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Val d'Isère will always get the Gold from me

WINTER WINNER

Former Olympic skier

Graham Bell shares

*his passion for the
resort that shaped him*

Val d'Isère has shaped my life as a skier more than any other resort. It is where, in 1982, I skied my first downhill course, on the Oreiller/Killy (OK) run. Named

after local racing legends Henri Oreiller, a double Olympic gold medallist in 1948, and Jean-Claude Killy, a triple Olympic gold medallist in 1968, it got easier with practice, but at 16 it felt terrifyingly fast to me.

Val d'Isère is also where I competed in the 1992 Winter Olympics on the notorious La Face, and where I have skied my most memorable off-piste, such as the Couloir des Pisteurs. It was a home from home while racing on the World Cup tour in the Eighties and Nineties, and it's where I met my wife Sarah while she was working as a chalet girl in the mid-Eighties. It helped change me as a racer and skier, but the resort has also mapped the entire skiing zeitgeist of the past four decades.

At the time of that first downhill run on the OK I was with the British

junior team, and we stayed in ugly Sixties apartment blocks in La Daille. New-builds must now be stone-clad with a traditional pitched roof.

We couldn't help noticing back then that the resort's lift system was in need of serious regeneration, too.

The Solaise cable car, built in 1940, was still clunking up the mountain, and the La Daille gondola may have looked like Sixties chic, but it was a squeeze to fit four big downhill racers into a cabin.

Investment from the Eighties on has been phenomenal. Since the Funival underground funicular opened in 1987, there has hardly been a new lift that's not state-of-the-art, from a sleek 10-person gondola for Solaise to the ongoing £170 million regeneration that includes underground moving walkways in town and an American-style day lodge on the mountain.

BBC commentator Matt Chilton, who first skied in Val d'Isère in 1985, is a fan of the 2002-built Olympique gondola, which accesses Belvedere's slopes from near the town centre. "I'm fortunate to have skied all over the world and I'm convinced that the Olympique is the finest ski lift on the planet," he says. "In

terms of speed, capacity and vertical uplift, nothing comes close."

The Eighties saw a boom in the British catered-chalet holiday, with Val d'Isère a key destination. When we

met, my wife was working in a chalet called Le Clos, one of the larger ones run by Mark Warner. There were 12 chalet girls (no boys), and dinner was served in big dishes at 7.30pm prompt, with one guest being "mother". The family trip we took last Easter, staying at Inghams' Chalet Hotel & Spa Le Savoie, is a good example of how the roles of staff have changed. As Sarah noted: "Clean rooms and mixed staff in smart uniforms – such a contrast to the baggy tops, leggings and cowboy boots we wore in the Eighties."

My first experience of the luxury end of the chalet market came in the late Nineties at Le Chardon Mountain Lodges, with champagne and canapés, gourmet meals and an outdoor pool. The 2000s saw openings such as the splendid Eagle's Nest, and Chalet Husky with its indoor climbing, archery and rifle shooting, and the luxury sector continues apace, including a five-star boutique hotel,

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Le Refuge, under way on Solaise.

This high-end demand also extends to the high street. Susan and Jock Dun set up a hire shop in Val d'Isère in 1991, and now run Snowberry rental. "Our customers have become more demanding over the past 30 years," says Susan. "Most realise the importance of decent equipment that's properly serviced and correctly adjusted, but they expect top-quality gear and service at a good-value price."

John Yates-Smith, founder of YSE chalet holidays, says his first job in the resort, in 1976, was washing dishes at the Fjord hotel. "I was paid £5 a week, while my brother Dick was paid £12 as a rep. He had a room and I slept under the ping-pong table. Val d'Isère was a hairy-chested place then – accommodation was basic and hot water a

luxury. Après consisted of four sleazy nightclubs playing Johnny Hallyday and frequented by Parisians in leather trousers."

Dick Yates-Smith opened Dick's Tea Bar in 1979. From very modest beginnings it became *the* place on the World Cup tour for a post-race party.

Val d'Isère was a lot more punk back then. An old haunt of mine featured a bubblegum wall, with every inch covered in used gum. One throwback that has stood the test of time is the Moris Pub. Chilton was its manager for a season in the Nineties. "It is possibly the last remaining link to the Eighties," he laughs.

On the mountain, La Folie Douce, at the top of the La Daille cable car, hired Kely Starlight as artistic director in 1996. His refreshing take on entertainment led to Austrian-style ski-boot dancing on tables – après-ski with an Ibiza twist. The partying has not stopped since.

In town, Dick Yates-Smith sold his bar in 1997 and it has had a number of makeovers. But the regeneration plan for the heart of the resort, called Le Coin de Val, will add 900 extra guest beds and see Dick's Tea Bar knocked

down and relocated.

Jim Adlington first skied in Val d'Isère in 1992, working his way up from pot-washer to professional freeskiier, and setting up Planks Clothing. "When I arrived there were loads of ski bums and snowboarders from all over the world living a hand-to-mouth existence, just so they could ride every day. It's impossible to be in Val d'Isère for the winter now and not work."

Another change is the increasing number of people who come to Val d'Isère just for the après, but Jim's not complaining: "We should thank places like Dick's for partying all night because it means fewer people, especially the seasonaires, go skiing off-piste. So it keeps all those classic lines free on a powder day."

Last season saw an abundance of powder days in Val d'Isère, as good as any I can remember. Yes, the resort may have changed, but the mountains remain as challenging and awe-inspiring as ever.

Graham Bell is a former Olympic skier and now works as a TV presenter and journalist.

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VAL D'ISERE THROUGH THE AGES

1888

Val d'Isère opens first hotel – Auberge Moris

1936

Le Rogoney drag-lift opens on Solaise, the mountain directly above town

1937

Col de l'Iseran, Europe's highest road pass opens, continuing from Val d'Isère into the neighbouring Maurienne valley

1940

Solaise cable car built

1952

Hydroelectric dam built below

Val d'Isère, covering the old village of Tignes and creating the Lac du Chevril. The new ski resort of Tignes was built above

1955

First running of the Critérium de la Première Neige ski races, which take place at the beginning of every ski season, snow depending and are now part of the World Cup circuit

1961

La Daille apartments constructed

1972

Val d'Isère and Tignes area renamed the

Espace Killy, after ski racer Jean-Claude Killy, one of Val d'Isère's founders. The area has since been renamed Val d'Isère/Tignes

1987

Funival opens in La Daille

1990

Solaise Express chairlift opens

1992

Val d'Isère hosts the Olympic downhill, super-G and combined ski races during the Albertville Games

2002

Olympique

gondola opens on Bellevarde

2009

Val d'Isère hosts the Alpine Ski World Championships

2016

Solaise gondola lift with heated seats and Wi-Fi on board opens, and the ski area at the top is revamped too

2019

Old Solaise cable car station set to become France's highest hotel at 2,550m – although it is behind schedule and won't open fully until the 2019-20 winter season



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RINGING THE CHANGES

Skiers at Val d'Isère, right; Graham Bell and his wife Sarah at the 1992 Winter Olympics, left; the French resort at night, below

ESSENTIALS

Inghams (01483 791114; ingham.co.uk) offers seven nights at five-star Chalet Hotel & Spa Le Savoie in Val d'Isère from £1,079 per person half-board, including a choice of complimentary wines with meals, return flights and transfers.

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