

## Ski one of the toughest pistes in France? Easy

Roger Alton

Last updated January 7 2011 9:00PM

# Take Val d'Isère's La Face slowly and (almost) anyone can do it, says Roger Alton; plus five other challenging ski descents

Val d'Isère: it's easy to respect, but difficult to love. A bit like *The Economist* or Stephen Fry. It feels a little too sprawling (that's Val, not Fry). There are too many wide open snowfields and not enough skiing below the treeline — and it can get damn cold (minus 20 the other day). Oh, and it's absolutely rammed with Brits at all times. But the fact remains that there is an astounding amount of skiing, off and on piste, and in a week of high-speed cruising we still hadn't covered anywhere near all the ground.

Val does boast one of the greatest black runs in the world, the Olympic Face, on Belvarde, the steepest run on the World Cup downhill circuit that cascades right into the heart of Val d'Isère like a near vertical shard of ice. But anybody who is competent on a black run can do it with just a bit of skill and patience.

La Face was carved out of the trees above Val at a cost of millions of euros for the 1992 Olympics. Now, of course, you're not allowed to ski it from the original start; that would be too dangerous. But you can still see the start shed, high above the exit from the Belvarde gondola, and the steep runnel of white ice snaking out below it. In 1992 Patrick Ortlieb of Austria took gold in a time of 1min 50.37sec over the near 3,000m course. You do the maths: that is, as they say, smoking. Britain's Graham Bell, then at the height of his considerable ski-racing powers, did it five seconds slower. He finished 33 places below Ortlieb, which goes to show how tight the margins are in this most ferociously competitive of sports.

Bell remembers it well: "It's a toughy, that's for sure. Personally, the only section I really enjoyed was the start. It was total freefall. You reached 90mph in a few seconds and then went straight into this big compression left-hander."

Now the lower part is used for a combined course (a mixture of giant slalom and downhill) in the World Cup programme. After finishing in December, the great Swiss racer Didier Cuche was so pumped that he was taken to hospital, and the winner, America's Ted Ligety, lay comatose in the finishing area as he recovered. Afterwards he said: "This is one of the hardest races I've had in a long time."

This macho talk is all by way of saying that this is a big hill, and a big run, that you can be proud to do: and you can feel that you have earned your *vin chaud* when you get to the bottom in good order. When we tried it, the run was a little icy but a couple of

metres of snow would fall over the next few days, making conditions perfect.

We're skiing with Tom Saxlund, a highly focused and amiable guide who runs the New Generation ski school, one of a raft of nimble English-speaking enterprises that have sprung up in the Alpine resorts, as the stranglehold of the ESF (École du Ski Française) has weakened. And his teaching methods are very different: it's a long way from "bend ze knees".

"To change performance and learn new movements, our brains need to be relatively calm and attentive," he says. "If we are too busy surviving; or being scared, it is pretty pointless to try to learn new things."

Well, let's try to keep that in mind on La Face. As Tom points out, in race conditions it is like a steep skating rink. The World Cup athletes we see on TV generate astounding grip through great strength and technique. "You will slide," Tom says, "but by making gradual turning and tilting movements while standing on the balance points of the ski, reasonable black-run skiers can ski icy slopes safely and enjoyably."

The run starts innocuously enough, a wide open cruise to a little notch and then with a swing to the left it starts to get a little more serious. Then after a run to the right along a tight path, the fun begins and a steep wall yawns to the left. Here the racers would take big air, but I am happy to manage a couple of turns to get established and then try to ski properly to the next flattish break. Then we cruise to the left and suddenly here is the steep wall of snow and ice that flows all the way down to Val d'Isère. It's important to get a rhythm, not to be phased by the angle or distance. This part is often bumpy but right now it's perfect. The cheerful clicking of the edges on the hard snow begins to feel familiar as I try to keep it together before a final calculation of distance and time for the last schuss, into the tuck and past the finish line.

Go there now. It is a superb run, and in magnificent condition, as are the rest of the Alps. It's time and money well spent.

**Need to know** Roger Alton stayed at Chalet Danielle in Val d'Isère as a guest of Ski Power (01737 30 60 29, [skipower.co.uk](http://skipower.co.uk)). With plenty of availability throughout the rest of the season, a week's stay at Chalet Nadine costs from £418pp (based on two sharing). The price includes seven nights' catered chalet accommodation, flights (departing Gatwick) and transfers.

More information For information about the New Generation ski school, which operates in many destinations, including Val d'Isère, Les Arcs, Verbier and Courchevel, visit [skinewgen.com](http://skinewgen.com)

## **Ski on the edge: other challenging descents**

**La Sarenne, Alpe d'Huez** Want to try Europe's longest black piste, which starts at the top of Pic Blanc and carries on for a full 16km? You'll need to be up to skiing moguls at the top of this run, although it does get easier lower down. [alpedhuez.com](http://alpedhuez.com)

**Vallée Blanche, Chamonix** For a once-in-a-lifetime off-piste experience, take the Aiguille du Midi cable car to reach the Vallée Blanche: a 20km, off-piste run down the Mer de Glace glacier that can be tackled only with a guide. The start — a walk from the cable car down along a ridge clutching a safety rope — is almost as famous as the run

itself. Views are stunning. [chamonix.com](http://chamonix.com)

**Tortin, Verbier** A challenging start with some gnarly moguls en route sorts the men from the boys on this wide but steep piste. A joy in powder, but not so easy when it's icy. [verbier.ch](http://verbier.ch)

**Jackson Hole** Type "Corbet's Couloir" into Google and the word "death" is the second suggestion that pops up in the predictive search box. Described as "America's scariest ski slope" the entrance to the couloir requires dropping from a cornice that, depending on the conditions, means a freefall of up to 9m (30ft). [jacksonhole.com](http://jacksonhole.com)

**Spanky's Ladder, Whistler** From the Glacier Express lift take a left and you'll see a hardcore hike up to the start of double black diamond runs down into the Sapphire, Ruby and Garnet Bowls of Blackcomb. Obey the mountain signs and don't even think about entering if there's a risk of avalanches. [whistlerblackcomb.com](http://whistlerblackcomb.com) *Will Hide*

© Times Newspapers Limited 2011 | Version 1.21.0.7 (27234)

Registered in England No. 894646 Registered office:

3 Thomas More Square, London, E98 1XY

[My Account](#) | [RSS](#) | [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Classified advertising](#) | [Display advertising](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Contact us](#)

---

## Share

Close

In order to view this article, the recipient must be a subscriber to [thetimes.co.uk](http://thetimes.co.uk)

LinkedIn

Twitter

## Email Article

Close

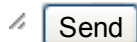
In order to view this article, the recipient must be a subscriber to [thetimes.co.uk](http://thetimes.co.uk)

Your name

Your email address

Recipient's email address

Please enter a short message if you wish (maximum 300 characters)

 Send

## Discuss this article with...

Close

Start your  
conversation here

Friends email Type your friend's email here Start your conversation here

300

Send