

**GOOD  
SKI  
GUIDE**  
Skiing with  
the locals



# Skiing with the locals

Sally Anne Voak find the way to master new areas

**M**y heart sank when I was asked to organise a week's holiday for a party of 11 – six adults of varying abilities, a 20-year-old snowboarder, two young children and a couple of grannies. Catering for so many different people sounded like a huge challenge, especially as they are a critical lot!

Our destination was Samoëns in France's Grand Massif, a highly-rated family destination close to Geneva airport.

And the resort's new six-pack lift opens out into a big, varied area shared with Flaine and Les Carroz. The main access lift is outside the village but there is a good free bus service and huge car park. The ski schools and restaurants are excellent. The only downside is that weekends and school holidays can produce some queues at the beginning and end of the day.

However, chalet-hosts, Tom and Alison

Ward-Lee, were happy to help with additional information and put me in touch with some of their mates to help me devise a week of great skiing and boarding.

So here's six of the best... from guys who know their local stuff!!

## Intermediate Heaven

The varied terrain, mountain animals, stunning frozen lakes and waterfalls inspired Alison Ward-Lee to choose the resort to launch their Alps accommodation business with husband Tom. She picks the best intermediate runs for scenery and thrills:

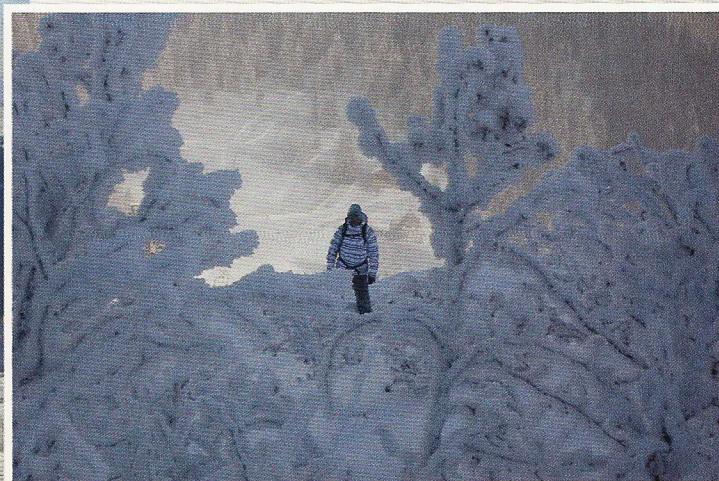
"On day one, take the Chariande Express up to the Tête de Saix, and say "Hello" to Mont Blanc, then head down Perce Neige, a lovely long blue run with great views. Follow the signs for Marvel, one of the longest, most scenic green runs in Europe, which threads through the trees

all the way down to Morillon. After a coffee take the Sairon lift, then work your way back to Samoëns 1600 via a choice of reds or blues."

For a fun mid-holiday day trip, head down the Silice, a wide blue from the Tête de Saix, which becomes the Dolomie, take the Vernant chair lift and look down at the frozen lake as you are whizzed up to the Tourmaline, a long windy run, which brings you down to Flaine for a coffee and loo-break.

"If you can ski a red run competently," says Alison, "I strongly recommend taking the stand-up telecabine to the Grand Massif's highest point, Les Grandes Platières, and then enjoying the 14 magical kilometres of the Cascades, with its frozen waterfalls, and maybe a passing ibex or two. It's a blue run, but you need to be in control of your parallel turns. You can ski right down to the pretty village of Sixt with nearly 2,000 square





metres of vertical descent to pick up the ski-bus back to Samoëns centre."

### Family Favourites

Mark and Jo Entwistle are bringing up their two daughters to become intrepid "snow bunnies", just like their French schoolmates. The whole family skis together most weekends in the season and 13-year-old Alex is a competent snowboarder.

Mark, 36, a builder, originally from Birmingham, says: "The ski schools here move kids on from the nursery slopes to the wider blues quite quickly, which is a great confidence-builder. However, safety is paramount. If you are a group with different abilities, go to the top of the Tête de Saix, the highest point in Samoëns, and then you can take blue or red runs down to suit yourself, and meet up at various intersections before reaching the lift at 1600."

For a short family run he recommends taking Chariande 2 lift (to the left of the new, high speed Chariande Express) to Les Demoiseaux, which is a gentle, wide blue with lots of little jumps and wooded bits at the sides for fun.

"Airon, a red at the top of the ridge, is nice and wide, and turns into a blue, Les Molliet, which goes down to Les Carroz for lunch," he says. "We also sometimes go over to Flaine if we have a whole day, and come back down for a meal at the Bar Le Savoie, which has inexpensive child-friendly dishes like nuggets and chips, as well as adult favourites like mountainous salads, although sadly no Brummie-style curries!"

### New Challenge

For a fresh ski experience, Swedish-born resident Asa Granander recommends

Telemarking.

Asa, 36, who has two young daughters, has lived here for 10 years. She started skiing at the age of three, worked as a ski-guide in 60 resorts and now helps run several businesses in Samoëns.

"I tried Telemark to push myself a bit harder, and found I enjoyed it – so I now mix the two. I manage to get two or three sessions a week," she says.

