

Ski

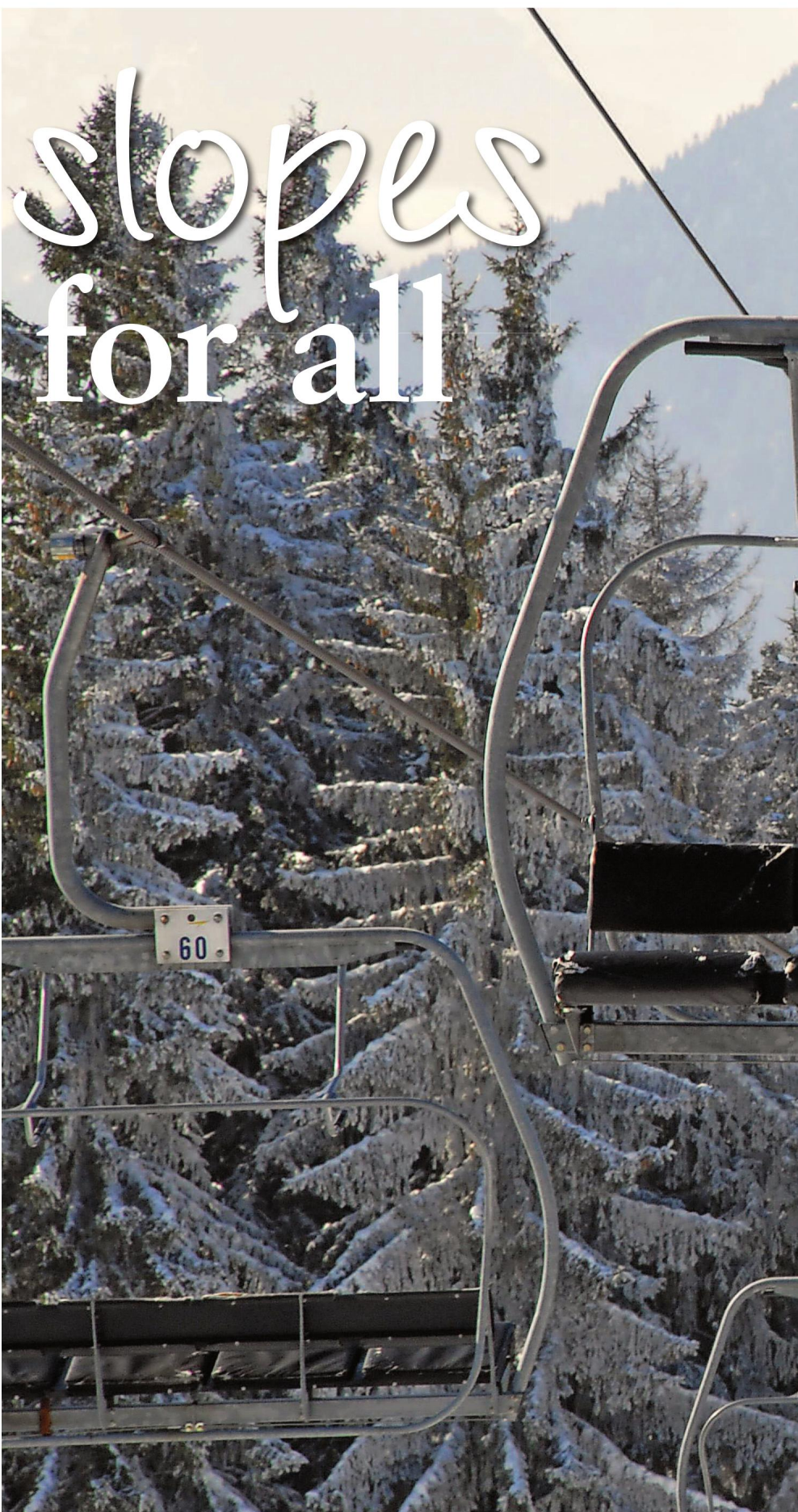
French resorts are making it easier for the less able to enjoy the thrill of the pistes, as **Mary Novakovich** explains

It is only four months until the 2018 Winter Paralympics in South Korea, when the sight of disabled skiers and snowboarders doing the seemingly unthinkable will leave spectators open-mouthed in amazement.

