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ACTIVITIES

Indoor Sports centre (spa, sauna, fitness room, hot tub, tennis, squash, swimming pool, volleyball, table tennis, badminton, football), cinema, bowling, concerts
Outdoor Paragliding, microlight flights, snowmobiles, snowshoeing, walks, tobogganing, ice driving, bikes on snow, paintball, rolling bubble

Phone numbers
From abroad use the prefix +33 and omit the initial '0' of the phone number

TOURIST OFFICE

www.valthorens.com

lots of wood. Ski-in/ski-out.

*****Val Chavière** (0479 000033)

'Friendly, fab position, good set menu,' says a 2011 reporter.

*****Val Thorens** (0479 000433) Next door to Fitz Roy. Being renovated for 2012/13.

Apartments Val Thorens now has lots of smart chalet-style developments. These and many other residences are offered by UK operators and agents including Ski Collection, Ski Amis, Pierre & Vacances, Lagrange, Erna Low, Skiworld and Skitracer.

In the Plein Sud area, above the main village, there are several chalet-style residences. Among the best are Chalet Altitude and Chalet Val 2400, sharing a pool. The Balcons de Val Thorens has a 'fantastic' spa with pool. Many properties up here claim to be ski-in and possibly ski-out, but a couple of reporters have confirmed our own suspicion that access can be tricky in practice.

There are three Montanettes residences, of which the clear leader is the hotel-style Oxalys, with pool, hot tubs, separate spa for those in the best apartments and a superb restaurant (see 'Eating out'); some of the units here are very impressive.

The 5-star Montana Plein Sud residence with pool etc opened last season. And the 4-star Hameau du Kashmir with three types of sauna and a pool is due to open for 2012/13.

EATING OUT *****

Star quality

Val Thorens has something for most tastes and pockets. The resort's 'Holiday Guide' is very helpful, with photos and some idea of the cuisine.

Top of the range is the restaurant in the residence Oxalys, with two Michelin stars. We had a delicious and very inventive meal here; expensive, but worth it. The Fitz Roy and Val Thorens hotels also have serious restaurants. The Epicurien has gastro ambitions, too.

There are plenty of more modest places. The Galoubet was one reader's 'restaurant of the year' for choice, quality and service. For Savoyard stuff there's the Fondue ('friendly, intimate'), Auberge des Balcons ('nice food, attentive staff'), Chaumière ('good-quality steak and pasta') and the 'friendly' Cabane. The Vieux Chalet has a varied menu, including seafood and duck. The Steak Club found favour

with a 2012 visitor: 'went three times excellent pasta, steaks, burgers'. The Blanchot is a stylish wine bar with a simple but varied carte.

APRES-SKI *****

Livelier than you might expect

Val Thorens is more lively than most high-altitude ski stations. The action now starts up the hill at the Folie Douce (see 'Mountain restaurants') or on the terrace of Club Med in the village. The Red Fox up at Balcons is crowded at close of play, with karaoke. The Frog and Roastbeef at the top of the village is a long-established British ghetto – though two reporters this year hated it ('sleazy', 'overrated'). The Saloon and the Dunderbar (formerly the Viking) are lively. Quieter bars include the cosy Rhum Box Cafe (aka Mitch's). Later on, the Malaysia cellar bar rocks from 11pm until the early hours with 'top quality' live bands and dancing.

OFF THE SLOPES *****

Could be worse

Val Thorens is not ideal for non-skiers. But there's a sports centre with small pool, saunas, hot tubs, gym etc and a leisure centre with bowling (priced) and pool tables. Free weekly concerts are held in the church (recommended by a reporter), and there are twice-weekly street markets, a small cinema and an ice-driving course. The toboggan run (longest in France) is 'great fun'. Pedestrians can get to some mountain restaurants, and the panorama from the Cime de Caron is not to be missed. Buses to St-Martin and Les Menuires run four times a day except Saturdays. The Monday night welcome festivities are well done.

OUTLYING RESORT – 900m

ORELLE

Set at the foot of the gondola from the fourth valley (there's no piste down), Orelle isn't a recognizable resort, but offers good accommodation at a bargain price. A couple of hairpins up the hill from the lift base (there's a frequent ski-bus) is Hameau des Eaux, a smart complex of 200 apartments in eight chalet-style buildings, sharing a spa with decent pool – available through Peak Retreats and Zenith. It includes a small convenience store and a restaurant. The small town of St-Michel is 6km away.

