



“Andorra, too easy,” thought freeride skier Kev Wolff. He discovers how wrong he was



**T**HE only dangerous activity in Andorra would be getting to the bar through après-skiers enjoying Andorra's duty free status. No need for race skis just a bottle of Nurofen and some Alka Seltzer. But what the hell, skiing is skiing even if it would be a never-ending range of green runs.

I never really had any thoughts about Andorra and my impressions were of a rather small province of such unimportance that neither the Spanish or French could be bothered to invade. Visions filled my head of a sleepy region with a population of more goats than people. If it wasn't for the fact that it was covered in mountains you could probably carpet the whole country. All in all a quaint Hicksville country that Exeter could easily overthrow in a coup d'etat. The one fact I was aware of was that it is a haven for beginners and party animals.

'How are you today' my guide Gloria beamed through a George Hamilton tan and teeth. 'Welcome to Grau Roig. We going to ski? Yes.'

Looking up from the base of Grau Roig my impressions on the severity of Andorran skiing failed to upgrade itself. A face of red runs fell down into the village. These turned out later to be more than pleasant cruising terrain with plenty of spicy undulations to keep you on your toes before being thrown back onto your heels. On the other side of Grau Roig is the main village and accommodation of Pas de la Casa. Situated at 2,050m it's the highest resort in Andorra and the runs down are no less pleasant than its near neighbour, if a little more crowded. The token black run next to the slalom stadium never steep enough to even slightly curl any toes but that didn't stop me from taking a nose-dive chasing Gloria down it and having to be helped up by my guide still beaming through a wall of pearly-white enamel.

During the obligatory Latino coffee stop Gloria insisted on

w Pal... filled to the brim with beginners.

s One pair of crossed tips and you could tumble all the way to Marbella.

telling me about her forthcoming trip to Barcelona and how she preferred the sun to snow. I was more interested about a ski resort in the distance and Gloria nonchalantly imparted that this was its near neighbour, Soldeu and that you can now ski between the two resorts via a new drag lift.

"Yes, we are joining the ski areas together for the first time this season in a trial run." Wondering why I had never heard of this Gloria said that it was only a trial. Thinking that if this was North America the marketing machine would be well under steam and a national holiday instigated. Sarcasm aside the new lift has opened up over 145km of skiing – more marked piste than the Chamonix valley. The only downside to this is that you have to pay a daily supplement in addition to the lift pass.

Soldeu's main uphill transport is a brand new high-capacity gondola that takes you to just above the tree line. Off to the left are long green runs filled to the brim with beginners. But I was focused on the red and black lines dotted around the Riba Escorxada bowl in the centre of the ski area. This area offers some superb steep cruising on empty pistes. Another delight was uncovered in the form of the 'Stady bump' which I took to mean Mogul Stadium. If you have ever searched the world seeking the perfect moguls run then look no further than Soldeu. A fenced-off section of the piste is covered in six lines of the most perfect bumps. Lovingly shaped by man and machine they are a pleasure to ski. The resort even provides a free instructor who is ready to dish out advice on bump skiing. But the greatest surprise was still to come.

What looked like marked itineraries on the piste map turned out to be, to my knowledge, Europe's first cat ski operation – and it's included in the price of a lift ticket. When snow conditions allow, a piste basher drags skiers to the summit of the Pic d'Encampanada. From the pyramidal peak there can be only what is best described as some truly kick-ass terrain down to Plan Escorxada. Choose from a near vertical gun barrel that takes the shortest route down the face where one set of crossed tips could see you tumbling down to Marbella.

Head out around for the back of the peak for open bowls that graduate into steep trees or ski the guts of the mountain where the only certain thing about the snow is its colour.

Along with every ratrack is an instructor to give you any tips on varied snow plus a ski patroller to ensure safety.

For sheer steepness you only have to open your eyes. The main bowl of the Riba Escorxada offers some gut-wrenching steep chutes down its off-piste face that border on the vertical.

Whatever level of skier you are this ski area has a management team that understands what you want and panders to whims. Fellow European and North American resort directors take note: 'This is how a ski area should be run'.

Pal and Arinsal held little surprises except to confirm that they are definitive beginners ski areas. Most intermediates would ski the pistes out in a morning. While both have black



Photo: Manrico Dell'Agnola/The North Face

**From the pyramidal peak there can be only what is best described as some truly radical terrain**

runs marked on their piste maps they would both disappoint any keen mileage skier. The ski school director pointed out the terrain which is ideal for first timers. He was also at pains to make it clear that the ski school has many English speaking instructors and small groups of no more than eight, so improvement is rapid. Yet from the chairlift I spied several groups whose students numbered in the early teens.

If you're looking for danger in Andorra head to its capital, Andorra la Vella, but its not in the form of avalanches, crevasses or mad snowboarders, you need protection from yourself. Nestled among the craggy cliffs the shopping is truly black-double-diamond and X-rated. Any thoughts I had of a Hicksville town were destroyed with my first sight of this principality's capital. The main street is awash with neon signs offering every luxury brand imaginable. Designer labels dress shop windows with the word 'Discount' translated into



The new Caldea thermal water park. Perfect for relaxing after a day's skiing complete with a mountain view.

several languages. The tax-free status of the country has bred an electronic retailers market that makes London's Tottenham Court Road seem like a small stand at a boot fair. This may not be the most expensive place to visit but you may find yourself with a credit card bill looking like you have spent a week in Le Byblos, Courchevel.

In the middle of the Andorra Town is a pleasure complex built in the shape of a Spanish Cathedral fabricated entirely from glass panels, an icon to the wealth of the region. Inside are numerous swimming pools, steam baths and spa pools. The glass covering giving a superb view of the mountains. It was here I began to form an opinion that maybe Hicksville in the Pyrenees does have something to offer the masses and dinner could justifiably consist of eating my own words.

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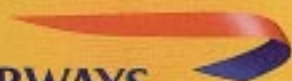
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