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SKI ISSUE 2006 Sainte-Foy Tarentaise, France

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The reward in skiing at Sainte-Foy Station in the Tarentaise Valley comes in the form of shorter lift lines and longer-lasting powder -- not to mention the small-town vibe and Mont Blanc views. A newcomer to the Alps, the resort opened in 1990 a few miles uphill from the original village of Sainte-Foy Tarentaise. But there's no poured concrete here: The mountainside chalets are built from local timber, stone and slate, and much of the development has taken an enviro-friendly slant.

Visitors can fly into Lyon, France, or Geneva to access this growing, family-style resort within easy striking distance of the Haute-Savoie region's top terrain. Plan on a 2 1/2-hour drive from either airport. Sainte-Foy Station (the base village) is just off the main road that cuts through the Isre Valley. But most visitors to the region bypass it for the bigger -- and far more crowded -- mass tourism resorts of Val d'Isere, Les Arcs and Tignes (all within 30 minutes of Sainte-Foy).

BEST FOR . . . powder hounds with an aversion to mega-resorts and families looking for luxurious lodgings and easy access to great ski terrain in a quiet, rural environment.

THE SKIING: On powder days, valley locals (including ski instructors from the big resorts) pass up making first tracks at Val d'Isere and Tignes for a shot at Sainte-Foy. You'll rarely wait more than a few minutes for the lifts. The mountain's northwest-facing slopes and sheltered location keep it out of direct sunlight most of the day, which means more staying power for powder.

With few traverses (flat areas) and lots of off-piste options, the mountain is particularly attractive to snowboarders. And on stormy days, when the lifts at many of the big resorts are closed, the tree runs at Sainte-Foy deliver the goods. Four chairlifts (including a new high-speed six-seater opening for the 2006-07 season) access acres of groomed slopes and endless off-piste terrain. The lower slopes are great for beginners, while adventurous types head to the top to reach a powder keg of backcountry.

One of the best-loved backcountry routes is to Le Monal, a farming village that's uninhabited during the winter. Hire a guide and drop off the back bowl from the top lift, hike a bit and you'll be surrounded by pristine meadows thick with the white stuff. The 5,577-foot vertical descent on the north face of Le Fogliettaz (accessed from the top lift) is another famed off-piste challenge.



Flat areas are few at Sainte-Foy Station; crowds are scant, too. (Tarry Ward)

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