Travel

Inside Club Med's vast new 'ski factory' in Tignes

It started out as a tented camp in Mallorca with utopian ideals and no running water. But 73 years on, and now with Chinese owners, the French brand is moving upmarket and embarking on an Alpine building spree

Simon Usborne FEBRUARY 22 2023

In a marketing video posted online last year, creative types described their plans for a new Club Med hotel that was already taking shape in the French ski resort of Tignes. The architect behind one of the biggest winter openings of recent years said it would have to, among other things, "integrate with the landscape — it has to have a link with the surrounding buildings".

A few weeks after the doors opened in early December, my taxi rolls into the vast shadow of a resort within a resort. I gaze up at a sprawling pile clad in stone and larch with multiple terraces, balconies and jauntily angled aluminium struts. The nine-storey building, which is as long as The Shard in London is tall, has been plonked on the former resort car park at Val Claret — the highest of the villages that make up Tignes — with all the subtlety of a 747 ditching in Lake Como.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, never having been to a big all-inclusive mountain resort. And, to be fair to that architect, I guess you can only achieve so much landscape "integration" when you have to make space for 1,046 beds in 430 rooms (plus rooms for 388 live-in staff), a sprawling buffet for which 1,850 croissants are baked daily, and racking for 1,400 pairs of brand-new skis (rental is included in the price of the holiday).



Val Claret, the highest of the villages that make up Tignes. The new Club Med was built on what was a car park

If anything, the unapologetic scale of the new resort is a symbol of an empire on the rise — like the Colosseum but with lower-stakes entertainment. More than 70 years since it invented the all-inclusive concept in 1950 with a tented camp on Mallorca (the first winter resort followed in 1956) — and eight years since a buyout by the Chinese Fosun conglomerate valued the company at almost €1bn — Club Med is on a building spree.

A few miles up the road, or a quick ski via a couple of chairlifts, a smaller outpost has also opened this winter in Val d'Isère, hot on the heels of the 465-room resort which launched in December 2020 in La Rosière, just to the north in the same valley. Also new this winter is Club Med Kiroro Peak in Hokkaido, Japan, while Canada got its first resort last season in the Charlevoix Massif, north of Québec City. Newer clubs are under construction in the ski resort of Snowbasin, Utah, and San Sicario, near Sestriere in Italy. That's on top of a dozen or so summer openings and big-budget refurbishments (most of the chain's 72 resorts target the summer market).



Despite an at times rocky corporate history — and in defiance of a pandemic, surging inflation and a cost-of-living crisis — Club Med is becoming increasingly posh, with prices to match. It's a shift that seems to be at odds with its founding ethos. That first "village", as Club Meds are still known, was a not-for-profit enterprise conceived as a utopian, communal escape after the war by Gérard Blitz, a Belgian diamond-cutter and yogi. It had no running water.

Tents then became straw huts before Club Med grew to become a French institution in the travel industry. Henri Giscard d'Estaing, son of former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, joined the company in 1997 and has overseen the upmarket shift (he remains the company's president).



The lounge bar reserved for guests of the 25 'exclusive collection' suites



DJ twins Doppelganger Paris performing at the hotel © Eugene Levit



Ski lessons are part of the all-inclusive packages

Nicolas Bresch, a French veteran of Club Med and its managing director for the UK and the Nordic countries, tells me it was a case of "go posh or go home", as the budget end of the all-inclusive resort market became crowded. "We were strongly attacked by competitors doing what we were doing at a much cheaper price," he explains. "So, instead of getting into a price war, we started to upgrade our positioning."

While the pandemic felt like the end of travel, meanwhile, Bresch says it only inspired the company to double down. "We knew Covid would stop at some point and that we needed to continue investing to prepare," he adds. Even when the prices are high, he says, all-inclusive packages, paid for ahead of time, protect the cost of holidaying from inflationary shocks.

Demand is evidently there. I arrive in January expecting a quiet few days, only to find a hotel humming with activity, at 93 per cent occupancy. Well-heeled Brazilians are enjoying the final week of their school summer holidays. Couples from all over the world are paying the best part of £5,000 for a week in a Club Med — and up to £14,000 per week for a family of four in one of the "exclusive collection" of 25 suites that make up the upper floors. Suite guests also get a concierge service, an exclusive bar and lounge on the seventh floor, and separate area in the ski room.



One of the bars at the hotel — beer, house wine and some cocktails are included



The resort also has a 25m-long indoor pool and gym

The peaks of the Petite Balme and Grande Balme fill the view through the hotel's vast, east-facing windows. Just beyond them, and out of view, rises the Grande Motte, the highest point in the resort (3,653m). The sun is out. Within half an hour of arriving, I've taken full advantage of the convenience of an all-inclusive with a quick change in my room. My lift pass (also included) is ready and, by the time I reach the ski room, my equipment is waiting for me in my locker.

