

Baqueira-Beret, Spain

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Timeless Aranese architecture.



Après-ski tapas plate.

Photos by Claire Walter

Skiing the Spanish Pyrenees

Skiers find Alpine-style skiing and scenery with an overlay of regional mountain culture at Spain's largest ski resort.

By Claire Walter

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If you're a carnivorous skier or snowboarder who craves sun-kissed, wide open terrain and has a taste for nightlife, do I have a resort for you! And if you are bilingual or have a smattering of high-school Spanish, so much the better. The resort is Baqueira-Beret in the Spanish Pyrenees, deep in the Val d'Aran in the northernmost corner of the province of Catalonia. Though it's the winter playground of the Spanish royal family, you don't need to spend a king's ransom to ski there.

Straight-lining its history back to the Romans who came over the Bonaiqua Pass, steeped in centuries of rural isolation, and oozing with authenticity and charm, the valley became tenuously connected with the rest of Spain when the first road from the Spanish side reached this region in 1925. Then came Franco, and most of the Aranese were happy to be so far from the situation. Only when a tunnel was completed through the formidable mountains in 1948 did the Val d'Aran turn from a tenuous connection with France toward a firmer one with Spain. The local Aranese language is closely related to what is spoken

in equally isolated farming villages across the border in the French Pyrenees – though now, of course, everyone also speaks Spanish too.

The past is a powerful force in the present. Ancient stone houses line narrow lanes in classic villages that still wear the mantle of rural remoteness. Farmers tend sheep, cattle and horses, and try to coax crops from the earth on steep, stony hillsides. Austere Romanesque churches speak of a simple, enduring faith. Time seems to have stopped here – until you reach Baqueira-Beret, the largest ski resort in Spain.

Skiing rocketed the valley into the 20th century. Founded nearly 40 years ago with just one lift and three ski runs, Baqueira-Beret now boasts 31 chairlifts including two high-speed six-place chairlifts and four quads (more than Breckenridge, almost as many as Vail) with an hourly lift capacity of over 47,460 (more than double that of Snowmass), accessing 4,747 skiable acres (more than Whistler or Big Sky and nearly as many as Vail), and a 3,282-foot vertical drop (nearly the same as Sun Valley's Baldy). One third of the runs, including all of the lower-mountain terrain and the most popular high pistes, are equipped with snowmaking, meaning that the machine-made snow covers roughly twice the acreage of all of Aspen Mountain.

But you don't ski statistics. You ski the same sorts of wide-open, above-the-treeline slopes that North American skiers have learned to love in the Alps. You ski from those vast snowfields toward the treeline, but when it's snowing and visibility is low, or if you want a change of scenery from the world of white, you stay on the tree-lined lower runs. You can rock and roll throughout this three-mountain ski complex. And you do it all for roughly 40 percent less than mainstream ski resorts in Austria, France, or Switzerland.

The Resort Up the Road

From the lively downvalley city of Vielha, you reach the actual resort of Baqueira-Beret via a 13-kilometer (8-mile) drive on a curvy and narrow road. It snakes past intact old villages, old-new mid-rise hotels and apartments whose modernism shocks the eye, new-new resort developments completed after the local government began requiring all additional buildings to reflect the traditional Aranese building style of stone and wood, and finally to the crowded ski-resort base called Baqueira 1500, after its elevation in meters.

To a North American, the layout is curious. From Baqueira 1500, a convenient but architecturally uninspiring resort development, you trudge up the stairs to the central base area and the bottom of the Bosque chairlift. Every sign is in Spanish, and Spanish is virtually all you hear spoken around you. Did you pay attention in Spanish 101?

At the lift-loading area, an attendant sticks your skis or snowboard onto the back of your chair, while you and your liftmates ride up just in boots. At this latitude, adequate snow cover is not assured on the heavily trafficked lower mountain early or late in the season. When there is cover, you can ski all the way down at the end of the day. When not, you download on the chairlift. Being farther south (and also farther west in the Continent's main time zone) does have its advantages. Baqueira-Beret skiers enjoy longer days than those at the Alpine resorts, not a trivial matter when a mountain lunch might last until 3:00 in the afternoon.

The Bosque chair unloads on busy plateau, outfitted with mountain restaurants, a beginner area, a halfpipe, and additional lifts climbing higher and fanning out in either

direction. This is unquestionably the heart of Baqueira-Beret skiing. The Mirador and Pla de Baqueira lifts climb to a dazzling selection of runs for intermediate and advanced skiers. A long black run called Luis Arias honors the resort's founder. The route called Cara Nord is a sweet cruising run where intermediates can shine. There's no upper-expert terrain here, but since Spanish skiers tend to stick to the groomed pistes, powderhounds can expect to snare fresh tracks any time after a storm.