Many will be inspired to follow in their tracks, but could easily be daunted by the logistics of getting on the mountains if they have a disability or limited mobility. However, France is among the world leaders in making its ski resorts accessible to people with disabilities or life-challenging conditions.

The mountains have long been a place of rehabilitation and rejuvenation, and a combination of technology and changing attitudes has helped to make a snow holiday more inclusive. Over the past 20 years, resorts have realised that people with disabilities and other health conditions come as part of a family or a group, and it made economic and social sense to break down barriers.

It is not just people in wheelchairs who need specialist help to get the most out of a mountain holiday. Cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, blindness, deafness, multiple sclerosis, autism and Parkinson's are just some of the conditions that are now being catered for in ski resorts. It is a case of finding the resort that matches your needs – which, given the huge choice, is not as straightforward as it sounds.





A less-abled skier and her guide head for the slopes in Morzine, in the Portes du Soleil resort area

France has 150 ski schools that include handiski, the term the French use for specialist equipment and instruction for disabled skiers. Most are offered through the École du Ski Français (ESF). Look out for the *adapté* label, which shows that a resort has specialist equipment and instruction, as well as adapted accommodation and accessible restaurants. Within the Savoie Mont Blanc ski area, 32 resorts have these facilities (see panel on page 40). However, there are plenty of ski resorts without the official label that still have excellent adaptive facilities. Val d'Isère is a prime example, with both ESF and Oxygène ski schools offering lessons for the disabled.

There is plenty of room for confusion in trying to find the ideal resort – along with a lack of knowledge as to what is available. This is something that Catherine Cosby discovered ten years ago when she set up the Ski 2 Freedom Foundation, which swiftly developed into

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a vital link between travellers, ski schools and tourist offices. Her daughter is severely disabled, which inspired Catherine to spread her love of the mountains to people who might have thought that such holidays were off limits.

“Accessibility in French resorts is an integral part of my work in helping not just those wanting to benefit from being there, but also identifying what changes could be made to help more,” says Catherine. “Our information resource meets the needs of anyone whose health or general well-being may be affected by a life-changing, life-challenging or terminal condition – whether it’s physical, cognitive, degenerative, genetic, sensory, audio or mental. Exercise, fresh air, food and being surrounded by nature all help to restore life’s equilibrium. Our work as a charitable organisation is advocating mountains for all.”

As Catherine says, it goes “beyond the perimeters of what is often defined as ➡➡➡

disabled". She explains: "Requests come in from a range of needs – from those with dyslexia wanting to know if there is a version of a piste map suitable for them, to someone wanting to ski again after a stroke or a ski accident, to someone who is quadriplegic and fully ventilated."

Where to ski

One of the most popular Alpine resorts for adaptive skiing is La Plagne, which features the latest handiski equipment. The various forms of sitskis (monoski, duoski) strap skiers into a seat while they use outrigger-type poles to ski. On a tandemski, you ride in front while an instructor steers from behind. Parents who are good skiers can take a course so that they can steer their child on a tandemski.

People with little upper-body strength can use a kartski, which has long levers and is usually guided by an instructor. La Plagne is the only resort in France to feature the vertiski, in which paraplegics are strapped upright. The equipment comes free with a lesson, and there are discounts on lift passes for disabled people and their ski buddies.

La Rosière is another resort that has been expanding its adaptive ski programme over the past 20 years, and also works with Ski 2 Freedom. Its ESF director, Simon Atkinson, is one of ten instructors trained in adaptive skiing.

"People are quite surprised by how many different types of disabilities can be catered for," he says. "Depending on the requirements, we can give technical input



ABOVE: The resort of Les Menuires in the Trois Vallées has the *adapté* label

to help the person ski without assistance, or simply allow people to take to the slopes for the first time and ski in the company of their friends and family."

As well as the equipment, ski lifts are adapted to take the apparatuses on everything from drag lifts to gondolas. Resorts list the ski lifts that are accessible for handiski equipment and wheelchairs. Some ski instructors use sign language to teach deaf skiers, while blind and visually impaired skiers go with a guide and are connected via Bluetooth.

