

**BACK TO NATURE**

Andorra is blessed with such an incredibly beautiful environment that you simply can't stay in a foul mood for long; (clockwise from below) Sant Martí de la Cortinada; La Vall de Sorteny nature park; Vall d'Incles; Grandvalira ski resort with 210km of slopes; Areny-Plandolit House museum; Hotel Plaza. PHOTOS (except hotel and ski resort): CORINNE KERK



# Where the hills are truly alive

Everywhere you look in Andorra, there is stunning scenery. **By Corinne Kerk**

**I**T'S a small country, marked by a little red dot on the world map. It's safe, home to many foreign talent and surrounded by much bigger neighbours. That, however, is where similarities between the Principality of Andorra and Singapore end. You see, in Singapore, if you didn't notice a car behind your Mercedes Vito and back into it by accident, the driver of said car will jump out and scold you for being a bad motorist, take pictures of the damage (however minor), ask for your identity card and then scold you some more.

In Andorra, however, the driver of the car – which happens to be a beautiful Audi – gets out and smiles as she says something to you in Catalan. You say something apologetic back and that's the end of that.

We were amazed at the civility. But after spending a couple of days in Andorra, we reckon we know why folks don't go into a meltdown over a fender bender – and it's not just because they pay a lot less for their vehicles.

For one thing, this microstate in the eastern Pyrenees mountains sandwiched between France to the north and Spain to the south, is blessed with such an incredibly beautiful environment that you simply can't stay in a foul mood for long.

Everywhere you look, there is stunning scenery – yes, even in the city centre, mountains clad in alpine forests form the backdrop. When what you breathe is fresh air and most of what you lay your eyes on are mountains, valleys, forests, rivers and lakes (they make up 92 per cent of Andorra's land area), the hills are truly alive – you don't even need music.

With a surface area of only 468 square kilometres, Andorra is about two-thirds of Singapore's 710 sq km, but has a significantly smaller population of just some 80,000 in its seven municipalities.

The country has a parliament, but for historical reasons, is also the only one in the world with two heads of state – the Bishop of Urgell in Spain and the President of France – who are Andorra's co-princes.

Not surprisingly, more than half of Andorra's GDP is derived from tourism and trade and a big draw is obviously its natural attractions.

The highest of Andorra's 72 dramatic peaks is the Coma Pedrosa, which stands at 2,942m above sea level. The country's lowest point is at 838m, where it borders Spain at the river Riber, while average altitude is at 1,996m. One supposes that if Andorra were Singapore, it might flatten a couple of these mountains to increase its physical size, but being landlocked with no possibility of extend-

ing its borders, these mountains are safely the preserve of nature-lovers.

Blessed with a Mediterranean mountainous climate that translates into hot summers and cold winters, the latter yields plenty of snow that makes Andorra a favourite for winter sports. Grandvalira operates the largest ski resort in the Pyrenees with 210km of slopes catered to skiers of all abilities, including three World Cup slopes.

Non-skiers can also have fun, with snowmobiles, mushing (dog sledding), snow canyoning, laser combat in the snow, paragliding and helicopter rides. Little ones can occupy themselves at one of Grandvalira's four childcare centres and there are over 40 eateries and bars to pick from *après ski*. During summer, these mountains and valleys are abuzz with mountain-biking, trekking, golfing, horse-riding and fishing activities.

Since it was too early for snow during our recent visit, we headed to La Vall de Sorteny nature park for a little walk, and were blown away by the gorgeous scenery – alpine mountains, a rushing river, meadows and plains. We're told that in spring, there are flowers everywhere, making it even more glorious.

In addition, there are many valleys worth visiting for their flora, fauna and charming rural medieval dwellings, including Vall d'Incles and the vehicle-free Vall del Madriu-Perafita-Claror, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

After all that activity, head to Caldea – Europe's largest mountain spa. You won't miss its prominent glass-clad roofs and spire in Escaldes-Engordany. Its thermal water is rich in sulphur, minerals and sodium and enriched by thermal plankton. To create more exclusivity for guests, Caldea opened Inuu this year – a premium new wing that focuses on personalised treatments. In both cases, try to visit during daylight hours because that is when you can savour a



breathtaking view of the mountains while soaking in thermal water lagoons.

For history buffs, a visit to the Areny-Plandolit House museum is a must. Formerly home to one of Andorra's most influential noble families, the original building dates back to the 12th century and has been extended over the centuries. Not lived in since 1953, restorations were completed in 1985 to illustrate what the house was like in the mid 19th century, including the bourgeois lifestyle of the very wealthy.

Apart from the staggering number of objects and furniture accumulated by different family members over the centuries, the house has many fascinating rooms – our favourite being a wonderful library on whose shelves are a bibliographical treasure of some 5,000 publications, including a treatise on Canon Law printed in 1522. The Areny-Plandolit family had thousands of cattle, owned large tracts of land, the most important forges and also had businesses in agriculture and commerce, mirroring Andorra's economic boom at the time.

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