

All about the Sierra Nevada

December 2011

A 16-page Olive Press special supplement

Super stylee

Jon Clarke hangs out in southern Europe's top skiing resort

WHILE it's foggy in the Pyrenees and they're shivering in the Alps, I'm taking the sun near the top of Spain's second highest mountain.

It's early December and yet the Sierra Nevada still remains warm during the day. Some people are skiing in t-shirts and everyone is looking tanned.

Even better, my *elevenses* of a croissant, apple and a can of Coke come to no more than five euros... and that is at a restaurant half way up the slopes!

"Here we sell the weather, not the number of kilometres," explains David Navarro, of EIE ski school. "And mostly prices have not gone up for three years."

"On top of that you are just over an hour from the beaches of Almunecar and half an hour to the Alhambra. That is hard to beat."

What is certainly changing in the Sierra Nevada though is the dedication to move forward.

New kilometres of pistes are added every year and this season – for the first time – a fabulous new 165metre long 'half pipe' has been added for snowboarders (see page 22).

Currently there are over 100kms of pistes and by the beginning of December this year an incredible 50kms were already open, when almost all of Europe was still 'brown'. This included the celebrated Laguna valley for expert skiers (for the first time so early in the season) and even the 'Rio' run that leads right down

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Sierra Nevada *special*

From Page 3

to the resort of Pradollano, which sits at 2,100 metres. At the same latitude as Cyprus and just 30 miles from the beaches of the Costa del Sol, it is nothing short of amazing really that you can ski here from December through to May.

This is all to do with the altitude of the Sierra Nevada, which has its highest peak in Mulhacen, a staggering 3,482m above sea level.

From the top of the highest ski lift, at 3,300 metres, the views make the Mediterranean below look like a small pond, with half the coastline of Morocco clearly in view.

It is an amazing place, although it can be a little nippy up there with the wind whistling past, so make sure to bring a coat and jumper. From here, competent skiers are spoilt with the amaz-

It has also, rightfully, got a reputation as being a resort for fun

ing runs of the Laguna de las Yeguas area, including the celebrated Olympic run,

which is full of twists and turns. Here, you can sometimes find yourself skiing alone midweek for long periods and the sheer nature and landscape are spectacular.

It is incredibly easy to have a day or two's skiing in Europe's most southerly skiing resort. You head up to the resort of Pradollano, 20 minutes above Granada, where you can park easily in the under-

Suited and booted



He has been running ski shops for nearly five decades both here and in Australia. So Alfonso Sanchez del Rio, 70, knows a thing or two about hard work and good personal attention. For this reason, his family business Rio Sport, has a large number of attentive staff at its three skiing shops in Pradollano, which are branded with huge international sports company Intersport. These include his sons Philip, 34 and Alexander, 32, who have both skied professionally. "We either do things properly or we don't touch it," explains the technician, who grew up in Leon before moving to Australia. Moreover the company is one of only 24 places in the world where you can get Strolz, the top quality, personalised make of ski boots, from Austria. "They are perfect for any foot," he explains.

The height of fashion



FUN FOR ALL THE FAMILY: Pradollano and (right) fooling with Mickey



ground carpark right below the main square for around 20 euros for the day. Staying longer - or on a budget - take the turning left, marked 'albergues' just before you arrive and head uphill through a pine forest, before taking a right and dipping down into the resort.

Drive down this long windy road for half a kilometre, keeping your eyes peeled for a free space, but beware 'gruas' are out in force and you will be towed away if you park badly. From here, you are a five or 10 minute walk down to the centre of the resort, where you will find dozens of places to rent skis and buy your 'forfait' (or ski pass) from a machine using your credit card. It is between 37 and 44 euros for a day's skiing, but you can get a half day for just over 30 euros kicking off at 1pm and children get decent discounts.

It certainly pays to pick your days with Christmas and Semana Santa seeing the resort rammed, with sometimes big queues for the ski lifts. Then there is *Semana Blanca* (literally 'white week') - or half term at the end of February - when school children can learn how to ski, while bank holidays can also be very busy and getting up to the resort can be slow. That said, problems can be missed by arriving by 8.30am or by waiting till midday. While a modern resort, Pradollano itself is a pleasant place to simply take in the air or a spot of lunch, and there is a fair amount for children to do, with entertainers and Disney figures wandering around.

