

## Verbier: Sloanes' favourite slopes get hip



The Swiss ski resort, popular with young royals, is getting seriously chic, from sushi bars to the new W Hotel

There's a buzz about Verbier this winter. It's easy to see why. The super cool "W" hotel chain has opened its first hotel in the mountains, right at the top of the main street, and just a ski pole's length from the main Médran gondola. Thanks to strict building regulations (no high rises, exteriors that must be at least two-thirds wood, pitched roofs) the hotel spreads laterally not vertically, over five cedar- and pine-clad buildings.

On a sneak preview, I take in the freestanding baths in all the rooms, along with biofuel fireplaces and walk-in wardrobes. It's incredibly swish. The best suite has views of Mont Blanc, a personal hammam, balcony, private bar, mezzanine and a giant revolving circular bed. I'd like to move in immediately, though you'd need the discipline of an Olympic athlete to leave this suite, never mind bed, and actually get on to the slopes. There are apartments too, and a gym, spa, pool and restaurant.

Verbier has just about shaken off its reputation as a stronghold for Sloanes and minor royals. My stroll around town reveals that it's already familiar with fabulous; it has sleek modern hotels, traditional luxury hotels, Richard Branson's super-chalet (sleeps 18, don't even think about asking how much . . .) and Bond Street shops (in case you urgently need to accessorise your Moncler jacket with Bulgari). There's a sushi restaurant, VIP clubs and packed après-ski bars. On this occasion, the closest I get to hanging out with the many movie, rock, DJ and sports stars who holiday here is taking the ski lift named after James Blunt. But W has still managed to up the ante; it's like being at an already-amazing party when a glamorous foreigner arrives late and causes a scene.

latest courses include biometrics and (yikes) video analysis, but it's not compulsory to watch a tape of everything you're doing wrong. All that high-tech research just means that his one-to-one coaching gets results. It's the best lesson I've ever had (and that includes school). After so many years of getting shirty whenever my skiing companions suggested venturing off piste, I start to feel comfortable doing this by mid-afternoon of my day with Smith. On moguls. I even miss lunch. All of which is a welcome first.

W is just one of the hot new places to stay this season. Others include a collection of hundred-year-old barns in the hamlet of Commeire, which has a population of only 12 people, that gives you a real sense of being out in the country.

Still, if you tire of all those panoramic views and free slippers, the skiing's not bad either. A new, high-speed gondola has opened up the Four Valleys even farther. The only way I could get to Bruson before, was a long trundle by gondola from the main Médran base to Le Châble, and then an interminable bus ride and s-l-o-w chairlift. However, a new gondola from Le Châble means that the entire journey is now possible in less than 20 minutes.

Bruson has just a few marked runs, but superlative and extensive off-piste skiing, as well as six miles of cross-country trails and nearly 4,500ft of vertical descent. Its days as the area's best-kept secret are surely numbered (at one point, it was so secret that it was in danger of being closed altogether).

However, Bruson's "tree skiing" (wooded areas to ski in during a white-out) and even Verbier's "itinéraires" (similar to black runs but off piste) are a challenge for me. I'm stuck in a rut and I haven't improved for years; the best thing about my skiing may well be my ski suit. Which is why I decide on a blow-the-budget day's coaching with Warren Smith, eponymous founder of the Ski Academy. His

### Need to know Getting there

Kate Johnson was a guest of the Verbier Tourist Board ([verbier.ch/en](http://verbier.ch/en)) and Swiss International Airlines ([swiss.com](http://swiss.com)), which has returns to Geneva from about £120. Return train tickets — called Swiss Transfer Tickets — from Geneva start at £91 ([myswitzerland.com](http://myswitzerland.com)).

### Where to stay W Verbier

The first W hotel in Switzerland, the W Verbier has 123 rooms in four adjacent chalets as well as five full-service residences. The W's signature Whatever/Whenever service 24-hour concierge will be on hand to help with everything from ski equipment to private jet service. There is an indoor/outdoor pool, as well as a spa and a restaurant that has as its "culinary director" Sergi Arola, the two-Michelin-star chef known for his modern, urban Spanish cuisine. **Details** Doubles start at £305 a night ([wverbier.com](http://wverbier.com)).

### Montagne Alternative

In the hamlet of Commeire, this makes for a tranquil base just a 30-minute car ride from the centre of Verbier. With minimalist interiors of wood and grey slate, crisp white bedlinen, warming woodburners and huge inviting sofas, this place oozes authentic charm (including Rosak, the world's happiest dog). Guests can rent by room or chalet (there are five chalets sleeping up to 32), and choose self-catering, deliveries or a private chef. There is no television and barely any wall art, the better to enjoy stunning panoramic views of Val d'Entremont from vast windows.

**Details** B&B doubles start at £170 a night or £425pp for a week ([montagne-alternative.com](http://montagne-alternative.com)).

### Chalet De Flore

Newly renovated on Verbier's main street, Chalet de Flore has just 20 rooms in a modern classic style: checked wool curtains, slate bathroom, pale wood. There's a sauna, and staff will happily ferry guests to their sister hotel, the five-star Chalet d'Adrien, for the full spa experience or a Michelin-starred dinner. It's intimate, with observant, attentive staff (by day two, your breakfast boiled egg will be cooked exactly as you ordered it the day before). There are homemade cakes and crumbles for an après-ski sugar-rush in the wood-panelled lounge, with expansive views of the Grand Combin and Mont Blanc, where you can have a drink before heading out for dinner.

**Details** B&B doubles start at £260 a night ([chalet-flore.ch](http://chalet-flore.ch)).

### Cordée des Alpes

New last season, this is a boutique hotel with a swish spa and a well-regarded restaurant. The style is plush and warm with distressed-wood panels, log fires, designer sofas, spotlights and lots of purple and aquamarine in the colour scheme.

**Details** B&B doubles are from £186 ([hotelcordee.com](http://hotelcordee.com)).

### The Nevai

A new sushi bar in this hip design hotel with a minimalist feel and penthouse suites with outdoor hot tubs. DJs play in the cocktail lounge, which is known to attract the cool après-ski crowd. The hotel, which opened in 2008, comes with a spa using Elemis products and with a hammam steam room. It's connected to The Farm nightclub, which has attracted pop stars Bono, Diana Ross and James Blunt in the past. **Details** B&B doubles are from £240 ([hotelnevai.com](http://hotelnevai.com)).

### Further information

The Warren Smith Ski Academy ([www.warrensmith-skiacademy.com](http://www.warrensmith-skiacademy.com)) has two hours' tuition from £159.

Six-day lift passes start at £237 for adults. Ski hire starts at £91.50 for 6 days from Fellay Mode et Sport ([verbier.ch](http://verbier.ch))