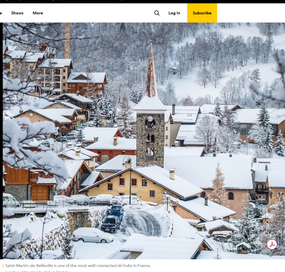
National Geographic Traveller (UK) content straight to your inbox — sign up for our newsletter here —>

TRAVEL

This Tiny French Village is Surrounded by the World's Largest Interconnected Ski Area

The once-sleepy little village of Saint-Martin-de-Belleville was never intended to be a ski resort. Today it's one of the most luxurious in the vast Les Trois Vallées ski region – but also one of the most authentic.

By Katja Gaskell
Published September 5 2026



Saint-Martin-de-Belleville is one of the most well-connected ski hubs in France.
SAINT-MARTIN DE BELLEVILLE TOURISM

This article was produced by *National Geographic Traveller (UK)*.

It's a bluebird day and I'm peering over the top of Combe de la Saulire, one of the most popular red runs in Les Trois Vallées. Morning sunshine glows in bright filaments on the perfectly groomed piste, against a dramatic backdrop of cloud-brushing mountains.

Typically, this 3km-long run is packed with skiers causing bottlenecks on the technical top section before they let rip down the wide-open slope. This morning in mid-April, however, I have the run to myself and I bomb it down, carving sweeping turns in the snow. There are plenty of reasons to choose springtime skiing, but having runs all to yourself is one of the best.

However, even if I hadn't chosen the last week of the season to ski Les Trois Vallées, I could probably have still made it to the top of Saulire before the crowds, thanks to where I'm staying. Set at 1,450 metres in the Belleville Valley, the small village of Saint-Martin-de-Belleville is incredibly well connected. Less than half an hour after clipping in my skis at the bottom of the drag lift that sits between the town hall and the baroque church, I'm standing at 2,437 metres in the heart of the biggest ski area on the planet, with runs leading off in all directions.

Closing after 46 years

Shop now

"It's one of the best things about Saint-Martin," says my cheery guide, Fabrice Jacquet, from the École du Ski Français (French Ski School), or ESF. "It's very, very fast to get anywhere."

La Bella Vita wellness centre in Saint-Martin-de-Belleville features panoramic views of the surrounding Alps.
SAINT-MARTIN DE BELLEVILLE TOURISM

Yet, this place was never supposed to be a ski resort. Compared to other ski areas in Les Trois Vallées, the former farming village is minuscule, a tiny cluster of stone and timber buildings. When, in 1964, work started on Les Menuires ski area further up the valley — part of then-president Georges Pompidou's ambitious Plan Neige programme to help boost the country's economy — much of Saint-Martin didn't even have running water.

"Saint-Martin was only meant to be a kind of suburb," says Mappy Fremiot from the Maison du Tourisme as she shows me around a museum — housed in a converted farmhouse — charting the village's history. "The idea was to put cheap apartments here for skiers heading to Les Menuires. But then people started visiting and they fell in love with the village and its authenticity."

It's true that it couldn't be more different from its purpose-built neighbours, where high altitudes and ski in, ski out convenience outweigh aesthetics. Saint-Martin is something of a timber-and-stone time warp — albeit a rather luxurious one. The village is now one of the most exclusive in Les Trois Vallées, where luxury chalets and apartments sit tucked behind the solid stone walls of former farmhouses. "But it's not like Courchevel," says Mappy, referring to the notoriously expensive ski resort. "It's discreet luxury, it's not bling bling."

Walking around Saint-Martin, it does feel like a community. As I wander past a historical washing trough and the communal clay oven where families once baked bread — both stops on the village's self-guided heritage trail — I spy locals out for their daily stroll, stopping to exchange local news and inspecting gardens waking from their winter slumber.

BATTLE

Meet Meeting. 125cc equivalent electric motorcycles.
Discover Battle Electric
Sponsored

On another afternoon I join guide David Dereani for a tour of the *Moulin du Burdin*, one of *nine* flour mills that once stood alongside the Doron de Belleville rives that runs through the valley. "There are still a dozen or so farming families in the valley today," David says as we make way for a tractor lumbering along the dirt road. "Some farmers teach skiing during the winter and work the land in the summer."

Les 3 Vallées ski area is a popular destination for winter sport aficionados.
DAVID JAMES, SAINT-MARTIN-DE-BELLEVILLE TOURISM

Perfect piste

I spend my first couple of days skiing around the Courchevel Valley and Vallée des Allues, in which Méribel sits, trying to cover as much of the domain as possible. But with 600km of piste slopes, I barely scratch the surface.

What I do manage to ski, however, is perfect. After a bumper snow season, the conditions are still stellar. As I cruise from one empty slope to another, I pass abuttered mountain restaurants and a very empty La Folie Douce, the bar-restaurant's DJs and dancers long gone. But who needs vodka lugs and shot skis (skis with shot glasses built into them) when you have the mountains practically to yourself?

Finding one restaurant still open, I decide to stop. Perched at the top of the St Martin 1185, the slopeside Le Corbelieu is set in an old chalet d'alpage (traditional mountain chalets, historically used in summer) once belonging to the grandparents of siblings Martine and Bruno Suchet, who have been serving hungry skiers here for 40 years. I order their grandmother's quiche de Mémé Nini along with a Picon bière (beer with bitter orange liqueur) and enjoy a leisurely lunch on the sun-drenched terrace.

On my final day, I head towards Val Thorens, one of the highest ski resorts in Europe, and find myself standing at 3,200-metre Cime Caron, one of the ski area's highest points, surrounded by a jagged band of snowy summits. There's been a dusting of snow overnight and as I make my way down Bouchet, a red piste that waltzes me around gentle bends, I find pockets of fresh powder. When I later attempt the black Combe Rosall, snow on the steep mogul-studded run is already turning to slush.

PRINTABLE
CHAIR YOGA PROGRAM

PRINT NOW

As I make my way back across the valley, I alternate between broad blues and cruisy reds, eventually reaching the top of Bioley, a gently undulating run that takes me right back into the heart of the village. Empty slopes might be one of the best things about spring skiing in Les Trois Vallées, but staying in Saint-Martin makes it that bit more special.

How To Do It

Peak Retreats offers a week's self-drive trip to Hotel Saint Martin staying in a two-bedroom apartment on a self-catering basis from £8,100per person, based on four sharing and including Eurotunnel LeShuttle crossing in a standard car.

More info:
st-martin-belleville.com
les3vallees.com

This story was created with the support of Saint-Martin-de-Belleville.

To subscribe to National Geographic Traveller (UK) magazine click here (available in select countries only).

Related Topics

SKIING | WINTER SPORTS | ADVENTURE SPORTS | WINTER | RURAL AREAS | MOUNTAINS

You May Also Like

TRAVEL
Why Sundance is the ski resort to visit this year

TRAVEL
How to plan a family ski trip, according to an expert

CANADA'S CAPITAL
Comeo alive in Winter
SEE WHAT

You May Also Like

TRAVEL
Beyond the Alps—7 alternative European ski regions to try

TRAVEL
Why Norway and Sweden are perfect for a cross-border ski trip

TRAVEL
You can enjoy Switzerland beyond skiing—here's how

TRAVEL
Ride the world's steepest cable-car to this remote Swiss village

TRAVEL
Why Serre Chevalier is great for a family ski trip

THE BEST OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC DELIVERED TO YOUR INBOX
Sign up for more inspiring photos, stories, and special offers from National Geographic.
SIGN UP

© 1996-2015 National Geographic Society | © 2015-2026 National Geographic Partners, LLC