



LA NORMA, FRANCE

Abigail Butcher on why small ones can be just as juicy

Tucked up the high-sided Haute Maurienne Vanoise sits a small resort called La Norma. It's not the most charming of resorts; accommodation is purpose-built, dominated by a rather monstrously ugly UCPA building. But the car-free village centre is functional and home to the best freeride shop in the Maurienne – Relief – a good indication of what's up top.

North facing, with a top lift height of 2750m, La Norma has just 13 lifts, including the rope tow and a couple of T-bars in the village for beginners.

Glancing the piste map, it's not the sort of place you'd rush to, but all the better for those who know its riches.

I first visited the Maurienne Valley for Fall-Line in April 2017. I loved the area so much, I went back for that winter. I lived in a tiny village directly opposite La Norma.

From my bedroom window I could look across to the fresh snow on the steeply wooded mountain sides, sometimes shrouded with cloud with just the very peaks of La Norma (2917m) and Col de Pelouse (2798m) peeking out of the top.

The Maurienne Valley sits sandwiched between the Tarentaise and Italy, right on the border. It's a secret powder stash, benefitting frequently from the Retour d'Est, the weather system that blows precipitation up from the east, swirling around in the valley and landing as snow on the hills.

There are so many powder pockets here it's hard to choose what to write about.

Take the Melezet gondola out of the village and link a few turns down to the Arlette chair. Once up, head skier's left into Espace Naturel (an unofficial freeride zone that is not avalanche patrolled) for some warm-up

turns between the pine trees, finishing at the base of Arlette again. Go up a second time, but this time take skier's right off the red piste Carralet and bound your way through the trees; I did this time and time again last season, with fresh tracks more or less each time.

Be sure to cut right onto the Forêt piste when you hit a walker's track, or you'll end up in Le Saint Joseph gully with a long walk out.

Up the Arlette chair again and then Norma II chairlift and get out your skins. Tour for less than an hour – 20 minutes if you're fit – to the ridge right at the top of La

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Norma and find yourself knocked out by views across, up and down the Maurienne, totally unspoiled by ironmongery, unlike views in the Tarentaise, which would be marred by a plethora of lifts.

That said, you will see what looks like a power station in the valley. It is in fact the complex of wind tunnels at ONERA, an aeronautical test centre responsible for developing parts on civil and military aircraft – as well as testing yacht parts and speed skiing clothing and safety wear.

Enough of the geekiness, from the ridge you can take a choice of three couloirs

leading back down the north face: G1, G2 and G3. Whichever you choose you'll finish your run in a wide powder field that leads down to Piste des Crêtes.

Follow that red piste round into Piniers – a blue – and charge up the Arlette chair again (there won't ever be a queue).

This time, take Norma II again and cross the gully high up in the shadow of La Belle Plinier, a 3076m peak skier's right of La Norma that has endless couloir opportunities. I went one Saturday afternoon with guide Fred Buttard, co-owner of the fabulous guiding outfit Upguides, and we toured for two hours up to the summit, an immense, steep, unforgiving climb that rewarded us with more spectacular views and a 45-degree ski down Y couloir, with a long ski back down through the trees eventually joining the Forêt.

Finish your day with a drink, or tartiflette or burger, in the Telemark bar in the centre of the village. There are a couple of places to eat on the mountain but the Telemark is the best in La Norma, serving locally sourced food and fantastic vin chaud, perfect at the end of a good day's skiing.

The best thing? A day pass is €31, a six-day pass is €166 and the Saturday special rate is just €22. The rates for the six-day pass have actually dropped for this season, and offers skiers the ability to visit neighbouring Valfréjus (the home of speed-riding) as much as they like, as well as one day each in Aussois, Val Cenis and Bonneval sur Arc further up valley. These are good options for sunny days, but in bad weather, or when the pow is good, stay put in La Norma and keep on sessioning the Arlette; it's what powder days are meant for. *Fall-Line*

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