The resort's bulk softens slightly with elevation as I look back from my first chairlift. It's also fair to say that Tignes Val Claret, a hillside cluster of big brown apartment blocks, was never known for its architectural merits. Established mainly in the 1960s, it benefited as a host resort at the 1992 Winter Olympics (including for the sadly shortlived ski ballet). It's best known today for its reliable snow — there aren't many ski resorts that start above 2,000m — and relatively cheap digs.

I've brought my brother out for three days of skiing in an area we know well. We're grateful for the altitude after an early season beset by unseasonable warmth, and are blessed with sunshine, cold temperatures and recent snow. Fuelled by excellent *jambon-fromage* sandwiches we make ourselves at the breakfast buffet, we go in search of untouched snow, including a memorable descent from the Grande Motte into the Leisse valley.

Performers on stilts dance while a staff member loads doughnuts on to the rapidly depleting dessert counter. I've only seen anything this mad on a cruise ship

Even at this altitude, climate change is threatening the tradition of summer skiing high on the retreating Grande Motte glacier. The new Club Med had been due to open at the same time as Le Ski Line, a separate 400-metre, €62mn indoor ski slope at Val Claret that would guarantee skiing all summer. What would surely be the first snowdome to be built on an actual ski slope was approved by the resort in 2016, to the horror of environmental groups, but the plan was finally scrapped with the election of a new mayor in 2021.

If skiing can only flourish at higher altitudes, the sport risks becoming only more rarefied. That's bad news after decades of democratisation, but it makes Club Med's upmarket shift look quite, well, smart. The new resort is pitched at the four-star level (or four trident, as the company calls it, in reference to its logo), rising to five stars in the top suites, which are generously proportioned and include balconies and cute little sitting rooms.



The Solstice restaurant — nouvelle style and reservations only, in contrast to the buffet downstairs



The sprawling nine-storey building displaying the group's trident logo

Luxury mixes slightly awkwardly with some of the cultural traditions of the brand. The perkiest battalion among the staff are known as GOs, or *Gentils Organisateurs* (literally, kind organisers). They are encouraged to eat with guests, among other duties, which can include anything from serving drinks to circus acts.

The entertainment can be eccentric. On our first evening, I head to the buffet for dinner to find GMs (that's *Gentils Membres*, or guests) lining up at the burger and steak stations (I go for a very good and less besieged veal stroganoff). Not far away, a mobile DJ blasts out Daft Punk right next to the salad bar. Performers on stilts wearing silver costumes adorned with flashing lights and ostrich-feather wings dance while a member of the kitchen staff — her head nodding more gently to the beat — loads doughnuts on to the rapidly depleting dessert counter. I've only seen anything this mad on a cruise ship.

Two floors above the buffet, the Solstice restaurant is a more subdued, reservations-only affair, albeit still a massive space. There's a reassuringly concise menu and a solid wine list (the food at Solstice is included but anything other than the house wines, the cocktail of the day, or standard beers costs extra in the resort's various bars). Highlights include a very fine poached egg and mushroom starter, but I begin to wonder if the nouvelle portions are the only thing distinguishing the quality of the food from the buffet below.



Loud carpets in one of the communal areas

I'm told that it took five years to get the interiors right. Perhaps some of the carpets in particular have suffered from overthinking. I become obsessed with the corridor outside my room. It's laid with a grey carpet that is a poor facsimile of oak planks, interspersed with sort of kaleidoscopic patchwork of garish triangles to announce each bedroom door. I wonder if the cheese dreams have begun early as I stagger to bed after a Savoyarde fondue on my final night.

It clearly didn't take five years to build the place (I gather they managed it in one) — and it shows. Generic mountain and action-sports posters have been thrown at the walls, and my brother, who's an architect, points out the low quality of some of the materials, from the windows to the standard-issue ceiling tiles.

I am impressed by the service and the efficiency of the place. Perhaps it's that I've travelled in term time, without our young children, but I struggle to see the value in such high prices, however inclusive they might be. Is it really worth paying such a premium to be cloistered in a resort where children can roam freely and enjoy ice cream and ski lessons on tap (prices include the small army of dedicated instructors who march on the ski room each morning). Judging by the grinning faces around us and — I'm told after my visit — record early-season bookings across Club Med's winter resorts, the popular answer appears to be a resounding "yes".

Details

Simon Usborne was a guest of Club Med Tignes (*clubmed.co.uk*), where double rooms cost from £5,130 for seven nights, including all meals, ski passes, rental and lessons for two adults (but excluding flights and transfers). A family room for two adults and two children starts at £9,087 for seven nights in the Easter holidays, with the same inclusions

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