

FALLING FOR STE FOY

Are you a hazard on the slopes? Don't fret, France's best-kept secret is paradise for reluctant beginners

FIRST, I have a confession to make. I ski in the manner of Bridget Jones: bottom out, legs akimbo, terror on my face. I don't like heights, I dislike the cold and I find the idea of tearing down a mountain with a pair of skis strapped to my feet deeply unsettling.

In contrast, my husband, Adrian, likes nothing more than to hurtle down a black run at 150 miles an hour with a broad smile on his face and our nine and 12-year-old daughters, Ella and Anya, overtaking him.

Indeed, Ella deems parallel turns a waste of time. Why ski from side to side on a mountain when you can scud straight down it, she reasons.

But as long as I can wear silk long Johns and a fur-trimmed designer jacket, and at least fantasise about sporting Chanel skis (a snip, I am told, at £4,290), I'm happy, in the name of family unity, to hit the slopes every year and be the butt of their tiresome Eddie the Eagle gags.

And I am especially happy if our family holiday is to what I believe to be the world's best-kept ski resort secret — Sainte Foy Tarentaise (pronounced 'Sante Fwuh', with the flourish of somebody sneezing), in the Haute Savoie region of the French Alps.

Created in 1990, in the mould of a traditional Savoyard village, it's a tiny four-lift resort which has long been the preserve of canny off-piste guides from nearby Val d'Isere.

In fact, Sainte Foy, one of the world's youngest ski resorts, was virtually unknown until a Sunday newspaper last year listed it as 'numero uno' on a list of the planet's top ten ski spots. Following this 'outing', however, it has been officially launched as a cute and quietly luxurious retreat for families.

WE VISIT with Venture Ski, a new British company offering bespoke luxury and flexibility on arrival and departure dates.

Our little ones' excitement levels reach Mont Blanc heights when we touch down at Grenoble Airport. The slopes are now only two hours away.

As we arrive, the Isere Valley is revealed in all its glory: a cluster of wooden chalets surrounded by dramatic winter scenery. Even the shop signs are wooden. There's little more than a cafe, two restaurants and a small supermarket selling Reblochon and Tomme de Savoie cheeses, alongside sheepskin slippers. I half expect to see Father Christmas shopping there. It's one of the most beautiful, quietest villages in the Savoie.

Scrutinising the plan des pistes (which is the only way someone as apprehensive as myself really gets to see the slopes) I find our base camp at 1,500m, a chairlift two minutes from our chalet door and plenty of pistes.

by Caroline Phillips

The black slopes, at 2,620m, look daunting, but those in the know tell me there's something for everyone. Even Bridget Jones.

Next stop, Zig Zags ski shop, where the friendly French owners insist on sharing their oysters with us, (for the record, 'les huitres' are surprisingly good for a mountain village). While we slurp down the molluscs, they fit us out in boots and skis. If only shoe shops were like this back in the UK.

Afterwards, at the Ecole du Ski Français — until recently run by a former solicitor, one of the many English residents — we pick up passes for five days' group tuition. These cost €120 each (£86), the price of a bowl of spaghetti in some of the bigger resorts.

Next day, the children hop onto the Magic Carpet (which takes beginners to the top of the nursery slope) then speed off to greater challenges via the nearby chairlift. Meanwhile, I meet my ski instructor, Raphael.

I tell him I've lost my confidence, but he reassures me that my guardian angel is standing behind me. Whether it's my angel, the powdery snow, the sunny day, the stunning surroundings or the teaching, I surprise myself by thoroughly enjoying the morning.

Back at Les Sapins, the comfortable chalet we share with 24 other guests, we relax in the communal Jacuzzi which has views of snowcapped mountains. 'Isn't this wonderful,' coos a fortysomething guest from Venture Ski's neighbouring chalet, who has crossed the road in a towel and a pair of moon boots (it's that kind of place).

The chalet is lovely and atmospheric. There are neither phones in the rooms nor locks on the doors and the décor is all wood-paneled walls, rustic marble floors, leather sofas, open fires and antique armoires.

At dinner, we sit at a communal table. Ella sits next to a teacher from Sheffield, and a marketer from Chelsea Football Club chats to Anya. The food is superb. Every day, there's a hearty English breakfast, followed by



World's best-kept secret: Sainte Foy Tarentaise is the perfect spot to take a beginner's tumble

tea and cakes in the afternoon and a three-course dinner (including dishes such as foie gras and truffle pate and oxtail ragout) come night-fall. A game of Scrabble seems to follow every meal.

Mark, a former Formula One team member, tells us between mouthfuls about his latest daredevil belisking exploits in Sainte Foy. His business partner, Peter Duke, an erstwhile Army officer and helicopter pilot, reveals his own Boy's Own credentials. Over coffee, I thumb through the guest book: it bears testimony to a faultless, cheerful service and great food.

We ski next and every morning and also spend a lot of time up the mountain in Les Brevettes, a restaurant in a 16th-century building where punters hang their gloves to dry above the wood-fuelled cooker and where the owner sleeps behind a curtain on a platform above the kitchen. It's here that all the pistes meet and where chef Laurent Fraisseix prepares a mean rabbit stew, gratin dauphinoise and tarte tartin for just €14 (£10).

We talk there in French to the old man, said to be as ancient as the mountain, who operates the chair lift. Tourist lore has it that this local has never left the mountain and can

forecast the weather. Guests often ask him when the snow is coming, and he invariably replies: 'Lundi'.

Over lunch, however, it unfolds that he's actually called Malcolm and comes from Wales. Maybe it snows in the Brecon Beacons on Mondays.

When we aren't skiing or eating, we take the children to the chalet's English-trained nannies while we go shopping in nearby Val d'Isere. Or there's snowbiking, sledding — with or without huskies, snowshoeing, snowboarding or helicopter trips.

AS WELL as all this, we walk to a French Heritage site, the deserted village of Le Monal, with Charlotte and Helen — two triathletes who work for Venture Ski and fill me with so much enthusiasm that on my return to England I compete in the London Triathlon.

We hike for two hours through the Alps, clambering up a rocky face, past a glacier where I dare not look down, beside frozen lakes and through forest where there's little more proof of other life than the occasional deer's footprint.

We reach a spiritual place with stone chalets and burial mounds

enclosed by mountains and fill our water bottles from a stream.

I remember what I most dislike about ski holidays when we go next day to Les Arcs — with its vast slopes, faceless architecture, huge queues for the skilifts and even longer lines for self-service hotdogs.

As for Sainte Foy, there are no lift queues but beautiful, empty pistes.

Contrary to expectation, I loved the freedom of its mountains, felt exhilarated by its beauty, snow, fresh air, delicious food and, er, skiing. So forget Bridget — we're going back again next year.

TRAVEL FACTS

■ **VENTURE Ski** offers luxury catered chalets from £660 per person all-inclusive with a Spa and creche as an additional bonus for families (0870 242 4881; ventureski.co.uk).

■ **SKI lessons** through the Ecole du Ski Français (00 33 (0) 4 79 06 96 76; esf-saintefoy.com).

■ **TO GET to Sainte Foy**, take the snow train from St Pancras to Bourg St Maurice. Alternatively, fly to Lyon, Grenoble or Geneva with British Airways (0870 850 9850; ba.com) easyJet (easyjet.com) or Aer Lingus (0870 876 5000; aerlingus.com).