

Andorra – AITO Ski Trip

The closest I'd ever come to whooshing down the slopes was watching Ski Sunday on TV, so when me and my husband James were invited to accompany members of AITO (Association of Independent Tour Operators) on a trip to Andorra, we leapt at the chance.

We flew from Heathrow to Barcelona on a 'no frills' flight, courtesy of Iberia airlines - my first-ever outing on a plane. Anyone in a similar position has no need to worry – it was brilliant. We flew through check-in and all the staff we encountered were very friendly and helpful. The cabin crew even showed me to my seat and made sure I was settled.

The flight itself took about an hour, an easy hop for first-timers, and on arrival in Spain, the group was greeted by our guide, Jaume. Over the next four hours, he would keep us entertained with interesting snippets about each town we passed through on the way to our destination – Andorra le Vella.

It is a long journey from Barcelona to Andorra, but a picturesque one, with rolling hills giving way to the majesty of the Pyrenees. Even in early spring, when the landscape isn't at its greenest, it's still a pretty view.

Andorra itself however, was not at its best during our stay. It nestles in a narrow valley, surrounded by mountains, and anyone expecting the picture-postcard charm of traditional ski resorts could be disappointed.

The green-grey buildings lining the streets were dominated by the huge amounts of construction work being undertaken, but don't be disheartened – it's all in the cause of providing more accommodation for tourists and we were told the builders were nearing the end of their work.

However, we all settled into our base for the week, a Novotel – a pleasant enough hotel, but not outstanding – before gathering over a delicious buffet dinner. Vegetarian options were on offer, though most fruit and vegetables are imported, so the choice can be limited.

I opted mainly for the outstanding fish dishes, though chickened out of trying octopus for the first time.

Tuesday saw our first day on the slopes. We boarded our mini bus and headed off to Pal, the first of the three resorts we were scheduled to visit that week.

Accessing the slopes via a wonderfully robust cable car (anyone with a fear of heights will be pleasantly surprised by the smooth ride these round, red vehicles offer), we poured out onto the top of the mountain.

We were separated into three groups – advanced, intermediate and beginner skiers (James and I were the only beginners).

Our skiing lesson progressed nicely under the tutelage of an English-speaking instructor, and two hours zipped by before we rejoined the rest of the group to regale them with tales of falling down and snowploughing, before moving further up the mountain for a spot of skiddooing. Thrill-seekers may be disappointed at the length of time on these speedy machines, but for us a quick trip round the side of a mountain was more than enough.

Next up was something we had all been eagerly waiting for – dog sledding. Half a dozen yelping hounds awaited us, and as the first pair went out, it was clear this was going to be harder work than we thought, as the lead pooch didn't want to drag tourists round the snow, and proceeded to bound after his chums in a circle, despite the very best efforts of the handlers. Sadly, our 30 minutes on a dog sled was radically reduced, but it's something I'd gladly try again when the canines were willing.

Back in le Vella, we were treated to a bit of pampering at the Caldea spa complex, which boasts a variety of treatments including Turkish bath, sauna and outdoor Jacuzzis. Most of us opted to get wrinkly in the latter, though we did try a few of the pools, including the bizarre grapefruit bath – a tepid pool with seven or eight of the fruit chucked in.

For dinner we headed out to La Borda Estevet restaurant.

It was a beautifully renovated building, oozing charm and cosiness, and if that wasn't enough of a pleasure, then the food certainly was - hearty, tasty and plenty of it, all delivered by impeccably polite waiters.

James and I opted for a seared steak, but we were really spoiled for choice – the food was wonderful, and again, limited, but tasty vegetarian options were available.

The next day saw us depart from La Vella and head out to the second resort – Arcalis. This time, for us beginners, the learner slope was sectioned off from the rest of the skiing area, and much flatter.

Our instructor, Jorge, spoke less English than his predecessor, but seemed to teach us more despite the language barrier. By the time the whole group got back together again, it was clear the Arcalis resort had impressed, and we trooped off to dinner happily.

The third and final day of skiing took us to Soldeau, the furthest resort from La Vella, and the only one of the three resorts to have accommodation on its doorstep.

It's a bit of a trek to get there, and at the height of Andorra's rush-hour, it can be as much as an hour's drive, but patience pays off. After being dragged by the throng of people through the cable car point, the resort of Soldeau is beautiful, and stretches over a number of peaks, so there's something for everyone.

An hour of falling over later, I retreated to the sun-drenched terrace that marks the front of the café at Soldeau, and proceeded to work on my tan, while my fleet-footed husband whizzed up and down green slopes under the watchful eye of the instructors.

The day passed quickly, so for those who aren't of a sporty persuasion don't be downhearted. If the weather is glorious, take advantage of the early sunshine to soak up a few rays – but don't forget the sunblock. I used factor 25 and still got burned.

During the afternoon, we were escorted round the Hotel Sport, one of the few 4-star establishments in Andorra. It was a sumptuous building which not only was luxury personified (at a fairly reasonable 100 or so euros a night – about 80-90 pounds we guessed) but looked out over the slopes.

There's plenty of skiing for everyone in Andorra, and they're keen to attract experienced skiers to the country – those in our group said they were pleasantly surprised by what they found, so if it's somewhere you haven't tried before, give it a go.

To order a FREE copy of the AITO Ski Directory - the must-have guide to the best ski companies in the business - call 020 8744 9280, email skiing@aito.co.uk or visit the website at www.aito.co.uk.

The Directory will be launched in September for the 2005/2006 ski season.