

WINTER SPORT

Who says the ski season is over at Easter? Not this year

With the holiday falling so early in the year, there will still be lots of snow afterwards. Enjoy it in La Plagne, says **Minty Clinch**



On the look out: the redesign of Summit View into spacious apartments is indicative of the kind of refurbishments being done in La Plagne

As soon as Easter is over, no matter how early it falls, Europeans stop skiing in favour of sailing and golf. This year Easter Sunday is on 23 March, about as early as it gets, which leaves five weeks of relatively empty slopes and long warm days before the lifts close towards the end of April. Bad news for the resorts, but excellent news for canny Brits: if you want to get yourself or your children on the slopes in optimum conditions at end-of-season prices, 2008 offers exceptional choice.

After weeks of glittering sunshine in February, snow returned over the past week and much more may fall. No matter what the conditions, the late-late rule is go high, which puts the linked areas at the head of the Tarentaise valley near the top of everyone's hit list.

The other requirement, especially for family trips, is to go close. Skiing is not the most

uncluttered of sports, so there is a lot to be said for easy lift access. If you're prepared to stay in the middle of a large resort, sleeping on the slopes is the way forward. If you prefer the romanticism of a Savoyard hamlet, a chalet with on-demand shuttle services to the mountain is an attractive alternative.

In Tarentaise terms, La Plagne has always been the poor relation to Val d'Isère and Courchevel. Built on economic imperatives that are now 40 years old, it is ripe for reinvention. Cheapo French six-packs – two sleeping in the master bedroom, two in bunks in the passage, two in the living room – have no place in 21st-century holiday plans. And quite rightly so.

On the plus side, La Plagne has lower prices than more sophisticated rivals. It has invested in the huge lift system required to link its 10 outlying parts to Plagne Centre, and it has slopes for all levels. If that comes as a sur-

COMPACT FACTS



HOW TO GET THERE

Snowline (0844 557 3118; snowline.co.uk) offers Summit View from £499 per person, based on two sharing, seven nights' half board, flights and transfers. Courses with Oxygène cost £315 for children, adults £357 for tuition Monday to Friday, 9.30am-12pm, equipment rental and limited lift passes. Chalet Merlo (07793 816930; chalet-merlo.eu) from £10,000 to hire for seven nights (up to 12 people), with return flights, road transfers, half-board and daily resort transfers.

prise in what is seen as an intermediate cruiser's paradise, try the Couloir du Cairn on the north side of Bellecôte.

Ecological sensitivity is not a concept that springs to mind in La Plagne, but although the planners will give permission for new hotels – historically in very short supply – they've shut up shop on apartment blocks. Summit View in Plagne Centre is exactly what they see as the resort's future. Two years ago, this low-rise building overlooking the nursery slopes had 200 owners time-sharing 40 rabbit hutches. A redesign has created seven spacious apartments, the largest sleeping 12, modelled on the Aspen Lodge complex in Val d'Isère, an earlier development from VIP/Snowline, Summit View's new British owners.

As 60 per cent of La Plagne's winter visitors are British, this is entirely appropriate, but Snowline has added an Anglo-French dimension to its operation by branding Summit with Oxygène,

the resort's leading independent ski school. The Snowline courses are for children and adult beginners, English speakers only, with a maximum six in a group.

The De Monvalliers, who started Oxygène in Val d'Isère, have invested heavily in La Plagne's brave new world by setting up a real-estate company, a rental shop and the ski school. Convenient or what? "We love La Plagne," said Julien, one of five brothers and three sisters involved in the family empire. "Like Monaco, it's ugly, but it works."

Fair enough, but not everyone wants to spend their holidays in Plagne Centre. An alternative is Chalet Merlo in tiny Le Miroir, above Sainte-Foy on the wild side of the Tarentaise valley. It is American-owned but run by Chris Harrop, the British developer who built it, along with his partners, Merlo. It also sleeps 12. It is more luxurious than Summit View, with an outdoor hot tub, a gym, spectacular views from sofas and champagne on

tap. Then again, it doesn't allow parents to oversee their children on the nursery slopes from the comfort of their own sitting room.

Guests also enjoy door-to-lift transportation: 10 minutes to Villaroger, at the bottom of the Les Arcs system; 15 minutes to Les Brévières, the back door for Tignes and Val d'Isère; and 30 minutes to Montchavin, the base camp for La Plagne. And there is great skiing in Sainte-Foy, just five minutes up the hill.

On the face of it, it is the more expensive option, though an entry rate of £10,000 for 12 people works out at less than £1,000 a head; fairly affordable for an effort-free, most-expenses-paid week with a high degree of privacy. Depending on which week you choose, Summit View is marginally cheaper than Merlo at the end of the season. It also has the advantage of flexibility, in that guests can book rooms in an apartment to be shared with strangers rather than find enough mates to fill Merlo.