The adage claims it's easy to have a morning's skiing then an afternoon on the beach

The resort really started to evolve quickly from 1995 when the World Skiing Championship was scheduled to be held there (it actually took place the following year due to poor snow). "Since then the infrastructure changes were huge and it is now a big resort," explains Jose Maria Rada Calvo, or 'Chechu', 56, who has been running his ski school and rental business Snowpeople in the resort for over 30 years. "When the weather is favourable, and that is most of the time, this is a fantastic place to be skiing. "After the recent heavy snowfall there is at least a metre of snow on the higher slopes and plenty even

at the resort." Giles Birch, who runs the British Ski Centre, estimates that Pradollano has one of the longest seasons in Europe, opening at the start of December and often going through to mid May. "There have even been snowfalls in June and when the snow and weather are favourable, which is more often than not, the openness of the ski terrain provides some of the most exhilarating off piste skiing to be found anywhere." He continues: "Off piste skiing here has made a great name for itself with easily accessible zones all over the terrain, very little avalanche risk and wide open expanses for all to enjoy." And then there is the famous adage that it is easy to have a morning's snowploughing in the Sierra Nevada followed by

an afternoon on the beach. Two years ago, local Granada newspaper *Ideal* decided to try it out the theory, picking a sunny day in May and a couple of foreign students based in Granada. Picked up in Granada at 8am they were skiing on the slopes from 9am to 1pm, before taking the 75 minute drive down to the Costa Tropical resort of Salobrena. "It worked perfectly and by 3pm they were settled in eating a paella on the beach," explains Santiago Sevilla, from Cetursa, the company that runs the resort. "Then by 9pm, not content to call it a day, they were having a tapas crawl around the Albaicin of Granadajust to add the icing on the cake," he adds.



FAR FROM THE CROWDS: The Laguna area can be nearly empty on some days



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The 'glue' of the slopes

THERE are few people that work as hard as Jose Maria 'Chechu' Rada Calvo.

The boss of Snowpeople - which has been running for nearly four decades -

doesn't just order around his team of 20-plus employees, who work in his supermarket, burger bar and skiing shops. Chechu, 56, who moved to Granada from La Rioja in the 1970s, can actually often be

found behind the supermarket till, finding the right size ski boot... and even flipping burgers! "Everyone has got to put in that extra effort these days," he explains, after a lunch-

hour session working in the Snowpeople burger bar. And don't think for a second that when the season ends in May he puts his feet up.

He can even sometimes be found flipping burgers

On the contrary, he heads off to his successful restaurant/bar in Almerimar marina, where he works the entire summer season.

A popular chap, who is very much the 'glue' of the resort, his company is certainly a clever operation in branding having no less than four outfits sitting slap bang on the main square.

But there is no doubt that the company also offers quality, with Chechu's lieutenant Jesus Arenas guaranteeing that the ski shops run efficiently and well.

"We take particular care of children and families and that is where we concentrate our



HARD WORKER: Businessman 'Chechu' Rada Calvo

abilities," explains Chechu. The company is also taking particular care of Olive Press readers by offering a 10 euro coupon off ski hire or ski les-

sons, via its advert in this supplement. For more information on prices visit www.snowpeople.es for more info



EXPERT: Instructor Giles Birch and (right) a lesson

Ski teacher Giles Birch still loves the Sierra Nevada two decades on

IT has been over two decades since Giles Birch arrived in the Sierra Nevada as a ski rep.

Now knowing every inch of piste like the back of his hand, he also has a three-year-old daughter learning how to slip and slide with grace.

Exactly a decade ago he set up the British Ski Centre with his partner Jonathan, another skiing instructor.

"But what makes me really sad is that so few people have heard of the Sierra Nevada outside of Spain," explains Giles, who lives on the edge of Granada with his Portuguese wife. "It is quite unfair as there is great snow for long periods of time and there is almost always amazing weather."

"It is easily as good as any international ski resort and the range of skiing and schools is as good as anywhere else."

