It's way down south, technically the French Cottian Alps.

Think Briançon. But there's a twist. It's slap-bang on the Italian border, perched beside an ancient high pass, now an important Route National. (This is beginning to sound like estate-agent's speak for a mansion yards away from a motorway - "easy access to transport links"). Heavy lorries do

go past all hours of the day and night, but you'd never know it because they're underground in a tunnel built for the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin.

That's another bit of info to perk your ears up. Turin Airport is only 1 hour and 20 minutes away...half the time it takes to get from Geneva to the Big'Uns.

So far so good.



THE SNOWY MOUNTAINS OF MONTGÈNEVRE

Its location on the pass means huge dumps of snow scooped up as precipitation in the south and north give the area an enviable snow record.

What about the mountains? The village is at 1,850m, the top lift 2,630m. The skiing divides into three sectors. First off the south-facing Le Chalvet, two lifts whizzing you up from the centre of the village. Pack a camera as the views over the Ecrins National Park and Briançon are stunners. Open reds, easily ridden by competent intermediates swoop joyfully down to midpoint. Where better for my invariable 11.00 hot chocolate stop than Les Terraces? The clue is in the name, a wide sunny affair with comfy sofas dotted around...easy to sink into, not so easy to get out of.

TopTip: have a Café Gourmand. A perfect Italian espresso with not one, not two, but five! yummy, tasty sides. Lie back in the sun and reflect on your excellent choice.

Later in the morning the sun will have warmed the opposing side of the valley. Head for Les Gondrans with its very different vibe. Up past the nursery slopes through trees to wide higher runs peaking at L'Observatoire, one of a ring of old tactical military forts. There are choices from here, each guaranteed to raise a smile. Blues, reds, and endless off-piste delights. If you feel fit, try a top-to-bottom non-stopper and earn yourself boasting rights in Le Graal, Montgènevre's après ski epicentre.

Endless off piste delights await the skier who is lucky enough to discover Montgènevre

CHILLED OUT L'AIGLE

Moving on. The third sector, L'Aigle, is dramatically different to the others. A long and slow chair transports you over terrain untouched by humans but imprinted hither and thither with the tracks of foxes and alpine hares. It's a great ride in sunny weather, but not recommended if there's a wind blowing. Consequently, you might find yourself the only occupant of the meandering red Souréou linking with the black Les Rhodos further down. Both are achievable by confident intermediates...in the right conditions.

Most accommodation is on the sunny south-facing side of the valley, centred around ancient streets and alleys, with an obligatory old church and spire. It's definitely not party-central. think tranquil, relaxed and chilled out. Bars and



restaurants sit shoulder-to-shoulder along what could easily be the sea-front, except its snow. The last few years have seen the development of some swish family-orientated upmarket apartments, each with shops, swimming pool, sauna, and ski hire, close to the slopes.

I stayed in the Le Hameau des Airelles, only 16 steps from my front door to the ski lift. A few more steps down was Le Chalet des Gourmandises, the morning essential stop for fresh, warm croissants. Across the road, Intersport provided top-of-the-range skis and boots.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

Here's where I reveal Montgènevre's next door neighbour... Claviere in Italy!



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So close they're practically semi-detached. Like all good neighbours they get along famously, swapping recipes, intermarrying, sharing mountains and slopes. Yes, they've had past disagreements, but that's all forgotten now.

SKIING THE MILKY WAY

And, beyond little Claviere, is the Via Lattea – The Milky Way – 400km of pistes and the resorts of Sestriere, Sauze d'Oulx, San Sicario, and Cesana. You can choose to stay within a local sector, or buy a lift pass for all. Top Tip: find your ski legs in Montgenevre, then venture further afield. It's entirely viable to 'do' the Milky Way in a day, but remember: Quality v Quantity.

Time for some cross-border action. There's no queueing for Passport Control, but it is a bit of a slog. After a hold-your-nerve schuss down a blue trying to keep some speed, the run flattens out into a walk as you realise you're in Italy. Fantastico! Even more fantastic is the name of the sector, Monti de la Luna. It was here I had one of the most memorable runs of my life, not on a

steep black, or some narrow couloir, but a simple green.

From the Colla Bercia 2293m to Cesana 1360m, piste #90 (numbers not names in Italy) meandered down a farm track overhung with branches heavy with snow, forming an ice-tunnel, dappled shadows contrasting with shafts of piercing sunlight. I slowly snow-ploughed the more to prolong my enjoyment of the moment, the place, and my senses. I don't believe it could ever be that perfect again.

To finish, back at the top lift, the rickety old hostel Baita della Luna served awful burgers, but wonderful homemade Zuppa de Ceci con bruschetta (Chickpea soup with bruschetta)

It's the simple things that stay.

Michael Cranmer was a guest of Montgenevre Tourist Office, www.montgenevre.com He stayed at Le Hameau des Airelles courtesy of Zenith Holidays, www.zenithholidays.co.uk