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MENU

LFStyle gets the low down on Andorra's Grandvalira ski area, with top tips on where to relax and shop when off the slopes plus property advice from Jordi Tàpies Ibern, Director of Lucas Fox Andorra.



by **TARA STEVENS**

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Discover Grandvalira: Andorra's sexiest ski resort

It's easy to write off Andorra as a somewhat tacky tax exile. True enough, if you only drive through on the CG1, what you'll mainly see is high-rise apartment blocks and shoulder-to-shoulder duty free stores hawking booze and cigarettes. Turn your back on the main resort of Andorra la Vella and it's a whole other story: chocolate box villages like Arinsal, Ordino and Pal, soaring alpine peaks and deep, winding valleys, pine forests garlanded in snow and glittering icicles and yes, the unexpectedly sophisticated ski zones of Grau Roig, Pic de Cubil and El Tarter on the Grandvalira circuit (www.grandvalira.com), which in the past couple of years has reinvented itself at an upper end of the market that easily competes with the best in Europe.

“Generally the quality of the snow is better in Andorra than at other resorts near Barcelona or Girona”, says Jordi Tàpies Ibern, Director of Lucas Fox Andorra (www.lucasfox.com/Property/andorra.html). “And even when it isn't, the fact it provides top quality artificial snow is hugely important, guaranteeing that even in bad years you can ski most of the season. Grandvalira's investment into ski lifts, restaurants and generally more interesting services is enormous compared to any

resort in the Pyrenees, and skiers can easily feel that.”



The kick-starter to this decade-long transformation was the Hotel Grau Roig (www.hotelgrauroig.com), which opened in 1956, but after a mega revamp in 2003 burst back onto the scene raising the bar exponentially in terms of accommodation in the region. Today it offers the kind of dreamy digs you would more commonly associate with Val d’Isere or Aspen. Situated at the foot of the slopes of Grau Roig, a slate-tiled, après-ski café La Vaqueria welcomes you: all pinewood settles and armchairs where you can stomp the snow from your boots and tuck into French onion soup, fondue and cowboy-sized meat grills with a New Zealand Pinot Noir – the wine list is off-the-scale. After a day on the slopes cosy up in the basement wine bar, Teatro del Vino, and taste your way through this extraordinary range of top-flight reserves or take part in wine tastings every evening at 6pm. Then feast like a king by a crackling wood fire in the romantic, stone restaurant La Marmita where locally caught game is turned into star dishes like venison tartar with apples and foie gras, and roast pigeon with pistachios.



So far so fabulous. Add in an intimate spa with exotic treatments ranging from cranial massage to Ayurvedic rituals – the Vatta Ritual is a miracle-worker for stress and insomnia (70 minutes / €95) – and plush rooms inspired by posh Swiss chalets with polished wood floors, luxury linens and fur throws, and balconies that open straight onto the mountainside – we love the ‘Romantic Room’ with its wood-barrel tub and pony-skin chaise longue – and it’s very tempting not to leave at all.

Resist, because the beauty of a ski weekend in Grandvalira these days is that the surprises keep on coming. It might even inspire you to invest in your own little getaway.

“We have many properties in the Grandvalira area, especially around el Tarter, ranging from large family villas on typical Andorran constructions called ‘pleta’, to cozy small apartments for weekend breaks”, says Tàpies. “The ski areas may not be famous for their luxury villas, but we have some truly special properties on offer priced between €400,000 to €900,000, as well as a wide range of well-appointed ski apartments from €120,000 (1-bedroom) to €380,000 (3-bedroom).”

What to do when you’re not skiing

Lunch: Grab a juicy burger and the crunchiest fries at Dylan’s, El Tarter, or indulge in traditional mountain cooking by a roaring wood fire back over the border in Spain (15km

from Andorra la Vella) at the Hotel Os de Civis (www.hotelosdecivis.com).

Dinner: Round out a day on the slopes at El Tarter at L'Abarset (www.grandvalira.com/en/labarset-restaurant), which delivers excellent food to the strumming of local bands, or treat yourself to one of six different restaurants at the Hermitage Sport Hotel (www.hotelhermitage.sporhotels.ad) in Soldeu: three are headed by Michelin-starred chefs Nandu Jubany, Carles Gaig and Hideki Matsuhisa.

Drinks: Hit the newly opened, luxuriously rustic Vodka Bar (www.facebook.com/Vodkabar.Andorra) by Barcelona designer Lázaro Rosa-Violán. Perched high on the slopes at 2,150m it's the ultimate spot for après-ski drinks and if vodka doesn't rock your boat, there's an excellent range of biodynamic and natural wines to boot.

Shop: Illa Carlemany (www.illa.ad) benefits from duty free prices so it's worth waiting to update your winter wardrobe with top brands like Rip Curl, Quiksilver and The North Face.

Relax: Soak away your aches and pains in natural hot springs at the Caldea Spa Centre (www.caldea.com), which includes Icelandic ice baths and sultry Turkish steam rooms among its myriad offerings.

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