The best thing for him though, is the length the season, which is far longer than any other Spanish resort.

"We start in late November and stay open until early May while other resorts don't open until mid December and end their season in March."

This is partly due to the resort's altitude and the quality of the snow which is constantly worked on during the night.

"That's why you'll never see slush even in the latter part of the season," he adds.

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WHEN BOOKING LESSONS

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It is certainly fair to say there have been no half measures in the Sierra Nevada this season.

Not just content with its exciting new Sulayr snowboard park, the resort has now built a brand new half pipe for snowboarders. One of the largest in Europe – and the biggest in Spain – the 165m-long installation has taken four months to build.

Due to open this month, the half pipe (which is 14 metres wide and up to six metres deep) cost just under a million euros to build.

"It is an excellent addition to the resort," said spokesman Santiago Sevilla. "We are very excited about it and just waiting for a big snowfall for it to be opened."

The half pipe is a great addition to the Sulayr park for snowboarders and freestyle skiers.

The park is designed to allow skiers to practise jumps and acrobatics on three different natural and artificial modules without running into each other.

This revamped area in Loma de Dilar, previously used by cross-country skiers, is very much geared towards a younger clientele.

It boasts new features including wifi for internet use.

The Sierra Nevada is fast becoming one of Europe's top resorts for snowboarding

No half measure

ers, a massive sound system and a completely fresh look which stands out from the rest of the resort.

Perhaps, most importantly, there will be a safety team on hand to help anyone who gets injured.

"The new additions are revolutionising the way the resort treats snowboarders," says French woman Melanie Benarfa,

band set up the first snowboard school in Spain with

who runs the Surfin snowboard centre, with husband Gaston Marinoni.

We are starting to see some of the world's most famous riders visiting us here

friends 22 years ago - estimates that the resort now has more snowboarders than skiers.

"I think the change happened as long as five or six years ago and I wouldn't be surprised if today there were almost double the number of snowboarders."

Her shop has done well to cash in on the massive growth in the discipline, which is naturally nearer to surfing and skateboarding than skiing. Certainly in its style and attitude.

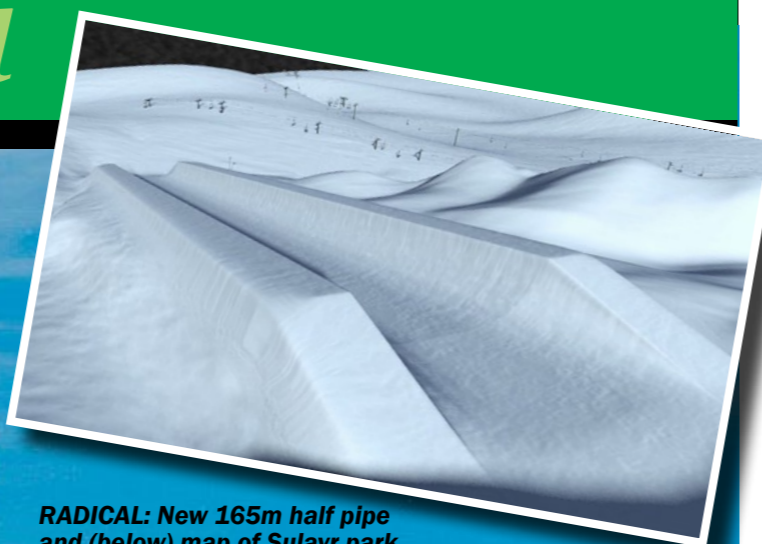
The Surfin centre is also

one of only a handful of places in Spain to be chosen as an official Burton Learn to Ride centre.

Incorpo-

rating all of the US labels' flags, it is able to offer classes for women, children, as well as special 'freestyle' classes.

"It is a great place for kids to learn how to snowboard," explains Melanie. "And for adults, well, the Sierra Nevada is easily one of the best places for nightlife in Europe."