Skier's left from the central sector is the Bonaigua area. Drop into the cusp of a small valley between Baqueira and Bonaigua for a choice of four chairlifts. The Manaud lift rises to the resort's highest lift-served point, the Cap de Baqueira at 2,500 meters (8,235 feet). You can bypass the Baqueria 1500 congestion by driving to the Port de la Bonaigua, where you'll find a handful of runs, mostly intermediate on the map, and also some more challenging off-piste detours. The first phase of an expansion area called Peulla features a high-speed quad and three additional runs. Skier's right from Baqueira is the Beret area, with still another lift base that is high above the treeline to directly access typically European open terrain, where the vista is of white slopes, blue skies and endless mountain panoramas.

You can ski your legs into stumps, especially with so many high-speed lifts and so few liftlines. What you don't want to do is enroll in ski classes, unless your Spanish is a lot better than high school level. Although savvy, thrifty Brits have discovered Baqueira-Beret for its moderate prices and great weather, it's an overwhelmingly Spanish resort, with little English spoken by instructors.

It's the Culture, Stupid

Baqueira-Beret isn't just about skiing. It's a cultural experience. Dust off your Spanish dictionary, because you'll need it to read signs, menus, and maps. Also, reset your body clock, because the Spanish, who probably comprise 95 percent of Baqueira-Beret's clientele, don't ski like the rest of us. After a leisurely breakfast, they don their stylish ski clothes and head for the lifts at about 10:00. They ski until 1:30 or so, then break for a long lunch and perhaps a nap on the sun terrace. At 3:00 or later, they take a few more runs, and then make their way down the mountain.

At the base, in any of the small villages that line the long access road, or down in Vielha, it's tapas time. Bars put out luscious tidbits that range from olives to foie gras, roasted peppers to small sausages, to be washed down with wine or beer. Skiers saunter back to their lodgings, with or without shopping along the way. A two- or three-hour siesta follows, before freshening up for dinner.

Val d'Aran restaurants are virtually empty at 8:00, not because guests have finished dining, but because they haven't arrived yet. Sitting down to a correctly set table at 9:00 or 10:00 is common. Bottles of Rioja, the favorite red wine in Spain's ski country, accompany hearty, multi-course meals. Local specialties abound – rich soups and generous portions lamb, veal, duck – but international dishes are available too, notably at dessert, when pan-European sweets are prepared.

Then, for those with energy left, which seems to include every Spanish skier save young children and had-enough-partying grandparents, nightspots abound. Noisy, smoky, crowded bars pack 'em in until the wee hours. Music thumps, lights play, and dance floors rock in many Val d'Aran clubs. The vibrant scene doesn't end till dawn.

You might adapt quickly to the Spanish way, or you can modify it. If you get to lifts before 9:30, there won't even be a wait at the bottom station. If you break for lunch at noon, you'll practically have the restaurant to yourself. If you quit at 3:30 or 4:00, the valley runs won't be mobbed – and you'll be the first at the tapas bar. If you have dinner early, around 7:00 or 8:00, the restaurant is all yours. And if you turn in around midnight, you'll have the stamina for the next morning's 9:00 or 9:30 start. But with that off-beat schedule, you probably won't run into King Juan-Carlos, who keeps more traditional Spanish skiing hours.

IF YOU GO

LOCATION

Baqueira-Beret is 350 kilometers (about 217 miles) from Barcelona and its international airport and 166 kilometers (103 miles) from Toulouse, France, which – as the home of Airbus Industries has excellent air service from elsewhere in Europe, and also TGV rail from Paris. Air fare and transportation between the European gateway city and the resort are additional. Although there is limited bus service to and within the Val d'Aran, a rental car is strongly recommended from either gateway.

The most direct way to book lodgings is to go to www.baqueira.es, click on “The Valley” and then on “Accommodations.” The country code for Spain is 34. All packages below are quoted per person, based on double occupancy, for seven nights and include a one-week lift pass. At this writing, 1 Euro equals US\$1.26.

HOTELS

Luxury

Hotel Royal Melia Tanau, Baqueira 1700; Local phone: 973/64-44-46; E-mail: dtortan@trypnet.com. Luxurious five-star with unsurpassed location at the base of the Esquirol chairlift. Well-equipped and featuring an indoor pool, fitness center, massage service and well-regarded restaurant. From € 945 in low season to € 2,028 in holiday season, including breakfast.

Rafael Hoteles La Pleta, Baqueira 1700; Local phone: 973/64-55-50. E-mail: lapleta@rafaelhoteles.com; www.rafaelhoteles.com. Well-located hotel with a bell tower inspired by traditional Aranese design. Inside are all contemporary conveniences, including indoor pool, fireplace lounge, fitness facility, shuttle to the lifts, and more. Duplex suites also available. From € 680 in low season to €1,348 in holiday season, including breakfast.

Moderately Priced

Hotel Val de Ruda, Baqueira 1500; Local phone: 973/64-52-58; E-mail: hotel.valderuda@teleline.es; www.valderuda-bassibe.com. This three-star charmer – stone on the outside, lots of cozy wood on the inside – at the base of the lifts is favored by the Brits, which means you'll find English spoken there. From € 548 per person in low season to € 987 in holiday season, including breakfast and lift pass.