Paralympian alpine ski champion Kelly Gallagher, who won Britain's first-ever gold on the slopes in the 2014

Sochi Olympics, trains and races in Tignes, another highly rated resort for adaptive winter sports. Born with oculocutaneous albinism, Kelly has a visual impairment and skis with a guide.

"We've got Bluetooth radio communications in our helmets, and he's describing what we're doing," she says. "Once you have a guide – it could be a private lesson or even in a group – as long as one person has the comms, they're able to talk to you. I normally wear a bib, and the guide will have an orange vest, which gives other skiers an indication that they should allow you a little more space.

LIFE-CHANGING SKI HOLIDAY

Denise Reeves, who had two life-changing experiences, including being in a coma, went on an Alpine ski trip. Catherine Cosby, of Ski 2 Freedom, recounts her story:

"Denise is a remarkable person and had rather given up on being able to do anything again. I recommended she went to Montgenèvre [in Hautes-Alpes], as it offered both an ideal location and ski instructor experience. Katie Waddington of Zenith Holidays helped with the booking of flights, accommodation and in-resort representation.

"Denise needed a lot of help, as she had a subsequent brain injury, but went in March this year on what was going to be a 'one-off' ski trip. In fact, the experience was so rewarding that she has already booked for next winter.

"The resort is exceptional in accommodating all types of conditions. There has to be some compromise, as there is a lack of suitable, fully-wheelchair-accessible places to stay. But parents and skiers overcome this when they have perfect slopes and instructors. Thomas from ESF was remarkable."



ABOVE: A skier using a dualski and outrigger poles at La Plagne; **FACING PAGE:** A skier and guide on a tandemski in Les Menuires

PHOTOGRAPHS: ADAM BATTERBEE, ÉCOLE DU SKI FRANÇAIS

“As long as there is someone skiing with you, and you feel confident in that little cocoon of safety, the mountains are as open to you as they are to anyone else.”

Where to stay

Off the slopes, people with disabilities have to contend with many issues, namely getting around the resort. It pays to be selective: newer purpose-built resorts such as Les Arcs 1950 have a wider range of accessible accommodation, and, in Les Arcs' case, the chairlift comes right into the bottom of the traffic-free village.

Like Les Arcs, La Plagne is part of the vast Paradiski domain in Savoie, which is linked by the double-decker Vanoise Express cable car. The brutalist architecture of La Plagne's Aime 2000 might not be to everyone's taste, but this huge, cruise-liner-like complex has all its shops and restaurants under one roof, making it simpler for people who cannot move around easily.

Les Menuires has flat central areas that are connected by lifts. Tignes, Courchevel and Megève are among the resorts that have heated pavements. La Clusaz's website has an unusually exhaustive list of shops and restaurants that have and have not been adapted for people with disabilities. Valloire's clear, flat streets make it easy for wheelchair users, and while Méribel is good for people with visual impairments, it's not quite as practical if you are in a wheelchair. Val d'Isère is also flat, and has accessible accommodation right in the centre.

Walking around a resort can be a problem for people of limited mobility, or just plain old age. Catherine Cosby suggests wearing crampons on snow boots to prevent falls, and that goes for people pushing wheelchairs. “Wheel blades are brilliant,” she adds. “They're like mini-skis about the width of a laptop and they just clip on to the wheels of a wheelchair. You can stick them on anything. I'm trying to get more ski shops to stock them for hire.”

The location of accommodation can also be a minefield, particularly for mixed groups of abled and less-abled skiers. Ski 2 Freedom's website goes into detail about the hundreds of properties Catherine has inspected for their accessibility. Some hotels and residences have access problems that might not be immediately obvious, such as steep footpaths.

Groups of skiers need to balance the desire for ski-in, ski-out accommodation with practicalities. Not all disabled skiers will be able to ski all day, and they

could end up being marooned in a chalet in a hamlet or partially up a slope. Morzine, Les Gets, Val d'Isère, La Rosière and Samoëns – to name just a few – all have lively village centres with more to offer in après-ski activities.

“Wanting just to ski is a very English thing,” says Catherine. “If you go to a really French resort, they're full of people who aren't skiing. They're up in the mountain with their dogs, or they go tobogganing after lunch. They're having a holiday.”

