



The valley of delights

Spain | Hemmed in by mountains and isolated for centuries, the Val d'Aran is now the surprising setting for some of Europe's best heli-skiing. By *Tom Robbins*

As I sat down on a bench outside the small corrugated-steel hangar, a flicker on the path caught my eye. A lizard darted out from a crack, then froze, warming himself on the sun-baked concrete, inches from my ski boot. It was March, and beyond the fence of the tiny heliport, the fields were green, the tree branches unencumbered by snow; the sun shone on the white stone belfry of Vielha's ancient Sant Miquèu church. I took off my woolly hat.

Even as the helicopter was being wheeled out from the hangar, it still seemed deeply improbable we were about to go heli-skiing — an activity that typically takes place in the frozen wilds of British Columbia, not on a mild morning on the outskirts of a bustling Spanish market town. I'd finished work the previous night in London and taken the short EasyJet flight to Toulouse, where I'd pushed my ski-laden baggage trolley through the sliding doors of arrivals to be met with a warm, pine-scented breeze redolent of Mediterranean beach holidays.

There I met James Morland, founder of specialist tour operator Elemental Adventure, who had flown in from his home in Chamonix. His company arranges heli-ski trips in the world's most exotic and far-flung locations — not just British Columbia and Alaska, but the Himalayas, the Caucasus, the volcanoes of Kamchatka and many more — yet he was eager to show me his latest and least likely discovery: that world-class heli-skiing exists in a country better known for its sun, sand and sangria than its snow. From Toulouse, we drove two-and-a-half hours south, crossing in darkness into the Val d'Aran: a 35-mile-long valley, hemmed in by mountains, that runs from the border up to the ski resort of Baqueira-Beret.



As our helicopter lifted up the following morning, we could see the valley stretching away below us — the roofs of Vielha, the Val d'Aran's administrative centre and only town, then the series of small villages dotted along the valley floor as it climbs towards the ski resort, each clustered around the spire of a medieval church. Flat ground is in short supply; the valley walls curve upwards almost immediately from the banks of the Garonne, much of them covered in forests of fir, beech and black pine. Up near the ski resort we could see columns of smoke, where heather was being burnt to create firebreaks before the summer heat took hold.

And then some kind of magic: the helicopter climbed up above the tree line

and the world turned white. There were jagged peaks, hanging valleys and open snowfields for as far as we could see. To the west, Aneto, at 3,404 metres the highest peak in the Pyrenees, a glacier tumbling down below the summit. The helicopter dropped us on a flank of the Tuc deth Metdia, rotor wash sending flurries of snow into our faces as we crouched while our guide, Sergi Gasa, unloaded the skis. Then the aircraft lifted again, dropped sideways back down into the valley, and the three of us were left alone on the mountaintop, seemingly transported not just upwards but back in time to the middle of winter.

We set off, following Gasa down mellow rolling slopes into a pristine bowl where we regrouped, breathing hard and beaming. The snow wasn't deep



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powder (though that is possible, any time from January until late March), but it was smooth, buttery and, most importantly, gloriously untracked. Gasa led off again and we followed at wide intervals, enjoying the sensation of having a mountainside to ourselves and carving huge, fast S-shapes across its face. Far below, we could just see the yellow helicopter, waiting for us beside a stream.

In fact we didn't see another track in the whole of what became an increasingly eye-opening day. Heli-skiing does exist elsewhere in Europe, but is strictly controlled. Usually, pilots may only set down in a handful of prescribed landing spots — in Austria's fabled Arlberg, for example, that country's biggest ski area, there are just two. There, helicopters work like taxis, lifting one group of skiers then going to collect another, or heading off for a different job. For the skiers, the usual drill is that after the helicopter drop, you spend as long as possible skiing back down before returning to the pistes or lunch.

"That is heli-lift — here we do heli-ski," said Gasa, as we prepared for our second run. Rather than a taxi driver, he explained, the pilot here is more like a chauffeur — moving with you from place to place, waiting at a discreet distance when not needed. The guide sits up front beside the pilot, directing him to land wherever the snow looks best, anywhere in a 400 sq km area of rugged upland. In the Alps, such terrain would likely be dotted with farms, mountain restaurants, perhaps hydroelectric infrastructure, probably ski lifts, too. Here, the land is wilder and less developed —

home to brown bears and bearded vultures, but with few humans around to object to heli-skiers (though with only 400 coming all winter, even they are pretty scarce). "Up here, there are no villages, no hikers, climbers, nothing," said Gasa. "It's perfect — just like Canada." Hard to believe we were little more than 100 miles from Barcelona.

In that three-hour session we did 10 runs, skiing down from one ridge, then being lifted up to the next so we could move through the range, completing a circuit on both sides of the valley. And then, it was time for tapas, or rather, in this part of Spain, *pintxos*.

At Tauernes Urtau, in the pretty village of Arties, the 10 metre-long bar was filled with trays offering 70 types of bite-size treat: *jamón serrano*, grilled octopus, fried squid, *croquetas*, local cheeses and more. *Pintxos* means spikes — a reference to the cocktail sticks that hold them together, and which the waiter counts to calculate your bill. (Like prices throughout the valley it's very reasonable, especially compared with the Alps — here a decent bottle of Tempranillo to wash down the *pintxos* costs €10). We filled our plates and sat at a table in the sunny square outside, quiet except for the occasional farmer driving past on a tractor. In 30 years of skiing, I had never done *après-ski* quite like this.

