

SLOPE OFF FOR FAMILY FUN

Andorra proves the perfect spot for father-son bonding in the mountains

by ROBERT HARDMAN

DINNER for one on a skiing holiday – and I am feeling strangely liberated. No one is going to tick me off if I have both the chocolate tart and the cheese for pudding while brazenly scrolling through my phone at the table (a cardinal sin at home).

I am actually on a holiday for two. But after the first couple of nights, I am abandoned by my companion, who has found more entertaining company. That is because my 13-year-old son, Hal, has made all sorts of new friends here at Neilson Hotel del Clos at El Tarter in Andorra, the duty-free principality wedged between Spain and France high in the Pyrenees. And



Wonderland: Ski slopes at the El Tarter resort amid the Pyrenees in Andorra

I couldn't be happier. Previously, skiing has always been a family affair with my wife and three children.

But this time, with my daughters revising for exams, my wife has nobly offered to hold

the fort at home and suggested a week of father-and-son bonding on the slopes. Knowing Hal would not want to be stuck with his father all week, I wanted something with ready-made friendship groups and decent snow.

Andorra was the perfect solution. The main El Tarter ski area starts comfortably above 2,000 metres with surprisingly sensible prices – even during the February half-term peak week.

Hal is a confident skier, but I book him in to ski school for the three mornings to iron out any lurking bad habits and make friends. I then join one of the ski-guiding trips included in the price. Neilson employs a squad of instructor-level experts to help make the most of the 215km of marked piste and more than 120 runs linking six resorts.

The Hotel del Clos has the traditional Alpine exterior but has been fully modernised inside, with good-sized bathrooms, flat-screen TVs and proper sound-proofing. Our half-board deal includes the full gamut of breakfast options – Hal's favourite part of the day – plus afternoon tea (the hotel is full of Brits, after all).

Dinner is a large, four-course buffet affair with plenty of excellent nightly fish options – I go a whole week without red meat. Andorra may sit between France and Catalan Spain but it leans strongly towards the latter in its Mediterranean cuisine and language.

Being duty-free, a decent bottle of wine in the hotel restaurant sits around the €24 mark and you can leave your name on it until next time. As for apres-ski, there are games rooms which soak up the children and a big bar with a giant sports screen and quiz nights.

It's a six-minute walk to the gondola which takes you up to the main ski hub, including ski school, restaurants and nursery slopes. Fast six-person chairlifts then continue up to the big ski areas without too much congestion. Up on high, you find roomy blue and red runs, plus demanding black runs for the bold.

One morning, I join Neilson's 'reds and blacks' group, led by Chris, a British veteran Andorra ski instructor, who leads us to the top of the vertiginous 'Avet', the World Cup run down to Soldeu.

It's the steepest thing I think I have ever attempted, with a gradient of more than 60 per cent in places. It feels like skiing down a cliff, but I manage – just. Lunch is well-earned that day.

If Andorra has one drawback, it is a rather severe, modernist aesthetic, mean-



Bonding: Robert with his son Hal

ing a dearth of cosy, chalet-style restaurants scattered around the mountain. With a few exceptions, mountain dining involves a tray and canteen-style scoff in what looks a motorway service station.

The flipside, of course, is cheaper prices – a mountain-top burger and chips is €16, a Coke for €3.80 and €2.50 for a doughnut (less than a Starbucks back home). And that is exactly what Hal and his friends want anyway.

By the end of the week, they are all getting on so well that Hal even asks his embarrassing old Dad if I would like to join them all to explore El Canillo, a large and pretty chunk of the resort which I have not even discovered before.

On the way back, he challenges me to a race down a sporty red run – and wins comfortably. Which is all very good for that father-son bonding but rather suggests that, next time, he is going to be the one sending me to ski school.

TRAVEL FACTS

PRICES for a seven-night stay at Neilson Hotel Del Clos (El Tarter) start from £699pp which includes flights, transfers and half board for two adults sharing a double or twin room departing from Gatwick on January 11, 2026 (neilson.co.uk).

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