A story to tell

Epic pistes, a gargantuan lift network, Olympic luge tracks, Moonbikes, 'ski sophrology' – La Plagne has come a long way in its 60 years, says **Katy Dartford.** Its creator would be proud…

I peered over the edge of the slope. Glued to the spot. "There is no way I can slide down that," I whimpered. I was convinced I'd smack into the chopped up, crusty snow below me. "Just let go! It's easy," called Kamel. As an instructor for La Plagne's Oxygene Ski School, I suspected it wasn't the first time he'd had to coax a fearful pupil down the mountain.

But, in my defence, it was pitch dark and instead of a pair of skis on my feet, I was on a Moonbike, a powerful and ultra-light electric snowbike, consisting of a single ski on the front and a mini-track at the back. And it was my first time driving one of these things.

The rest of the group were staring up at me, expectantly. Being on the slopes at night makes it significantly chillier and my hands felt frozen. I pushed forward inch by inch and 'released', fully expecting this lump of metal below me to wobble, tip over and crush me. But the drop was over in a few seconds and the upward camber instantly slowed me down. Phewee. Now onto the next section…

We were in La Plagne for the resort's 60th anniversary. I wondered what Doctor Pierre Borrione – considered the creator of La Plagne – would have made of this scene: a bunch of adults lanching themselves down the slopes, at night, on these hilarious vehicles.

Wind the clock back six decades and Borrione, the mayor of the commune of Aime, was faced with a dire situation: the traditional livelihoods of agriculture and mining in the Tarentaise Valley were no longer sufficient to support the local population, and young people were moving away to nearby cities such as Lyon and Chambery to find work elsewhere. The towns of Aime, Bellentre, Longefoy and Macot decided action was needed – they created an association to protect the interests of the local community, and decided to develop a winter tourist resort.

Under the guidance of Dr Borrione, La Plagne opened its first ski lifts in December 1961. It was a modest start, just two drag lifts serving four slopes – but it was the beginning of the regeneration of a dwindling community.

Fast forward to today and La Plagne is part of the second largest interconnected ski resort in the world. Linked to Les Arcs by the 'double-decker' Vanoise Express cable car, together they form the gargantuan Paradiski area: 425km of runs and 258 pistes.



▲ The resort's founding father, Doctor Pierre Borrione

◀ The resort in the early 1960s with just two drag lifts to its name and, below, how it looks today



◀ Night-time thrills: swap your skis for a Moonbike



PHOTOS OLIVIER ALLAMAND, ANDRÉ MARTZOLF, ARCHIVES DE SAVOIE FONDS BEZANÇON

GLORY DAYS

The next morning dawned sunny and cold. There hadn't been much fresh snow recently, but the pistes were in great condition – after all, 70% of them are above 2,000m.

We whizzed up the brand new La Lovatière chairlift, which has created a direct – and fast (five minutes bottom to top) – link between Plagne Centre and Champagny-en-Vanoise. Champagny boasts some superb, long technical reds and we cruised around in the sunshine enjoying our fill.

For many people, Mont de la Guerre is La Plagne's best red run – if not *the* best run – with its wide open motorway sections, tree lines and scenery to boot. We eyed up the area's many off-piste itineraries too, such as the north face of the Bellecotte and the 'nature slopes' – which are marked but ungroomed areas.

Over a lunch of lamb shank with orange at the Chalet du Plan Bois on the slopes of Montchavin-Les Coches (the restaurant has been open for 30 years, but completely revamped its menu last winter to focus on more local cuisine), our trusted ESF instructor, Jeremy Viber, pointed out some nearby off-piste tree runs. "There are more chairlifts here than anywhere in the world," he said (a fact I have yet to validate – but I loved his enthusiasm). "But not where the off-piste is," he added, gleefully.

HOW FAR WE'VE COME

I wonder what Dr Borrione would have thought, 60 years ago, if someone had told him that one day his humble little resort would be stage to the presigious Winter Olympic Games? He'd have no doubt scoffed in disbelief. But, in 1992, La Plagne hosted the bobsleigh and luge competitions for the 1992 Winter Olympics, whose host city was neighbouring Albertville.

Factfile

Katy stayed at the Araucaria Hotel (araucaria-hotel.com), which offers doubles from €140 per night. A one-hour Moonbike session with Oxygene Ski School (oxygene.ski) costs from €90; the Ski Sophrology session with Karine is €75 per person. A 15-minute experience on the Olympic bobsleigh track costs from €49. A one-day Paradiski ski pass costs from €67 per adult. For more details on La Plagne visit la-plagne.com.

The track, located under Plagne 1800, is France's only bobsleigh and skeleton track – quite an accolade. Would Dr Borrione, with zero luge experience, have agreed to launch himself down the 1.5km track, with its 19 bends and 124.5 metres vertical drop, if invited? I'd say it's unlikely, but for some reason I decided it was a good idea, and so found myself clambering into my bullet-shaped cage, laying on my back, feet first, before being pushed off down the chute at astonishing speed.

The luge takes bigger and bigger swings around the bends, G-forces squeezed me down, and my squeals got louder and louder with each one. I made it down in 1 minute 16 seconds and stepped out of my cage, buzzing and jibbering with the thrill of the ride. (Not quite as fast as Austria's Doris Neuner, who bagged Olympic Gold with her speedy descent of 46.590 secs, but hey I'll take it.)

After all this adrenaline it was a relief to spend a more meditative morning practising 'ski sophrology' with Oxygene's Karine Fromaget in Montchavin La Plagne.

Ski-what now, you ask? Karine first came across 'sophrology' – a form of meditation, breathing exercises and visualisation – as a young ski racer when a practitioner from Geneva visited La Plagne to help the racers cope with the stress of competition. As an instructor, she felt there was something missing in the teaching of skiing in France and, in 2018, she decided to combine sophrology with skiing as a way of helping those struggling with fears. "They could be beginners afraid of falling and hurting themselves, or getting hit by someone else, or they could be scared of icy or steep slopes," explained Karine.

We stopped by the side of a piste and imagined we were like the trees – grounded, but could also reach up to the sky. At another spot we imagined throwing our 'bad feelings' into a 'cauldron' to disperse them.

Then later, by an open snow field, we visualised succeeding at something and being 'congratulated'. "Being congratulated for success is something that doesn't happen often enough," said Karine.

If news of the Olympics didn't have Dr Borrione thinking you were pulling his leg, the story of skiers spending the afternoon pretending they were trees surely would. But it just goes to show how far La Plagne – and skiing – has come in 60 years. I think Borrione would be proud.



◀ **Experience the Olympic bobsleigh track, circa 1992**



▼ **Today, La Plagne is part of the second largest interconnected ski resort in the world**



▶ **The new Lovatière lift**

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