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LOVIN' A COLD CLIMATE

ANDORRA IS A TREASURE TROVE FOR THOSE WHO
WANT A UNIQUE WINTER HOLIDAY **52**

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OPENING ANDORRA'S BOX

THERE'S MUCH THAT AWAITS THE TRAVELLER IN THIS TINY PRINCIPALITY LOCATED IN THE PYRENEES

HON JING YI IN ANDORRA
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In the heart of the Grandvalira ski resort in Andorra, surrounded by snow-capped mountains that would charm even the frostiest of hearts, I thought I heard Marc whisper

“Sweetie” in my ear. This came as a surprise to me. Marc, with his dark hair and chiselled features, was effortlessly handsome, while I, wrapped in a bright pink ski jacket and orange ski pants, looked about as attractive as expired Kueh Lapis.

Marc was also our musher — the guide on our dog-sledding trip in Grandvalira — and he was in fact addressing one of the more mischievous members of his 10-dog team, a bright-eyed, brown canine named Sweetie.

But I didn't have time to feel disappointed, my attention was drawn to the exhilarating, 30-minute adventure before me. I couldn't help giggling with glee and whooping in delight, as the dogs worked merrily together to pull the sled over small slopes and bumps in the snow, their furry bottoms jiggling in sync. Leaning back, I couldn't decide whether to take as many pictures as I could of the sheer beauty that lay in the mountains before me, or to just surrender to the fact that not even the most expensive cameras can capture even a fraction of its essence.

HIDDEN PARADISE

Tucked in the heart of the Pyrenees mountains between Spain and France, and a two-hour drive from Barcelona (three hours from Toulouse), Andorra is truly a picture of perfection.

It didn't matter where we turned our heads — we were constantly mesmerised by the glittering snow in the mountains, the soft flowing rivers, the crisp air, fresh smell of trees and

spectacular sunshine. We also saw many well-preserved pre-Romanesque churches dating back to the 11th and 12th centuries — relics from Andorra's 700-year past. Andorra is also the only country in the world with two heads of state, the Bishop of La Seu d'Urgell in Spain and the President of France. It's another reminder of its long and relatively complicated past. Created under a charter in the year 988, the present principality was formed in 1278, and its official language is Catalan, although you'll hear citizens speaking Spanish, Portuguese and French as well.

One of the things I loved about Andorra was that we didn't have a lot of people to share the country with. With only about 80,000 residents, including 25,000 citizens, travelling around Andorra either by car or on foot was easy.

Perhaps because the country hasn't yet seen many Asian tourists — the bulk of its visitors come from the neighbouring countries — we were received by friendly people who were both curious about where we were from and eager to help. Many of those working in the tourism sector also speak English, although I found that in desperate times elaborate hand gestures and sound effects work perfectly well too. After all, that was how an 88-year-old farmer who spoke only Catalan explained excitedly to three journalists from Singapore how she keeps her own horses and bees, and makes her own honey and mead for sale.

A SLIPPERY SLOPE OF FUN

Skiing is something of a national hobby in Andorra: Our guide told us how students used to have free weekly ski lessons paid for by the Andorran government. Because I am not Andorran, and my skiing skills are about as good as my fashion sense in ski wear, I opted to spend my time on the bunny slopes at the relatively quiet Grau Roig sector of Grandvalira.

Grandvalira, by the way, is the largest skiable domain in the Pyrenees, and caters to skiers of all shapes, sizes and levels. Prices at Grandvalira range from 20 euros (S\$34.50) for half a day on the slopes, to 280 euros for seven ski days (within a period of 10 days). At Grandvalira, pesky five-year-olds zipped past me, skiing like they should be competing in the Sochi Winter Olympics. I ignored them. Thanks to a patient instructor, I eventually managed to navigate small slopes with a modicum of elegance after only two hours.

If skiing is much too mainstream for you, Grandvalira also offers a variety of other snow activities. Besides mushing, visitors can also go snow bike riding, snow shoe trekking, paragliding, cross-country skiing and play paintball. To get your fill of snow, huddle up in a real igloo on the slopes at the Grandvalira Igloo Hotel, situated about 2,350m up the mountains. The Igloo Hotel is made up of four igloos that can accommodate up to six people each. The hotel has a bar-restaurant, terrace and jacuzzi (no, it does not melt the snow around them).

And forget taking taxis after checking out — just ski down from the hotel, accompanied by a guide.

Possibly the second best thing invented by the human race after skiing is the apres-ski — food, drinks and spa. We chose to spend an afternoon at Inuu, a luxurious wellness centre with indoor and outdoor thermal baths, sauna, water beds, massage and beauty treatments. The baths at Inuu are supplied by thermal water from the natural sources in Escaldes-Engordany, a parish in Andorra, and are said to have healing properties. Admission begins at a steep 65 euros, but if you time your visit properly, the view of the sunset in the Pyrenees from the outdoor thermal bath alone is worth the money.

I stayed at the Hotel Plaza, a comfortable but affordable hotel run by

the Hotels Plaza Andorra chain. The five-star hotel has its own spa facilities and massage therapists, and is also conveniently located a stone's throw away from Meritxell Avenue, the main shopping thoroughfare in Andorra la Vella. Other options for accommodation include the family-friendly five-star Hotel Ski Plaza, which is within walking distance from the cable car that transports skiers to the Grandvalira slopes, as well the cow-themed Mu Hotel (get it?), which could appeal to younger visitors.

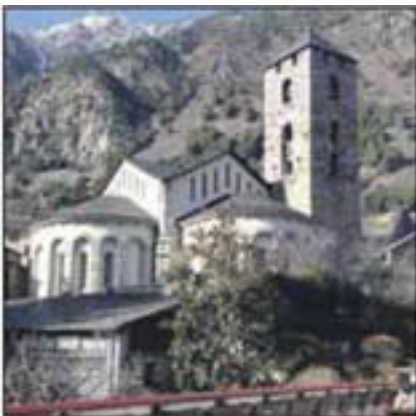
Those looking for a good bargain even after a long day on the slopes will be happy to note that Andorra is a great place for shopaholics. Though the country is not nearly as exciting as shopping havens like Paris, there are still bargains to be had, if you know what to look for. A quick walk down Meritxell Avenue revealed dozens of duty free perfumeries — although how one differed from the other remains a bit of a mystery to me. According to our guide, the French and Spanish love to take advantage

of Andorra's relatively low VAT of 4.5 per cent and its ridiculously cheap tobacco and wines. Then there's the Pyrenees Andorra, a shopping centre which houses not only popular fashion brands but also, to my delight, one of the largest cheese sections in the south of Europe. Here, I chose to spend my hard-earned cash acquiring large chunks of good quality Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.

I only wish I could have brought those darling doggies of Marc's — remember him? — home with me, too.



Snow boarders take to the slopes at Grandvalira. PHOTO: GRANDVALIRA



The Esglesia de Sant Esteve church in Andorra la Vella. PHOTO: HON JING YI



Imagine spending a full day at Inuu spa, where the healing waters work wonders.



> This trip was made possible by CheapTickets.sg



Enjoying the view of the mountains from my dog sled. PHOTO: HONJUN H

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