

TAPAS, TURNS AND TRADITION

Caviar and Corduroy: **KATY DARTFORD** enjoys a weekend of world-class slopes with a distinct Spanish flavour in Baqueira-Beret

"I never ski after lunch," Carlos declared as we sat down for a tapas feast and a glass of champagne to toast our morning's skiing at Baqueira-Beret. As a former ski racer for Spain, Carlos has earned his afternoon siesta. Between the creamy aubergine purée, cod carpaccio and foie gras drizzled with honey at the Moët Winter Lounge, I was starting to see why. But I wasn't ready to call it a day just yet – there was still plenty of skiing to do.

Baqueira-Beret, in Spain's Val d'Aran, is a resort that combines world-class slopes with a distinct Spanish flavour. This year marked its 60th anniversary – a milestone for a resort that remains one of Europe's best-kept secrets. Spain's largest ski resort lies on the high Bonaigua Pass, offering 171km of pistes across three main areas – Baqueira, Beret and Bonaigua. With everything from wide, family-friendly runs to steep, technical descents, there's something for everyone.

On the Jesus Serra chairlift, Carlos Cristobal, my guide for the weekend, explained the uniqueness of the Val d'Aran. "It's the only north-facing valley in Spain, and its snow benefits from an Atlantic climate," he said.

This combination of geography and expert preparation means Baqueira stays open even in tricky seasons. It was the only resort in Europe to open in November 2023, and the slopes were in perfect condition for the opening weekend of 2024 – fitting for the winter home of the Spanish royal family since 1964.

That morning, Carlos had taken me down the Luis Arias black run, a steep and thrilling piste just skier's right of the Jorge Jordana chairlift. Unlike some runs I've experienced, it stays 'black' all the way down with access to off-piste itineraries and steep side-country terrain. By the time we reached the bottom, I was buzzing and ready for lunch.

But first, Carlos whisked me off to look over the edge of Escornacrabes – 'Where Goats Tumble' – Couloir. "It looks steep, I know," he said, gesturing to the sheer drop. "But once you're over the edge, it's easier than you think." It seemed like a precipice at first, but from another angle, the pitch looked less intimidating. As I explored more of the mountain, I began to

"I BEGAN TO SEE WHY BAQUEIRA-BERET IS A FREERIDE FAVOURITE"

see why Baqueira-Beret is a freeride favourite, with its exceptional off-piste terrain and a stop on the Freeride World Tour – the only one where spectators can watch the action unfold directly from the slopes.

That evening, I explored nearby Salardú, a beautiful village perched between the Garonne and Unhola rivers. It's also home to the Husta Skis workshop. "When we started, it was just for fun," co-founder Xavi Giner told me. "But during the pandemic, we realised we could turn it into a business."

With Dani Poy, a carpenter, Xavi now creates custom skis tailored to each skier's weight, skill and style. For Baqueira's 60th anniversary, they designed a special edition ski using bamboo sidewalls and flax fibres, reflecting their commitment to sustainability. "It's about celebrating the valley," Dani said. "We want people to connect with the mountains through their skis."



Afterwards, we visited Salardú's Church of Sant Andreu, where Romanesque frescoes tell a story of medieval devotion – and near loss. Many were stolen using the controversial strappo technique, before being recovered and preserved.

Salardú is just one of several medieval villages along the Garona River, which starts here and flows north into France. If you stay in one of these villages rather than the resort, you'll find a variety of accommodations and fine restaurants tucked down cobbled alleyways.

Staying in Arties, we soon learned why Catalonia has been named the World Region of Gastronomy 2025 – the only region in Europe to receive this distinction. Just down the hill from Baqueira-Beret is Vielha, a charming town where the old centre along the river is full of tapas bars and traditional Aranese restaurants. Here, I tried one



"THE SHEER SCALE OF THE LANDSCAPE WAS BREATHTAKING"



of the Val d'Aran's most unexpected delicacies – sturgeon caviar, raised locally in the pristine mountain waters.

The Val d'Aran was isolated until the Vielha Tunnel was completed in 1948, and that helped preserve its unique identity. Locals speak Aranese, a language that dates back to the ancient region of Occitania, alongside Catalan and Spanish. This former isolation also influenced the valley's cuisine. Aranese dishes like olha aranesa, a hearty meat and vegetable soup, reflect centuries of self-sufficiency.

Lunch on the slopes at Cinco Jotas Grill Baqueira at 1,800 metres introduced me to the best of Spain's ham culture. Each bite of jamón ibérico – from pluma to secreto – was a reminder that food here is treated with the same reverence as skiing. A crema catalana was the perfect sweet refuel after 4,000 metres of descent.

That evening, we dined at Turnay Restaurant in Escunhau, where a slow-cooked stuffed cabbage – cooked patiently over a barbecue for hours – was the highlight of a meal that embodied the region's tradition and care for food.

But it's not all rustic fare. In Arties, with its narrow streets and stone houses dating back to the 13th century, I dined at Casa Irene, a Michelin-starred restaurant known for its refined simplicity. Here, traditional recipes are elevated with modern techniques. My old-fashioned wild boar civet with chestnut purée was deeply comforting, while the Queen of Sheba dessert – a gold-sprayed take on a Ferrero Rocher – was as indulgent as it was delicious.

In Vielha, La Baraque del Ciervo offers modern twists on traditional dishes, such as tempura shrimp from Huelva and Valley Sturgeon Carpaccio, leaving plenty of choices for vegetarians and pescatarians alike.