Vars / Risoul

Two high, purpose-built resorts in an attractive setting, with a traditional French atmosphere and a big linked area of slopes

TOP 10 RATINGS

Skiers	***
Lifts	*
Scenes	****
Snow	***
Expert	**
Intermediate	****
Beginner	****
Charm	**
Convenience	****
Scenery	***

RPI 80

Lift pass	£140
Ski hire	£85
Lessons	£75
Food & drink	£105
Total	£405

KEY FACTS

Resort	1850m
Blanche ski area	6,070ft
The entire Forêt	
Slopes	1660-2750m
	5,450-9,020ft
Lifts	50
Pistes	185km
	115 miles
Green	17%
Blue	42%
Red	32%
Black	9%
Snowmaking	116 guns

- + Attractive, family-friendly resorts
- + Fair-sized, uncrowded area of slopes
- + High resorts, reasonably snow-sure, but with lots of treelined runs
- + Among the cheapest resorts in the French Alps

- Still mainly draglifts and slow old chairs, though a few fast ones
- Few on-piste challenges for expert skiers and boarders
- Little to do off the slopes
- Fairly remote location

Were they nearer Geneva, Vars and its linked neighbour Risoul might be as well known as Les Arcs and Flaine. The slopes of their shared Forêt Blanche area are equally extensive, and the villages are more attractive than either. We visited a couple of seasons ago and loved it, despite the seriously flawed lift system (it's probably the most antiquated in these pages). All a question of priorities ...

THE RESORT

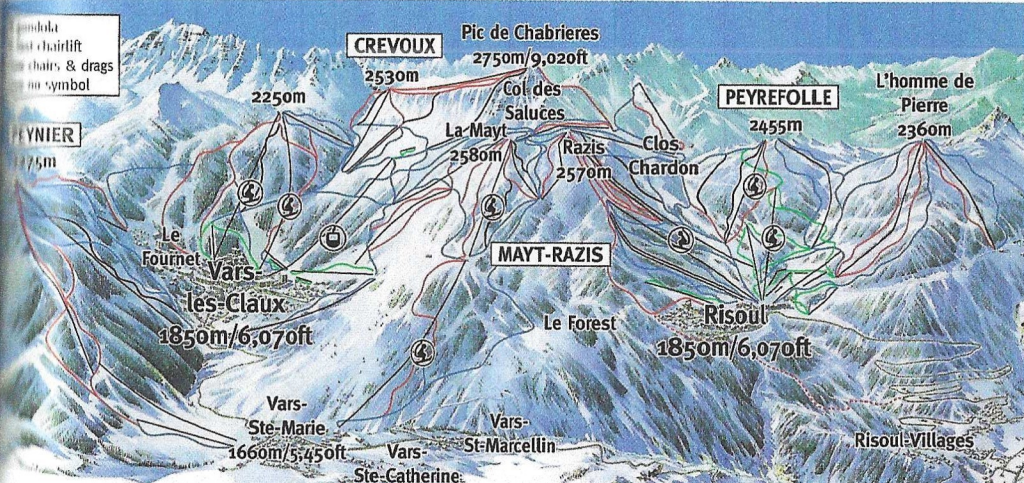
Vars and Risoul are the most southerly French resorts to get a chapter in this book. Airport transfers can take some time. Vars includes several small, old villages on or near the approach road, chief among them Vars-Ste-Marie. There are lifts on the fringe of this village, but the focus for most visitors is higher, purpose-built Vars-les-Claux. Village charm Vars-les-Claux has a lot of flat-roofed apartment blocks that look worse from up the mountain than in the village because in the village you can see the smaller chalet-style buildings as well. Reporters like the pleasant, relaxed atmosphere. **Convenience** It's a small place, but spread along a winding, quite steep road, with two main clusters of shops, bars, restaurants and lodgings: the original focus at the base of the main