Hotel Montarto, Baqueira 1700; Local phone: 973/63-90-01; E-mail montarto@baqueira.es. This four-star hotel is widely admired, not for the size or opulence of its rooms but for its first-rate service. The location is a short shuttle ride or reasonable walk from the lifts but convenient to restaurants and nightspots. From € 546 per person in low season to € 976 in holiday season, including breakfast.

Hotel Sol Vielha, Vielha; Local phone: 973/63-80-00; E-mail: sol.vielha@solmelia.com; www.solvielha.solmelia.com. This year-old hotel, four-star is well located, just off Vielha's lively main drag, within a short walk of shops, restaurants, bars, and nightspots. Rooms and two-story mini-suites are available. Facilities include a fitness center, two saunas, a steam bath, a Jacuzzi, massage services, heated swimming pool, and solarium. From € 417 in low season to € 853 in holiday season, including breakfast.

Budget

Hotel Edelweiss, Arties; Local phone: 973/64-44-23. This two-star, quasi-chalet in the village of Arties, seven kilometers from the lifts, as Alpine-feeling as you can get in the Pyrenees. From € 445 in low season to € 551 in holiday season, including breakfast.

Hotel Husa Tuca, Betren/Vielha; Local phone: 973/64-07-00; E-mail: hotel.tuca@husa.es. Because of its out-of-the-mainstream location in the Vielha "suburb" of Betren, this modern four-star hotel comes in with really attractive rates. Its slope-walled designed captures the light into each room, but the exterior is at serious odds with the traditional Aranese building style. From € 413 in low season to € 719 in holiday season, including breakfast.

DINING

Es de Don Joan, Unha; Local phone: 973/64-57-51. Visitors make pilgrimages to the pinpoint village of Unha, above the larger village of Salardu, just to visit this restaurant, which is popularly known as Casa Carmela. What once were a few tables in Carmela's home has grown into a three-story establishment, absolutely mammoth by the standards of the Val d'Aran. Veal, lamb, and beef, prepared in local ways, are specialties. Any mushroom dish is worth ordering. Entrees € 15-25.

La Borda Lobato, Baqueira; Local phone: 973/64-57-08. This former barn with a hayloft on the top burned and was recreated as a sprightly restaurant. Without the hayloft, the ceiling now soars over custom light fixtures, rush-seated chairs, and tables laden with good food. Many of the meats are prepared on an open grill. Look for such oddities as boned pork trotters, suckling pig, and small squids sautéed in ink sauce, as well as such more prosaic dishes as grilled lamb chops, grilled duck with fruit sauce, grilled lamb, and pork loin. Unlike most restaurants in the Val d'Aran, the menu is also presented in sort-of English. Entrees € 9.47-18.54.

Restaurant Esquiro, Baqueira; Local phone: 973/64-54-30. Charming spot with an Italian-Spanish menu, overlaid with Aranese specialties. Hearty beefsteak, lovely veal dishes, a

rich meat fondue, a beautiful platter of carpaccio with shaved Parmesan cheese, and a catch of the day star on the entrée list. Afterwards, ice cream concoctions reign. Entrees € 9.95-21.20.

Restaurant Urtau, Arties; Local phone: 973/64-09-26. Popular après-ski spot and well-regarded restaurant specializing in Aranese fare. Start with a local variant of vichyssoise, served in a shot-glass-size bowl, with mini-croquettes and a teeny spoon, or if you are courageous, a crock of olla Aranese, a local favorite delicately described as “innards soup.” The duck entrée is splendid, featuring both the breast in foie gras sauce and the leg paired with pear. The crepes are stars of the dessert menu. Entrees € 9.20-17.95.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

There’s skating, dog sledding, and a small cross-country skiing loop, but instead of such winter activities also found elsewhere, the main off-slope diversion should be sightseeing. Be sure to visit the Museu dera Val d’Aran (Carrer Major 26; phone 973/64-1815), an intensely local museum in a Vielha townhouse, featuring geological, botanical, agricultural, social, and historical displays. To understand a traditional Aranese industry, visit the Fabrica dera Lan (Carrer de Ribaeta; no phone, call museum for hours), which depicts spinning and weaving practices. The local church, called Glesia de Sant Miqueu de Vielha, is a Romanesque treasure begun in the 13th century.

Take a road trip, short in miles but rich in scenery. Drive the road between Baqueira-Beret and Vielha, detouring to such quaint hamlets as Salardu, Garas and Betren. Drive north from Vielha to Bossost along the Garona River where the French come to bargain-shop. If you and your vehicle are game, drive up the steep road to Vilamos. From Bossost, keep going north and just before the France, take the narrow road to Bausen. This enchanting hillside village is the oldest in the valley, now populated mainly by old people and old dogs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Torisme Val d’Aran, Crta. Gaussac, 25530 Vielha, Spain; Local phone: 973/64-06-88; E-mail: torisme@aran.org; www.aran.org. Oficina Turismo de Baqueira-Beret, Apartado 60, 25530 Vielha, Spain. Local phone: 973/63-90-00; E-mail: viajes@baqueria.es; www.baqueira.es.

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