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A new way to tackle the holy grail of ski runs



The Courmayeur ski resort Alamy

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The Vallée Blanche is one of Europe's most celebrated ski runs — 20km long and snaking down to Chamonix in France. It's a bit of a holy grail among skiers, but if you want to attempt it on the French side, you need to make a hair-raising climb down a narrow icy ridge. Try from the Italian side, which avoids that ridge, and you're looking at an ancient, uncomfortable and creaky three-stage cable car built in the 1950s that takes the best part of an hour to haul you up to the Punta Helbronner peak, at 3,466m. Only truly expert skiers try it. Until now.

Last week I set off on the inaugural journey of the new SkyWay lift, which whisks you from the valley floor in the Italian resort of Courmayeur to the peak in only 15 minutes. From there, it's a gentle traverse across the Mer de Glace — the Sea of Ice (sounds scarier than it is) — before winding down through the craggy alpine landscape. You still need a guide (one ill-judged turn can prove fatal), but it's now possible for intermediate skiers to tackle this fabled off-piste run.

Unfortunately, December is too early — the snow cover is limited and the slopes are unstable — but that doesn't matter; the super-slick SkyWay ride is an experience in itself, offering you the chance to absorb the rugged landscape, survey the peaks and admire the area's untouched beauty. Standing on the terrace at the top, Monte Bianco looms largest, but turn on your axis and, in the distance, you can spy the Matterhorn and Monte Rosa among the sea of snowcapped summits. Many are expected to make the trip just for the view, and if they do, there's a shiny new bar and café, the Bistrot des Glaciers, serving snacks and sandwiches (at about £4).

There are also tricky off-piste runs on the Italian side, although these are suited to experts only (with a local guide). Instead, we headed to Courmayeur's groomed slopes, catching the Dolonne gondola from just outside the town.

The pistes in Courmayeur are an intermediate's heaven, the mountain laced with wide, rolling red runs. The area is split into two distinct sectors. The main, east-facing, Checrouit area catches the morning sun and boasts the lion's share of runs, while in the afternoon most choose to explore the tree-lined runs in the Val Veny area.

We spent the morning ripping up the slopes, stopping every couple of hours to sip fresh Italian coffee and admire the stunning views. However, there was a greater treat in store — the food. As the sun dipped over the ridge, we headed for Château Branlant, a small stone chalet. "This is the only place I eat lunch," my guide, Amedeo Zambiasi, announced proudly as we

stepped inside the restaurant. We dined on ham from nearby Morgex, ravioli parcels stuffed with wild mushrooms and polenta topped with fontina — a cheese that’s a local speciality.

After skiing I took a stroll around the town. Via Roma, the main street, is flanked by bars and cafés frequented by elegant Italians sipping espressos and Aperol spritz. Courmayeur attracts a sophisticated yet down-to-earth clientele, many of whom hail from Milan and Turin.

The culinary wonders are not reserved for the mountain huts. Pierre Alexis 1877, tucked down a cobbled side street, offers the town’s leading gourmet experience. I dined on melt-in-your mouth smoked scallops before devouring a succulent breast of lamb, washed down with a glass of aromatic red wine. Little wonder this is Heston Blumenthal’s favourite resort.

Courmayeur is not a huge ski area, but for a weekend it has easily enough terrain to entertain. Those staying longer often take day trips to nearby resorts, where this season the skiing gets even better thanks to a new “Mont Blanc Unlimited” lift pass that is valid in Chamonix, Les Houches and Megève in France, as well as Verbier in Switzerland. From the summit of the SkyWay you can spy a few of these resorts. They may be better known, and boast more slopes, yet none rivals Courmayeur’s charm, elegance and gastronomy.

Need to know

Ben Clatworthy was a guest of Ski Solutions (020 7471 7700, skisolutions.com), which has four nights’ half-board at the newly renovated four-star Hotel Gran Baita in Courmayeur from £725pp, based on two sharing, including flights and transfers. Entry to the SkyWay (montebianco.com) is included with all lift passes. For pedestrians, a return trip costs €40 (£29) for adults.

Where to eat

Château Branlant (00 39 0165 846 584, www.chateaubranlant.com) has mains from €15 and requires a reservation. Pierre Alexis 1877 (00 39 0165 846 700, pierrealexiscourmayeur.it) has mains from €25.

Further information

For details of guides for the Vallée Blanche, which is usually skiable from mid-January to early May, see courmayeurmontblanc.it. The Society of Alpine Guides (00 39 0165 842 064, www.guidecourmayeur.com) offers group guiding from €85pp, including the bus fare from Chamonix to Courmayeur. If skiing the Vallée Blanche from the Italian side this winter, make sure to take your passport because stricter border controls are in place at the Mont Blanc tunnel. A bus runs from Chamonix to Courmayeur six times daily and costs €15. See sat-montblanc.com.

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