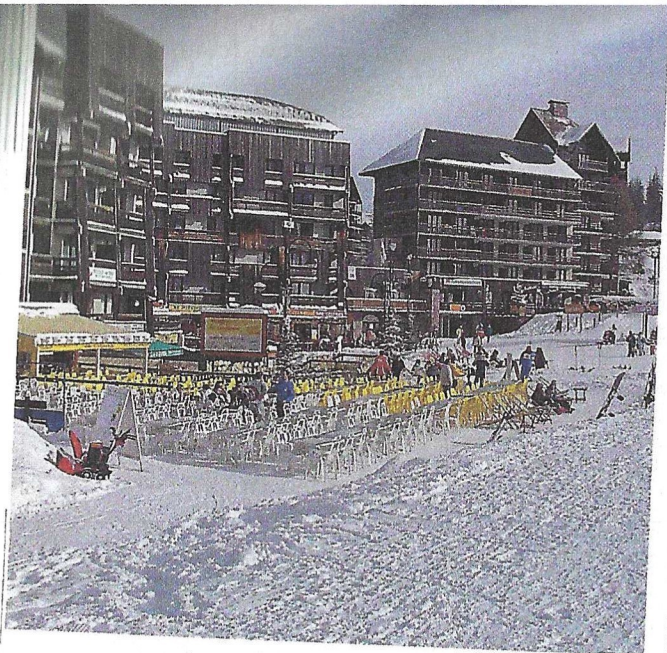
gondola; and Point Show, 10 minutes' walk up the hill. Each has nursery slopes and fast lifts into the slopes. Buildings spread beyond these points, varying in convenience. **Scenery** Pretty wooded slopes surround the village, and Pic de Chabrières has fine views.

THE MOUNTAINS

There are slopes on both sides of the valley, linked by pistes and by slow double chairlifts at the lower end of Vars-les-Claux.

Some reporters have found piste classification variable and the map unclear on the links between resorts. **Slopes** The wooded, west-facing Peynier area is the smaller sector, and reaches only 2275m. The main slopes are in an east-facing bowl with links to the Risoul slopes at three points. There's also a speed-skiing course.





↑ Risoul's 'front de neige' is very pleasant and compact and safe for children

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Resort news and key links: www.wheretoskiandsnowboard.com

NEWS

2011/12: In Risoul, a quad replaced the triple Razis chair (which accesses the Vars sector), more snowmaking was installed, and a beginner terrain park and a four-seasons ice rink with a synthetic surface opened. In Vars, two new terrain parks were built: the Girly park with 13 obstacles all in pink and the Kid park for children from age three. And a new rail line was built in the Eysina park.

Beneath it are easy runs, open at the top but dropping into trees.

Fast lifts After the three fast lifts out of the village it's draglifts and slow chairs unless you head down to Vars-Ste-Marie or over to Risoul.

Queues Queues are rare outside the French holidays, and even then Vars is not as busy as most family resorts. But a January 2012 visitor was concerned about crowding on the slopes, with lots of eastern Europeans and Russians about.

Terrain parks There are six freestyle areas, including two new ones – the Girly and Kid parks.

Snow reliability Not bad: the altitudes are quite high, the orientation mostly easterly, and snowmaking is plentiful.

Experts There is little to challenge experts on-piste, but there is plenty of off-piste terrain (and great off-piste tree skiing in Risoul, too).

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Intermediates These are fine intermediate slopes, with a good mix of decent reds and easy blues. Jas du Boeuf from La Mayt is a gentle cruise. The Olympique red run from the top of La Mayt to Ste-Marie delights most reporters and is a very respectable 920m vertical. If you can face the slow chairlifts and tricky drags, there are good treeline runs in the separate Peynier sector.

Beginners There are three free lifts on good slopes in central Vars, with lots of progression runs throughout the area. Quick learners will be able to get over to Risoul by the end of the week.

Snowboarding There is good freeriding, but beginners might find the number of draglifts a problem.

Cross-country There are 10km of trails. **Mountain restaurants** Most places are self-service. But the revamped Chal Heureux table-service place is 'good, with acceptable food and prices'.

Schools and guides A recent reporter had 'great' private lessons with ESF. **Families** The ski school runs a nursery for children from two years old, and there is a ski kindergarten.

STAYING THERE

Hotels The Ecuireuil (0492 465072) is an attractive, modern B&B chalet. Ste-Marie has a Logis de France – the Vallon (0492 465472).

Apartments Ski Collection features five apartment complexes. Pierre & Vacances has three, including the 4-star Albane – liked by a reporter.

Eating out There is a choice of simple, good-value places. The Après Ski at Point Show is worth a look, as is the Chaudron in Ste-Marie.

