



**Chilling out:** Sport Hotel Hermitage (above) and its luxurious spa (left)

# Andorra chic? Yes,

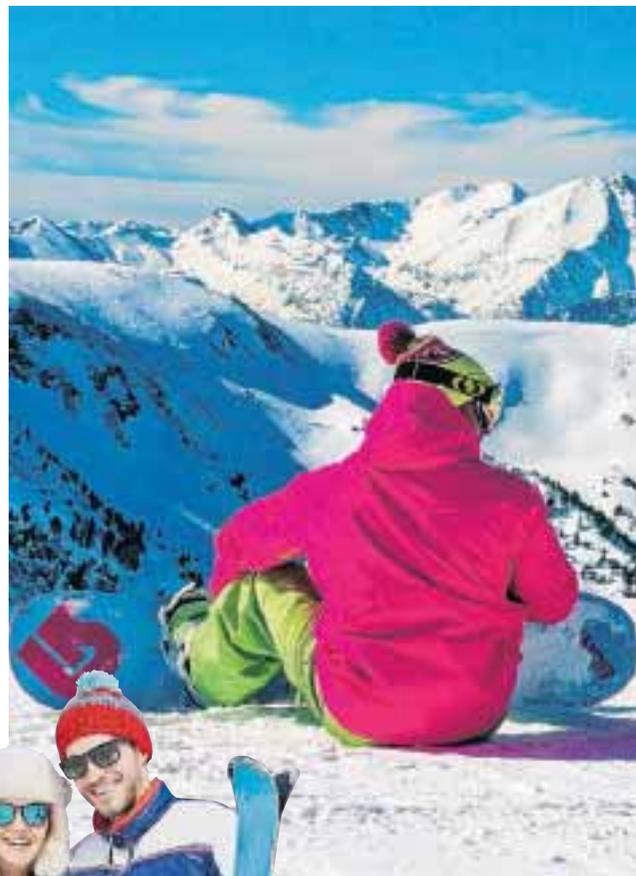
The Pyrenean ski destination is attracting a smarter set, says **Abigail Butcher**

**M**Y long day on the slopes is at an end. I'm luxuriating in the warm waters of an outdoor pool, looking up at the sun-capped mountains. The pool is part of one of the best spas I've had the pleasure of stepping into and belongs to the Sport Hotel Hermitage, a five-star property that recently became part of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World portfolio.

But I'm not in trendy Courchevel, Zermatt or Lech, I'm in Andorra. Once a destination for boozy Brits, this tiny, mountainous country wedged between Spain and France is fighting hard to improve its reputation.

Luxury self-catering apartments were opened in El Tarter two seasons ago by Pierre & Vacances, and Crystal Ski has introduced the family resort of La Massana to its programme this year. The Sport Hotel Hermitage is no longer seeking the Benidorm crowd, and nor are other four-star establishments in Soldeu, a resort in the Grandvalira ski area.

'The hotels got together and decided they'd no longer sell off rooms cheaply,' says Alexandra Jerez, who markets Soldeu properties. 'We'd rather have an empty room than sell it for the wrong price to the wrong people.'



Honorary British consul Fiona Dean puts it more succinctly. 'They got tired of toilets being ripped off the wall,' she says, 'so Andorra started to drag itself out of the gutter.'

Soldeu is situated in the Grandvalira ski area. The 210km of piste is shared with the resorts of El

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£150, [lazersport.co.uk](http://lazersport.co.uk)
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# it's a close second to Aspen



**Peak condition:** Snowboarders take in the view at El Tarter in Andorra



**High tea:** Terrace of the Sol i Neu restaurant in Soldeu



**Flights to Barcelona with easyJet start from £58.98 return, with shared airport transfers from Barcelona from £61. The Sport Hotel Hermitage is from £127.50 a night B&B (incl spa) based on two sharing. andorraresorts.com**

more adventure-hungry. There are plenty. He likens Andorra to Skoda cars: 'It's still trying to shake off its naff reputation. It's a good product but hasn't quite convinced everyone.'

Well, I drive a Skoda and I loved Andorra – though didn't expect to. And I'm not the only one. The International Skiing Federation (FIS) is taking this country seriously: over the past two years Soldeu has hosted World and European Cup races, and it just lost out – to Aspen – in hosting the FIS Ski World Cup final in 2017.

Adding even more to its credentials, the nearby and little-known ski area of Arcalis, which shares a Vallnord lift pass with Andorra's other well-known resorts of Arinsal and Pal, will next month host a section of the ultimate competition for freeride skiers and snowboarders, the Freeride World Tour. Yes, it's really that good here.

The boozing Brits are now mainly corralled in Pas de la Casa, leaving Soldeu and its tapas bars filled with Spanish, Russian and British clientele. With its tax-free status, Andorra is still cheap (a glass of Rioja in Soldeu's Taverna de la Iaia costs €2) but don't expect Benidorm behaviour along with your tipple anymore. Soon this Skoda-like resort will have Audi-like status, so get there first.

grooming, restaurants, skier facilities and snow-making equipment. Not that it needs it – for such a bad snow year (so far), the Pyrenees have received more than the lion's share. Last season when I visited in late March, a piste map was only half visible due to huge drifts of the stuff.

Several new freeride zones have been established in the Grandvalira

area, which is otherwise predominantly very pleasant, well-groomed blues and reds, and is an intermediate's cruising paradise.

Gordon Standeven, an English instructor who shows me around, says that Soldeu's ski school now has an off-piste facility, with all the gear and mountain guides to boot. He points out various couloirs and chutes for the

Tarter, Pas de la Casa and Grau Roig. Soldeu isn't pretty but the views are spectacular and the skiing is surprisingly good, with a mileage roughly equivalent to Alpe d'Huez in France or Ischgl in Austria.

The infrastructure here isn't bad, either. Grandvalira was formed in 2003 and since then about £80million has been spent on the lifts, piste-

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THREE RESORTS TO WATCH IN 2015

### Baqueira Beret



Spain's best-known ski resort has added 21 new pistes and three new lifts this season, in celebration of its 50th anniversary.

### Jasná



Jasná, Slovakia, has invested €200million (£150million) improving facilities. It has four new gondolas, 45km of piste and 12 freeride zones.

### Park City and Canyons



Park City and Canyons in Utah have announced plans to link up to create the largest ski resort in the US. Owner Vail Resorts will invest \$50million (£33million) in the next year.

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