

A VUARNET DAY IN LES PORTES DU SOLEIL

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HOW SHADES ICON JEAN VUARNET SHONE LIGHT ON THE GATES OF THE SUN

By *HILARY NANGLE*

Too often, contemporary realities crush my romantic notions of skiing Europe's Alps. I pine for cuckoo-clock chalets and hearty mountain-bred fare, but am greeted with modern architectural wonders and—egad!—McDonald's. Not so in Portes du Soleil (Gates of the Sun). This mindbogglingly expansive region straddling France's Haute Savoie and Switzerland's Canton du Valais met my fairytale expectation, delivering authentic alpine tradition flavored with abundant Abondance, Reblochon, and Tomme de Savoie cheeses. Neither flashy nor fusty, this family-focused region, an easy one-hour drive from Geneva, is one of the world's largest interconnected ski resorts.



Around the base of Avoriaz

Credit France's King of Shades, Jean Vuarnet, for shining some sun on the area. Vuarnet, who's also famed for conceiving the downhill tuck still used by racers today, grew up in Morzine, one of the region's anchor towns. After winning the 1960 Olympic downhill, he returned to head the local tourist office and launched two brilliant ideas. The first: Avoriaz, the purpose-built, car-free, architect-designed ski village above Morzine. The second: The interlinked-resorts concept. His visions now encompass 12 villages and 14 valleys stitched together by 195 lifts and more than 400 miles of marked pistes.

I got a taste of the magnitude upon entering Morzine, a narrow valley framed by burly, lift-zipped peaks. "Morzine is not a show-off place, it's too strong in its roots," says Eric Monné-Marullaz, co-proprietor of the four-star La Bergerie Hotel, noting the town's fourth-century settlement and 11th-century rise as a Cistercian religious community. "It's not a Courchevel, it's a real village." That is, a real village with a cheesemaker—Fruitière l'Alpage—and its cheese-centric restaurant. Heaven!

When it's time to devour the ski terrain, my guides outline a multi-course menu that begins with

a nibble of Super Morzine en route to cliff-top Avoriaz, the eco-sensitive, ski-in/out village that's the exception to the region's traditional architecture. Avoriaz appears as all elbows and knees, comprising of stepped half-pyramids designed to complement cliffs below and peaks above. We take bites out of Les Linderets' forested trails and savor the clustered chalets-turned-restaurants and the chapel notched into the white expanse of Plaine Dranse, a petite mountain village on the link to Chatel.

For the next course, we rise well above treeline to Pointe de Mossette and slip over the border to Switzerland. Although I've pocketed my passport, there is no control station. "The views from here are magnificent," one of my guides, former French ski team member Chrystelle Felisaz says, as we shelter in a pocket below the Pointe's 7,470-foot summit. Unfortunately, the Gates of the Sun aren't open and snow-heavy clouds obscure views of the craggy Dents du Midi and Dents Blanches.

Lunch at Champéry's Restaurant Coquoz, a high alpine chalet operated by the Coquoz family since 1950, is a welcome break punctuated with shots of *génépi*, an aromatic local liqueur infused with alpine herbs and flowers, flights of Valais wines, a charcuterie sampler, and a Swiss-accented version of the region's hearty fare, which, *naturellement*, involves copious amounts of melted cheese.

Two hours later, I waddle outside to begin the zigzag to Les Gets. From the chairlift, Felisaz points to Chavanette's notorious Swiss Wall, with its Le Car-sized moguls on a near-50-percent incline. "If we're going to ski all the way to Les Gets, we have to hustle," she says. She skates off the lift, and I chase her on a grin-producing thigh-burner to Les Prodains, where we hop a bus praying to make last call for the Pleney gondola.



A slopeside view of Hotel La Marmotte in Les Gets

The lifts are silent and the slopes are empty when we click out of skis in Les Gets and shuffle to La Marmotte, a Johansens Collection hotel. Although smaller and tonier, Les Gets village, like Morzine, is sandwiched between trail-etched peaks. It too has a cheesemaker with a restaurant. Score!

After a quick freshen up in the spa, I visit La Ferme de la Montagne, an unpretentious, chic-yet-cozy, five-star boutique hotel that oozes *savoir-faire*. "We personalize the experience, from the type of pillows on the bed to favorite coffee blends," director Suzanne Dixon-Hudson tells me over tea and scones. The eight-room hotel provides all the expected amenities, from airport transfers to ski concierges, plush rooms to gastronomic dining. I linger, taking in the oak walls and stone floors, wood burning fireplaces, meticulously placed antiques, and the dining

room, dressed in white and lighted softly by candles and fireplace. “Our guests are used to Michelin-starred cuisine, and we aim to be better than that,” she says. As I depart, I overhear guests in the outdoor hot tub toasting their day’s exploits with Champagne.

My final day, I awaken to more Champagne—this time the vintage is powder. Skis on, I glide through billowing white clouds, reveling in the lingering flurries, the cloud-fogged vistas, and the silence of the snow blanketed woods. But I’m not alpine skiing, I’m ski-joëring—tethered to a horse by reins and a tow bar. My guide whistles, interrupting my snow-kissed reverie, and I tighten my grasp just as the horse breaks into a canter.

By mid morning, I’m basking in powder glory on Les Gets ski trails. The clouds break, and emerging blue skies and sunshine create a postcard for the memories with craggy, optic-white peaks rising above frosted pine forests laced with trails. I rack up vertical, slamming runs off Le Ranfoilly and Le Rosta until the legs beg for mercy.

We find salvation at La Païka, a mountain restaurant in La Turche. Lunch begins with cocktails on the terrace, where I watch a chef tending jumbo shrimp, ribs, and steaks on the grill. En route to my table, I pass an eye-popping selection of house made desserts. There are, of course, abundant opportunities for cheese. I eat, drink, and laugh, savoring every minute and every morsel. Elation!

Donning shades as I step out into the late afternoon sun, I can’t help but reflect on Jean Vuarnet’s dual, visionary feats: turning sunglasses into a status symbol and recognizing that the sum is greater than the parts in creating this perfect place. As we don gear, a friend starts snapping pictures. I raise my head and grin: Cheese!

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Endnotes:

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