

Peak dining

With a culinary offering as elevated as its slopes, skiers heading for Courmayeur may need bigger salopettes, says **David Golledge**

Peering out in one direction, snowshoe-wearing intrepid explorers in threes – harnessed together for safety – inch their way along beneath the Giant's Tooth, one of the Italian peaks in the Mont Blanc range. In another direction, thrill-seeking skiers limber up ahead of the epic 11-mile Vallée Blanche off-piste descent, which drops nearly 2,500m before finishing across the border in the neighbouring resort of Chamonix. Whichever way I turn, there are vivid reminders of the awesome power of nature, with mountains spilling out as far as the eye can see.

I'm in Courmayeur, near Italy's northwestern tip. The most spectacular views from the mountaintops are not reserved for the hardest winter sports fans, but easily accessible thanks to the Skyway Monte Bianco cable car. This impressive feat of engineering is separate from the main ski area and looks out across the Aosta Valley, connecting 80 people at a time to the 'top of Italy', where the Punta Helbronner station forms a border with France at 3,466m.

I can manage only a few minutes outside in the thin air, as the temperature plummets to nearly -30C

during icy blasts. Retreating inside, the air seems just as rarefied in an altogether different way. The station is home to Europe's highest bookshop, plus a dazzling display of mountain crystals, a glass-floor walkway experience and sleek bistro.

HIGH-LEVEL CUISINE

The resort's wider culinary offering is equally elevated, including more than 10 stoveside restaurants – some open late into the evening thanks to the Courmayeur cable car running back to the resort until midnight. The local cuisine shares as much with French food as Italian, as this border region was part of French Savoie until 1861.

Local flavours have evolved since – in fact, foodies are possibly the group for which Courmayeur has the greatest allure. Every March, world-renowned chefs collaborate with Courmayeur restaurants for the Peak of Taste events, which offer visitors the chance to meet and eat with top chefs and enjoy special tasting menus and experiences, such as the 'highest aperitif in Europe' at the top of the Skyway. This March, the Mountain Gourmet Ski Experience, co-founded by Heston Blumenthal, had diners skiing with the likes



RESTAURANTS

Kartell Bistrot Panoramic's glass infinity table is particularly striking, with its sleek lines contrasting against the harsh terrain outside. The table sits on a glass floor and enjoys spectacular views of the Giant's Tooth from the Skyway Monte Bianco's Punta Hellebronner station at 3,466m, and was originally installed for a design festival. A three-course Alpine lunch with wine costs €75.



Kartell Bistrot Panoramic

Those seeking charming mountainside dining will be in their element at **Chateau Branlant**. The slopeside restaurant serves traditional dishes in a cosy atmosphere enhanced by roaring fireplaces, and offers a wide selection of Mont Blanc wines. Located on the Chercroit slope, it's open into the evening.

Just off the Via Roma at the heart of the town's après-ski scene, **La Terrazza** serves seasonal local, Italian and Mediterranean dishes in rustic surroundings. The large outdoor terrace is perfect for savouring mountain views in the summer season.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Skyway Monte Bianco; dining in Courmayeur; Peak of Taste festival

PICTURES: Giacomo Buzio; Lorenzo Bellfrond

of Jonny Lake – the former head chef at Blumenthal's triple-Michelin-starred Fat Duck in Berkshire.

Naturally, Courmayeur's ski offering enjoys a similarly lofty calibre. With 26 miles of pistes, the area is not huge, but has plenty of awe-inspiring runs. As I weaved my way down its quiet pistes, the blockbuster backdrop of Mont Blanc seemed ever-present. I felt like I was enjoying a private screening with an Alpine A-list.

Following an overnight whiteout, the snow came up to my knees. "Normally, the slopes are finely groomed – Italians don't like bumps", my guide assured me as I floundered through the snow. True to her word, the following day we tried the Aretu run and it felt immaculately manicured. The especially long and wide piste is a classic of the resort and a training ground for ski racers, given how easy it is to pick up speed.

STEEP LEARNING CURVE

With reds making up 17 of its 33 runs, Courmayeur is best suited to intermediates. Experts are rewarded for their skills with plenty of off-piste options and the only heliskiing available on Mont Blanc. Beginners might find the slopes a steep learning curve, but it's one that offers the possibility to progress quickly.

The town itself dates from the Middle Ages and aims to preserve its traditional charm by banning the building of further hotels. Its enduring popularity with

stylish Milanese guests felt unsurprising when strolling the bustling cobbles of the Via Roma, a pedestrianised stretch where designer stores rub shoulders with shops packed full of local specialities.

HOMELY ATMOSPHERE

After a long day on the slopes, the Hotel Gran Baita proved a homely place to rest. Rustic and wood panelled throughout, its inviting bar is ideal for swapping stories from the day. The Gran Baita is independently owned and provides a shuttle bus to the gondolas; it's possible to rent and leave skis at the top in heated storage.

For total relaxation, the Gran Baita's rooms with en suite saunas and their own outdoor pools are the star attraction. Even if clients don't plump for the premium option, the hotel spa has an impressive indoor-outdoor pool that felt lavishly warm amid the snowy surroundings. As I floated, it was hard to tell where steam from the pool gave way to distant mountain mists – helping me feel at one with nature's might. **TW**

BOOK IT

Three nights' bed and breakfast at the Hotel Gran Baita starts at £635 per person with **Momentum Ski**, based on two people sharing. The price includes flights and car hire. momentumski.com