The following morning, we swapped skiing for a wander around Arties, a village nestled between the Valarties and Garonne rivers. First documented in the 12th century, history is everywhere. The Gaspar de Portolà Tower, once home to the

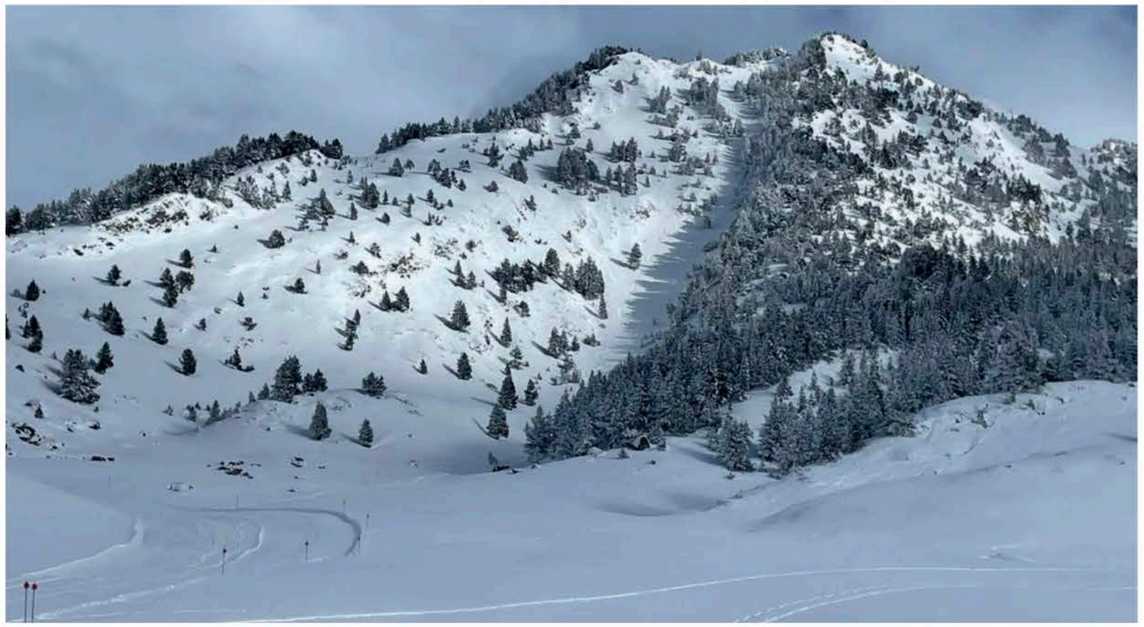


noble family of the Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portolà, still stands proudly, with a statue in his honour nearby. Portolà, the first governor of California, founded San Diego and Monterey. Nearby, Casa Paulet, an imposing Aranese mansion, is adorned with mysterious medieval carvings. And then there's the Romanesque church of Santa Maria, where Gothic altarpieces and Renaissance murals, hidden for centuries, were finally restored in the 20th century.

Just outside the village, the "Taro" Festival takes place on the summer solstice, where locals set fire to a giant fir tree and drag its burning remains through the streets in a UNESCO-listed ritual dating back to at least 1668. And then there's the bright red English postbox, a surprising nod to Arties' ancient connections beyond the Pyrenees.

On my final day, I took a scenic flight over the Pyrenees, soaring above jagged ridges and frozen lakes in Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici





National Park. The sheer scale of the landscape was breathtaking – a reminder of what makes this place so special.

Whether it's skiing fresh tracks, eating Aranese delicacies, or learning about Husta Skis' craftsmanship, Baqueira-Beret is more than a resort; it's a celebration of culture, nature and tradition. Located four hours from Barcelona and two-and-a-half hours from Toulouse, it's ideal to combine with a city break – but as Carlos would say, just don't ski after lunch.



TRAVEL FACTS

ACCOMMODATION

Hotel El Ciervo, Vielha – Family-run 3* boutique hotel in the historic centre of Vielha, known for its quirky décor and warm hospitality.
hotelelciervo.net

SKIING

Baqueira-Beret Ski Resort – Spain's flagship ski destination with 171km of pistes across Baqueira, Beret and Bonaigua. Renowned for its snow reliability, freeride terrain and as winter home to the Spanish royal family.
baqueira.es

ON-MOUNTAIN DINING

Moët Winter Lounge – Champagne and gourmet tapas on a panoramic terrace.
Cinco Jotas Grill (5 J's) – Iberian ham and Spanish delicacies at 1,800m.

DINING & GASTRONOMY

Turnay Restaurant (Escunhau) – Traditional Aranese dishes, family-run since 1977.
Casa Irene (Arties) – Iconic Michelin-starred restaurant blending tradition with refinement.
La Baraque del Ciervo (Vielha) – Creative, modern Aranese cuisine.

CULTURE & ACTIVITIES

Guided tour of Vielha & Val d'Aran villages – Romanesque churches, cobbled streets and unique Aranese heritage.
Husta Skis (Salardú) – Artisanal, sustainable custom ski makers.
Snowmobile, dog sledding, or scenic flight – weather-dependent activities offering a different view of the Pyrenees.

LOCAL FLAVOURS

Aranese specialties – Olha aranesa (meat and vegetable soup), wild boar civet, valley sturgeon caviar, crema catalana.
Wine & spirits – Pairings from Catalonia, cava and champagne traditions at altitude.

GETTING THERE

Approx. 4 hours from Barcelona; 2.5 hours from Toulouse.