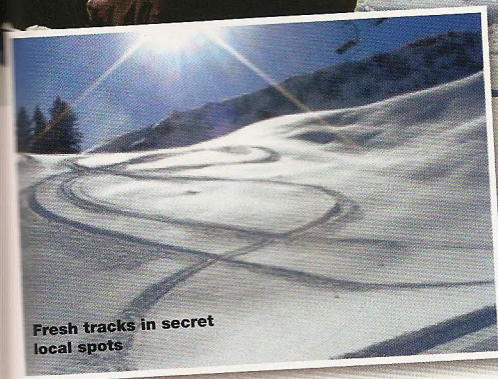
Asa recommends hiring gear from Extreme Glisse, and booking Adrian from the Zig Zag ski school for good instruction. "Choose wide blue slopes to start with – there are plenty down to Samoëns and Morillon from the top of the Chariande lift, and start early in the morning... you will enjoy it!"

### Thigh Burners

Dan Pike, 34, runs Go Massif, the local airport transfer company, and after six years in the resort he knows every bump and mogul. Here's his advice for the fast and furious.

"On the first day, take the Chariande Express lift up to the top of the pistes (eight minutes) and enjoy a choice of reds down to Flaine. Then go up the Grandes Platières Cable Car to the very top and come down the red run, Faust. This takes you back down to Flaine town. Start slowish, but aim to increase your speed by the end of the week. I do it in a straight line in five minutes. Awesome!"

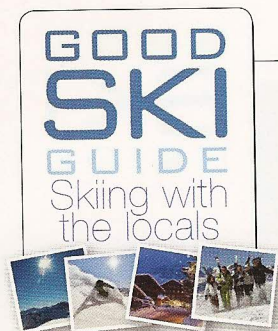
Dan, who has with two young children, says: "You can find plenty of great black runs in the Samoëns area, and it's so easy to link with other ski areas. One of my favourite challenges is to take the Gron Lift at Les Carroz, and top out underneath the lift. The bumps are huge and the first half is a punisher. Top to bottom is about 400 metres. Great!" ➔



Fresh tracks in secret local spots

For one or two days after a snow fall, there is a lot of easy off-piste in Samoëns. You are always in sight of the lifts and other runs. There's no trekking over the back country required!





## → Awesome Boarding

When bar owner Shane Cunningham isn't pouring pints of Guinness at Covey's Irish Pub in Samoëns, he heads off to the slopes for some free-riding or "gibbing" on the local pistes and off-piste runs.

"Early mornings are best in this business," says Shane, 33. "First, check the weather. If there is fresh snow, spend the morning on the Aigle Noir, on the front face of the mountain. If it is cloudy, go over to Les Carroz. You can see the trees on these runs, which helps visibility." If you want off-piste boarding, he recommends the Gers Bowl: "But the long drag lift can be tough, so be prepared!"

If there's no fresh snow around, take the Chariande lift to the top and steam down to Flaine where a Snow Park opened last year. "There are some big jumps there, and you'll earn that beer in one of the restaurants at the bottom," he says. "By the end of the week you might want some more adventure, but you do need to hire a ski instructor to get the most out of your day, as well as for safety."

"There is a huge amount of stuff to see if you take the Gouilles lift right up to the left hand side of the mountain, then explore from there."

## Steep and Deep

Six years ago, Londoner Tom Ward-Lee, 36, never imagined that he would climb Mont Blanc or get hooked on off-piste skiing. He has learnt a lot, including how to survive at 4810m, and where to find



Dan Pike



the best powder. Surprisingly, some of it is within sight of the restaurants and ski-school at Samoëns 1600.

"Since the new Chariande Express lift was installed last year, people tend to go over the top towards Flaine in the mornings, and the off-piste areas at the front of the mountain don't get tracked," he says. "For one or two days after a snow fall, there is a lot of easy off-piste in Samoëns. You are always in sight of the lifts and other runs, which is a bonus when you're new to the resort. There's no trekking over the back country required!"

His favourite run is Veret Gers, a proper off-piste route where you do need to wear a tracker (and Tom highly recommends a guide), and has a secret destination – the Gers Bowl.

"Take the Veret lift from the Grand Vans area, which joins up with the Bowl – an off-piste paradise at the back of Flaine. Lots of people don't know about this. You take a right towards the bowl, and then a steep drag lift to the top. Then, choose your route down from top to bottom of this massive powder field. Wonderful!"

It was well worth the effort of spending an hour or two online and I would recommend this type of research to anyone planning a family or group holiday at a previously untried resort.

Go to the tourist website, then home in on the listed bar owners, ski schools and taxi services to find helpful English-speaking experts. You'll get all the gen, and make some new ski-buddies in the process.

We had a brilliant time... and everyone was happy. Phew!



## TOP TIPS FROM LOCALS

**1** If you're driving, and the Grand Massif Express looks crowded, head on for 1.5 km up to Vercland, where there is never a queue for the telecabine, and free parking. The ski instructors use this route to the slopes, and you can jump straight on! (There is also a ski-bus from Samoëns to the telecabine, but check times locally.)

**2** Hire equipment from Roland Gay at 1600, or Extreme Glisse at the bottom of the Express lift, so you can store it there at the end of the day and enjoy the 10 minute walk or 2 minute bus ride back to Samoëns village in comfort. They will dry your boots overnight, too!

**3** Picnic at 1600. The top of the express is a large plateau, with ski-schools, nursery slopes and restaurants. If the weather is good, there is plenty of room for a picnic.

**4** On day one get a bus timetable at the Tourist Office. Most of the buses park here. There are plenty, and frequent, but it's wise to check the time of the last service if you plan to ski over to a neighbouring resort.