

# SKIING GOLD

## Tignes, France

By Karl Flesch

As someone who does a lot of research prior to traveling, I'm always amazed by the regional wonders which can only be uncovered by being there. Inevitably, on my way home I'm making a list of what I would do differently if I were to return. But rarely do I actually get to experience the hidden gems accessible only to the returning traveler. After reading the following article by Karl, I'm more convinced than ever that to truly know an area you need to go back time and time again.

— Bob Ingram

Tignes and Val d'Isère are the two resorts that make up the combined region known as Espace Killy, named after its favorite son Jean-Claude Killy, winner of Olympic gold in 1968 at Grenoble. The resorts are reached after a 3 1/2 hour bus ride through some breathtaking scenery from either Lyon or Geneva airport.

Espace Killy is a five-mile-long stretch of ridges, valleys and peaks covering 25,000 acres (five times larger than all of Vail). Connected by cable cars, tunneled funitels, gondolas, detachable high-speed chairs, it has 94 lifts in all. The Grande Motte, the highest mountain in the resort at just under 12,000 feet, offers some of the highest skiing in Europe. At 6,900 feet, Tignes is one of the highest resorts in Europe, promising excellent snow conditions even when lower resorts may have poor snow conditions.

I first came to Tignes for the 1992 Winter Olympics in Albertville. I purchased the tickets for the games and my American friend living in Paris chose the place to stay. I had never heard of Tignes, and the small rooming place did not even want a deposit! In the end, my friend in Paris could not get off from work, so at the last minute a colleague from work joined me. I saw Donna Weinbrecht of New Jersey win the first gold medal for woman's freestyle skiing in Tignes.

I saw the men's Super G in Val d'Isère. Staying in Tignes, there were long commutes by bus to the other far-flung venues of the Albertville games.

Now I travel to Tignes every January, and rarely find it bitterly cold or crowded. I stay at the Hotel Village Montana, a three-star hotel in Tignes le Lac that is ski-in and ski-out. The hotel offers spacious rooms with balconies, huge buffet breakfasts and dinners that end with a self-serve cheese course and desserts. There are saunas and an outdoor pool with views of the surrounding mountains.

The Espace Killy is constantly upgrading their lifts, replacing older and slower lifts with modern detachable six-packs and even an eight-pack! The lifts are strategically placed so that it's easy to ski down and find your way up to new terrain. Runs are long, averaging 15 minutes and 2000 feet vertical. Trails are groomed daily and can be as wide as football fields, a joy to the intermediate skier. Always nearby for the expert are thousands of acres of off-piste (ungroomed and unmarked slopes) to ski.

It is good advice to hire your own private instructor or guide to lead you around this huge ski area. Besides improving your skiing, they will find the best snow conditions on the mountain for skiing, whether on-piste or off-piste. One year my guide, Baudouin, found great powder snow fourteen days after the last snowfall! Most important, they will safely lead you to some fantastic off-piste skiing, offering avalanche responders for your protection. You will learn more from them about the resort than you ever could on your own, and they will even call ahead to make lunch reservations at those special chalet restaurants that can be hard to get into. They are with you for a full day of skiing from 9 until the lifts close after 4:30.

The trails are well marked. Large boards list open and closed runs and lifts at the base of all the major lifts. A short run down from my hotel to the Aero Ski (10 passenger gondola) whisks me up from Tignes le Lac to the top of Tovière, giving me easy access into Val d'Isère or Tignes Val Claret. Most of the skiing is above tree line, however during falling snow or flat light conditions, one can ski the limited areas between the trees in La Daille and Les Brévières.

Free shuttle buses run day and night, connecting the villages in Tignes and the villages in Val d'Isère. Pay

buses and taxis connect the two resorts, helpful for those skiers who miss skiing back before the lifts close.

Eating on the mountain is a pleasure with many small, charming chalets serving superb French cuisine. Most mountain chalets offer both self-serve and an area for sitdown dining.

A favorite stop for lunch is at Auberge L'Arolay found in the small village of Le Fornet (Val d'Isère). Small hibachi grills are placed right on your table where you can cook your own thin, tender slices of beef and then garnish them with various sauces. Salad and Savoyarde style potatoes cooked in a rich cream and cheese sauce finish off the meal. Most memorable is the after dinner drink "La Grolle" which consists of warm coffee, grappa, citrus peels and sugar, and is set on fire before being served in a communal carved wooden bowl with spouts. You pass the bowl around the table and whoever puts it down first has to pay!

2007 brings even more changes to Tignes with more new high-speed replacement lifts and a huge indoor aquatic center. In the middle of January, I will be returning to Tignes for another fun filled week of skiing adventures. ▲

An advertisement for Gore Mountain. It features a skier in a blue jacket and goggles, holding a ski pole. The text "WINTER CALLS. GORE ANSWERS." is in the top right. The words "MORE GORE" are written in large, bold, white letters across the center. At the bottom, there is a black box with white text: "When winter calls, Gore is ready to answer. Your hunger is always satisfied with more cruisers, more steeps and more glades. Info: 518.251.2411 Snow Phone: 1.800.342.1234 ENTER THE MORE GORE GIVEAWAY AT GOREMOUNTAIN.COM". The Gore Mountain logo is in the bottom right corner, with "GORE MOUNTAIN" and "North Creek • New York" below it.

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