Val d'Aran is a semi-autonomous area of a semi-autonomous region, Catalonia. The name literally means "Valley of the Valley", a circularity that might hint at its fierce sense of independence and identity. Locals here speak Aranese (at the museum in Vielha, I'd perhaps arrogantly assumed my English, or failing that my schoolboy French, would suffice; in fact exhibits are labelled in three languages: Aranese, Catalan and Castilian). The valley has its own distinctive cuisine (with specialities such as the *Olha* Aranese, a hearty stew of beef, beans, noodles and blood sausage). Customs remain strong — come to Arties on St John's Eve in June and you'll witness burning branches of a fir tree being dragged through the streets, with local children leaping over them.

Such idiosyncrasies are unsurprising when you consider the valley's centuries of isolation. The fact that it faces north is good for the snow — allowing moist Atlantic air to flow up from the plains of Gascony — but meant the valley was cut off from the rest of the country. In the 17th and 18th centuries, timber was used as currency. The first road connection to Spain, over the 2,072-metre-high Bonaigua pass, did not arrive until 1924. Even then, it could be shut for months in winter, so locals campaigned for a tunnel which, after 22 years of construc-



tion, opened in 1948. At 5.2km, it was once the world's longest, and was known as Europe's most dangerous until it was finally modernised in 2007.

Hampered by that isolation, skiing came late. Baqueira-Beret opened in 1964, by which time the British had been skiing in Switzerland for at least 70 years. But it transformed the valley's economy, especially when patronage by the royal family made Baqueira a must-visit destination for glamorous Spaniards. Juan Carlos was a keen skier and his son King Felipe still visits.



The resort, which sits at 1,500 metres, has grown significantly in the past decade, now boasting 157km of pistes, 35 lifts and a ski area that covers 2,166 hectares (comparable with a US big-hitter like Vail, which has 2,140 hectares and 31 lifts). There's an array of five-star hotels at the foot of the slopes, offering convenience and comfort, but for character, better to stay down in the valley villages, where the hotels, like the charming Casa Irene in Arties, where we stayed, are owned and run by local families.

For some reason, skiers in Baqueira

remain mainly Spanish, though the foreigners who do discover it tend to return with convert's zeal. That night we visited Salardú, a couple of miles down the road from Baqueira, and walked through the arched stone doorway of Eth Bot, a restaurant in an early 17th century farmhouse. It had a floor of polished flagstones and tables set up in what was the cattle stall; wine was kept cool in an animal trough through which a stream flowed. As we ordered a beer at the bar, a friendly, if inebriated, Brit with a broad London accent congratulated us on making it here, explaining his family had fallen in love with the place and bought a house nearby. "The whole valley is *muy rustico* and this place," he pointed enthusiastically to the aged beams above us, "is rustico as f***."

Such proximity of major ski resort and extensive heli-ski area is unusual anywhere in the world and offers a rare flexibility. Of course, the lifts provide a back up if storms prevent flying, but they also mean you can mix and match — a couple of warm-up days in the resort, say, followed by two heli-skiing. On our second day we tried another, increasingly popular, option: heli-touring. The helicopter dropped us at 2,731 metres on the Tuc de Parros — the last we would see of the pilot all day. Heli-touring means



using the aircraft as a shortcut to the high peaks, then switching to muscle-power, attaching skins to the skis to climb further into the back-country.

We took a run down into a deserted valley, seeking out patches of lingering powder, then put on our skins for a long climb, working our way around the mountain. The trick is not to rush or push yourself too hard, but to try to find a rhythm so that the motion becomes almost meditative. At the Tuc de Pedescaus, we looked back down the Val d'Aran to see a snake of cloud beginning to advance up the valley. "We have 30 minutes," warned Gasa, and we beat a rapid retreat to the ski resort, arriving there just as we were subsumed in a white out.

The next day, our last, we returned early, eager to test the pistes. They are wide, long and spread over five mountains, giving an expansive feel that reminded me more of resorts in the Rockies than the Alps. The main thing, though, was that they were completely empty. Visitors here, we were learning, stick to a Spanish timetable, eating dinner at 10pm, perhaps moving on to a nightclub at 1am, and rarely hitting the slopes before 10.30am. We made the most of what seemed a private mountain, blasting about the pistes until it was time to rendezvous with Gasa at the north edge of the ski area, where we hopped on skidoos and set off for lunch.

Our destination — half an hour away, via a snowy track through thick forest — was Montgarri, a place of pilgrimage since the early 12th century and once an important stop for travellers making the arduous journey over the mountains into the Val d'Aran. Today, rendered obsolete by the road and tunnel, it is all but abandoned, as serene and beautiful a place as you can imagine.

We parked the skidoos and walked across a wooden bridge over a shallow stream rushing with snowmelt. On the far side, set around a walled courtyard, are Montgarri's two remaining buildings, a 16th-century church and the rectory next door, now converted into a refuge for skiers and hikers.

A big Spanish pointer was snoring on the steps of the refuge; we stepped over him to take our seats by the open fire. Gasa showed us how to tackle the starter, smearing garlic, oil and tomato on bread before adding homemade *pâté* of wild boar and pork, or toasted goat's cheese. Meanwhile, vast steaks were cooked on an iron grill over the open fire. It was the most memorable meal of the year, spiced by the discombobulating realisation that I would be back home in London that night. We finished with coffee and a shot poured from a dark green bottle — not the usual rough grappa or *génépy*, but something infused with the flavours of sloes and cinnamon, sweet and like the Val d'Aran, a delicious surprise.

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Tom Robbins was a guest of Elemental Adventure (eahelisking.com) and EasyJet (easyjet.com). Elemental Adventure offers bespoke trips to the Val d'Aran starting at £2,300 including three nights accommodation, two days heli-skiing and one at the resort, transfers, equipment and guiding, or from £4,400 for a week. EasyJet flies direct to Toulouse from 27 European airports; returns from London Gatwick cost from about £40