



ALPINE AREAS

ABRIÈS A VAST PLAYGROUND...

This gem of the Haut Guil is equally well suited to expert free-riders and to the families who come out to play in the snow.

Perched at the edge of Queyras, Abriès has built an international reputation for its unspoilt and wild natural ski area. How has that come about? Because of the perfect contours of the land and because of the «retour d'est» phenomenon, a real meteorological conjuring trick. But this attractive ski resort isn't solely the preserve of winter sports die-hards. On the contrary, with its 900 metres of vertical drop it's also a great place for family fun.

THE PLAYGROUND LOOKS HUGE

There's a happy buzz in the air, this January morning, in the ski patrol rescue team's hut, at the top of the six-seater detachable chairlift, Le Gilly. For «PIDA» (the Avalanche Operational Response Plan) most of the young people have been up since around five o'clock. They're giving themselves a short break and having a cup of hot coffee. It's the

perfect time to ask them about their beloved ski resort. To our first question, 'What makes Abriès special?' « the reply is fired straight back, in chorus: «The retour d'est!» «The eyes of Florian Garcin, a strong skier who was born in Arvieux, light up at these words. He glances across at the Météo France weather forecaster, who's just arrived to measure the depth of snow. «This spectacular meteorological phenomenon is caused by a depression over the Gulf of Genoa in Italy.» Florian Labit explains. «This brings a front of cold damp air to the border. Of all the ski resorts in the Alps, Abriès is the most affected, and the quantities of fresh snow are remarkable, up to 1.5 metres or more in 24 hours.»

PARADISE IN THE LARCHES

«In my opinion, the woods are a paradise for skiers because the snow stays fresh for longer, due to the dry climate and the northerly exposure, particularly on the Valpréveyre slopes and La Brune...» chips in Frédéric Bues, chairlift operator for 25 years, who also keeps sheep. He's the man who, every morning, helps the numbed skiers to get off their first lift safely. «Here, you can ski through an open forest of larch, there are no shrubs. It's really enjoyable - if you have the skills. « Exactly, but what if you're a beginner? «Apart from a green run so

that you can go back down the chairlift easily, there is everything you need,» replies Théo Dubray, a former mechanic who's now a member of the rescue team. «The ski runs straddle a crest, at the intersection of two valleys, and wind round the slopes from north to south. You can ski from morning till night! « At that moment, the radios crackle. Benoit De Nas de Tourris, the leader of the piste team, is calling his troops back to work.

ATTENZIONE, MOMENTO SPETTACOLARE!

From the top of the chairlift, the feeling of immensity is powerful. With its 70 hectares of pistes, this is Queyras' second biggest ski resort. To explore it, you can start off by simply going «from right to left» and then «from front to back». To warm yourself up, we highly recommend a coffee at La Grolle, the mountain chalet. But if you can't wait to get started, head straight for the Aiguiller draglift that goes to La Viso, a blue run ideal for blowing the cobwebs off. Gravity takes you down to the La Colette draglift. Now keep your eyes peeled. To your right the sun's rays, slanting through the frost-sculpted larches, sparkle on millions of crystals brought over in the last snowstorms from Lombardy. To the east is a very unusual peak, chiselled into a perfect pyramid: La Taillante. On those slabs you have an incredible network of ski runs and rock-climbing routes side by side... At the top of Gilly it's red run heaven, not a place for novices. La Colette, Le Stade, Le Valon and Ponsolle are all of that same enticing colour. Only La Lauze, which follows a cunning route across towards the Aiguiller, avoids the challenges of the sheer slope. Pilou Sabastier arrives just behind us. A true son of Abriès, this former slalom skier and Alpine ski instructor has inherited from his parents the winter caravan beside the slopes, along with a certain panache. «Hey there!» he shouts gaily, seeing us hesitate. «This is a bit different from the smooth surfaces you get in Savoie, isn't it? « It has to be said that most of the pistes in Queyras have kept their natural contours, offering technically challenging skiing. «Come on, follow me, I'll show

you how to tame the beast! « and Pilou plunges off onto La Colette like a whirlwind.

AN ENDLESS VARIETY OF DESCENTS

Not many resorts have as many crests, valleys, hillsides, woods, slopes or ski runs for so few mechanical lifts. Even in the height of holiday season, you never get bored waiting because the skiers are busy discussing and appraising the downhill runs. The Ruibon draglift is a typical example. With the 917 metres chain of runs from La Dray and La Rousse, and La Brune with its wicked black run, not to mention the detours to the village of Valprévère, returning by shuttle, the possibilities are endless. Looking back on our trip, our memories are of a powerful experience like no other, perhaps even unique in the Alps: authentic skiing, in the wild, and as challenging as you could wish for. «Abriès is the opposite of skiing with the crowds, « is how Pilou sums it up, back behind his bar to serve us mulled wine. «The village has managed to retain its exceptional quality, both in ambiance and in snow conditions... For the lucky ones who know about it. When people come back from the production-line resorts with levelled-out surfaces and no character, we'll still be here to put the fun and the challenge back into skiing.

Text : Guillaume Vallot



USEFUL INFO

ABRIÈS

Altitude **1,550 m to 2,450 m**

Vertical drop **900 m**

5 mechanical lifts

70 hectares of piste area

21 km of groomed pistes

16 pistes : 2 green + 3 blue + 10 red + 1 black

15% artificial snow coverage

RISTOLAS

Fun area consists of a mechanical carpet skiers, a ski slope and two secure toboggan runs and a beginner lift baby.

USEFUL INFO

OTHER ACTIVITIES AROUND ABRIÈS

Cross-country skiing and sled dogs at Ristolas, the ice fall at Aiguilles, the little villages of Roux and Valprévère, bars, restaurants, the Costume Museum and the Arche des Cimes interpretation centre, shops, and free shuttles linking all these places... If fringe activities are your thing, you'll find plenty in to do and around Abriès. You can put on walking boots, snowshoes or cross-country skis, or have an unforgettable holiday, and not be bored for one second!