Après-ski Après-ski is animated at teatime. Later on, nightlife revolves around one or two bars.

Off the slopes There's tobogganing, ice skating, 34km of walking paths, cinema, leisure centre, snowmobiling, snowshoeing and dog sledding.

Vacances

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UK PACKAGES

Vars Crystal, Erna Low, Lagrange, Pierre & Vacances, PowderBeds, Ski Collection, Ski France
Risoul Crystal, Interactive Resorts, Lagrange, PowderBeds, Rocketski, Ski Collection, Ski France, Whitaker, Thomson, Zenith

Risoul 1850m

- Uncrowded slopes
- Some good off-piste terrain

- Still lots of difficult draglifts
- Limited mountain restaurants

Risoul 1850 is a modern ski station, purpose-built from the late 1970s onwards at the top of a winding road up from the original village of Risoul.

It is a quiet, apartment-based resort, popular with families – but not exclusively so.

Village charm Many of the original resort buildings are bulky eight- or nine-storey buildings, but wood-clad with some traditional style. Newer developments are attractive and chalet-style, made of wood and stone. The busy little main street, with a small range of shops, bars and restaurants, is far from traffic-free. But the locals offer a friendly and welcoming atmosphere.

Convenience The village meets the mountain in classic French purpose-built style, with sunny restaurant terraces facing the slopes and a compact centre. But some lodgings are a short but 'knackering' uphill walk away if you miss the last lift.

Scenery Risoul has a pleasantly woody setting beneath its slopes; reporters often comment on great views.

THE MOUNTAINS

The upper slopes are open, but those back to Risoul are prettily wooded, and good for bad-weather days.

Slopes The slopes, mainly north-facing, spread over several minor peaks and bowls, and connect with neighbouring Vars at two points.

Fast lifts There are three fast chairs accessing a good number of runs, but still lots of tricky 'difficile' draglifts.

Queues Queues are rare. But see the comment under Vars about crowds.

Terrain parks For 2012/13 there will only be the Zing beginner park with easy jumps and rails and a boardercross but no half-pipe.

Snow reliability Snow reliability is reasonably good; the slopes are all above 1850m and mostly north-facing. Snowmaking is fairly extensive.

Experts Risoul's main top stations access a couple of steepish descents. And there's some good off-piste terrain – including excellent, widely spaced tree skiing on not very steep slopes and areas accessed through gates that are closed when there's an avalanche risk (though these are not marked or explained on the piste map).

Intermediates There are decent reds

and blues in all sectors. Almost all Risoul's runs return to the village, making it difficult to get lost.

Beginners Three free lifts serve good, convenient nursery slopes. There are lots of easy pistes to move on to.

Snowboarding There is a lot of good freeriding to be done throughout the area, although beginners might not like the large proportion of draglifts.

Cross-country There are 15km of trails.

Mountain restaurants Choice is limited. The Homme de Pierre 'brings you decent dishes cooked to order', says a 2012 visitor. And the self-service Tetras is a small, attractive hut, with 'good food, friendly staff', says a visitor who went there every day of his trip.

Schools and guides Reports on the ESF have been positive, and we had an excellent ESF guide on our visit.

Families Risoul is very much a family resort. Both ski schools operate ski kindergartens slightly above the village and reached by a child-friendly lift.

STAYING THERE

Most visitors stay in apartments.

Hotels The Chardon Bleu (0492 460727) is right on the slopes. You can also stay overnight up at the Tetras mountain refuge (0492 460983).

Apartments We enjoyed the 4-star Balcons de Sirius units – good pool, hot tub and sauna; Antares is similar. Ski Collection has these and another property.

Eating out There's a decent choice offering fairly good value. Readers tips: Chérine (pizza, pasta), Marmite ('superb steaks and friendly staff') and Entre Pot ('very friendly, fantastic food'). We tried L'Extrad, which served huge portions (enough for two) of hearty mountain food.

Après-ski Nightlife is livelier than most people are expecting. There are several bars and the Relex club. Try the Babao and the Chalet or Eterlou for a quieter drink.

Off the slopes Limited. We enjoyed the guided night-time snowmobiling on adventurous and varied terrain. There's also tobogganing, snowshoeing and skating. Excursions to Briançon are possible.

Vars / Risoul

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