RADICAL: New 165m half pipe and (below) map of Sulayr park



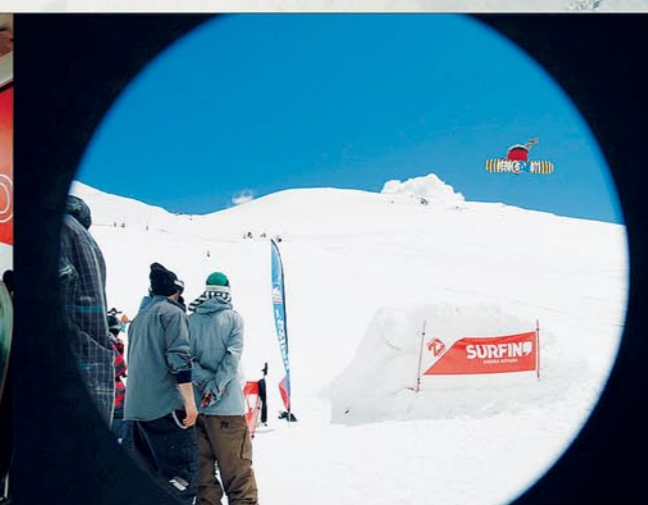
SERVICE: At Surfin shop you will get more than just a tasty range of clothes

SIERRA NEVADA FACTS & FIGURES

- d Contains the highest point of continental Spain, Mulhacen, at 3478m
- d The Sierra Nevada observatory is located on the northern slopes at 2800m
- d The Sierra formed 65 to 1.8 million years ago from the collision of the African and Eurasian plates
- d There are more than 100km of slopes
- d Operates 22 ski lifts
- d Has Spain's largest difference in altitude - 1,200m
- d You can see Africa from the slopes
- d There are a total of 115 green, blue, red and black slopes
- d The Mirlo Blanco amusement park has an ecological ice-rink and 130m toboggan runs
- d The newly installed Sulayr Superpark has modules for jumps and acrobatics
- d It now hosts the Alpine Skiing speed races
- d On Saturdays you can go night skiing on the El Rio piste
- d The historic city of Granada is located at the foothills only 35 miles away
- d In summer, visitors can go horse riding and cycling
- d It hosts the Por Todo Lo Alto music festival

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Holiday heaven

IT is the perfect place to take the whole family for a winter break. With an abundance of sun, and excellent snow for most of the season, the Sierra Nevada has plenty to offer. Outdoor dining, snowball fights, tobogganing and clowns, there is always something happening.



Off-piste adventure

Take a journey into the true Andalucian outback

LOOKING for a trip into the wilderness? Something a little different?

Well, why not take a two-day trek, off-piste and into the outback with one of a handful of specialist companies based in the Sierra Nevada.

Telemark, in particular, has a range of trips from hard-core uphill climbing for mountaineers to a half day soft snow walking trip with snow rackets. But best of all is a day cross-country adventure that takes participants back in time through the Genil valley. "It is a real, fun adventure," explains Luis Casanova, who helped to set up the ski school over two decades ago. "You get to see how the mountains were a few centuries ago."

"We try to put an emphasis on ecology and nature and it is impressive to see the typically old farmhouses in

the area."

Costing just 100 euros per person, the day out includes transport and lunch, and takes participants from deep off piste snow down to a green valley. "Best of all, a team of mules ends up helping to bring your stuff back to Pradollano," adds Luis. Another company, Snowpeople, also organises off piste mountain adventures.

One of the best sees participants heading off up the Barranco de San Juan and ending up in Lanjaron, in the Alpujarras, on the other side, from where you will be brought back by car.

"You are likely to see mountain goats, foxes and plenty of rare birds on the journey," explains Jose Maria 'Chechu' Rada Calvo. "It is a real adventure and something you will not forget for a long time."



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Chugging into the present day

THE only way to get to the top of the slope was to walk... or take a friendly donkey! Indeed, until the first two ski lifts (Borreguiles and Parador) were built in 1969, this was the preferred route. The resort actually dates back to 1912 when Spain's oldest ski club, the Sierra Nevada Society, was founded. However, it was not until the 1920s - with the

Long gone are the days when a rickety old bus took a couple of hours to reach the snowline from Granada