Access to the slopes for non-skiers is a factor to bear in mind, too. Val Thorens and Châtel, for example, have a good number of cable cars and pedestrian-friendly chairlifts so that non-skiers can join family and colleagues for lunch on the mountain. And the same tandemski that disabled skiers use can be hired as taxis to transport less-abled people – anyone from grandparents to pregnant women – to mountain restaurants so that no one is left out.

It also gives people the exhilarating experience of whooshing down a mountain in complete safety, whether or not they have ever strapped on skis before.

Many après-ski activities have been ➡➡➡





ABOVE: Gondolas above Megève; **BELOW:** Handiskis on the slopes of Le Grand-Bornand

adapted including more hair-raising experiences such as paragliding for people in wheelchairs. Some are slightly gentler, such as dog-sledding. Cross-country skiers – with or without disabilities – can explore the 120 kilometres of world-class trails in Les Saisies, a small resort in the Espace Diamant area with a large offering of adaptive sports.

Avoriaz, another purpose-built resort with accessible ski-in, ski-out facilities, is the location of Aquariaz, a huge water park with everything from raucous water slides to relaxing baths. Last winter, Balnéo at Le Palais in Megève expanded to include a fully accessible thermal baths complex with indoor and outdoor hot pools.

It is not just the Alps: many resorts in the Pyrénées have been expanding their adaptive offerings. Cauterets, Saint-Lary-Soulan, Peyragudes and the Grand Tourmalet ski area all offer handiski as well as adapted accommodation and accessible restaurants. La Mongie also provides the unforgettable experience of visiting the Pic du Midi observatory (at

2,877 metres), where the gondola and restaurant are accessible.

While resorts are making it easier for people with disabilities or limited mobility, there is still one area in need of improvement. As anyone who has



awkwardly clumped downstairs in ski boots knows only too well, there are very few mountain restaurants with ground-floor toilets. Lift stations almost always have adapted toilets, but if you want to enjoy a lazy lunch on a mountainside terrace, be prepared for a bumpy ride.

But the lure of the peaks can overcome that. “The enjoyment of being in the mountains, the fresh air, it’s incredible,” says Kelly Gallagher. “Just because I can’t see doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy being up there.” [👉](#)

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The Savoie Mont Blanc resorts with the *adapté* label:

Aillons-Margériaz

(en.lesaillons.com)

Arêches-Beaufort

(areches-beaufort.com)

Aussois

(aussois.com)

Bessans

(bessans-tourisme.com)

Bonneval-sur-Arc

(bonnevalsurarc.fr)

Les Carroz

(winter.lescarroz.com)

Chamonix

(chamonix.com)

Champagny-en-Vanoise

(winter.champagny.com)

Châtel

(chatel.com)

Combloux

(hiver.combloux.com)

La Clusaz

(en.laclusaz.com)

Les Gets

(en.lesgets.com)

Le Grand-Bornand

(en.legrandbornand.com)

Les Houches

(leshouches.com)

Les Karellis

(en.karellis.com)

Megève

(megeve.com)

Les Menuires

(en.lesmenuires.com)

Méribel

(meribel.com)

Morillon

(ot-morillon.co.uk)

La Plagne

(winter.la-plagne.com)

Pralognan-la-Vanoise

(pralognan.com)

La Rosière

(larosiere.net)

Saint-François-Longchamp

(saintfrancoislongchamp.com)

Saint-Sorlin-d'Arves

(saintsorlindarves.com)

Les Saisies

(lessaisies.com)

Samoëns

(winter.samoens.com)

Savoie Grand Revard

(savoiegrandrevard.com)

Tignes

(en.tignes.net)

La Toussuire

(la-toussuire.com)

Val Cenis

(haute-maurienne-vanoise.com)

Val Thorens

(valthorens.com)

Valmeinier

(valmeinier.com)

Crystal Ski offers adaptive ski holidays in La Plagne, including flights, specially adapted transfers, equipment hire, instruction and accessible accommodation (crystalski.co.uk).

More information:

ski2freedom.com; esf-uk.co.uk;
savoie-mont-blanc.com