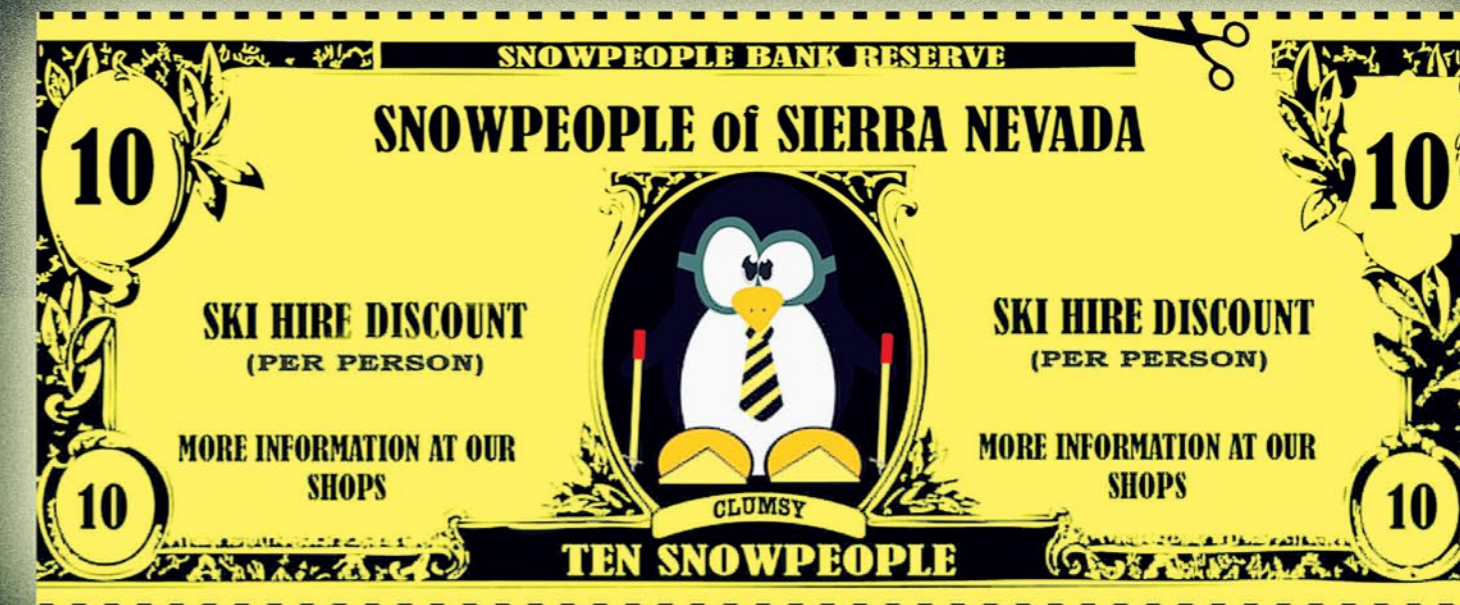
modernisation of Granada's roads - that the Sierra Nevada started to become known. By the 1950s a bus (top left) used to chug its way up to the slopes, while cars would turn up in their dozens at weekends. Visitor numbers slowly grew from then and, in 1964, Cetursa, a business dedicated to reserving ski tick-

ets, was founded. But it wasn't until 1969 that it got its first ski lifts and not until the 1996 World Ski Championships that it properly arrived on the world scene as a skiing hotspot. It is yet to look back!



Memory lane

HE first arrived on the slopes when his father got a job running the 'alberge' one of just three buildings in the Sierra Nevada in 1961. Living in the hostel - way before the advent of ski lifts - it was an exciting upbringing for youngster Jose Carlos Villanueva (pictured here and as an eight year old boy). "I actually had my first communion on the slopes wearing ski boots and a jersey. I was the only one in Spain," he explains pointing at a photo of him as a child, with his sister. Living there for five years, it was no surprise that he always had a strong urge to return and at the age of 15 he became a ski teacher. Now, appropriately - after 38 years teaching and an incredible 50,000 students - Jose Carlos is running the charming bar Bodega Casablanca.



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WHERE TO STAY

Chic and cheerful



It is hard to describe Pradollano as an authentic mountain village. But, with a metre of snow on the ground and the sun finally out, it certainly has its charms.

In terms of places to stay there are plenty of modern hotels, although few beat the stylish Sol y Nieve in the heart of the town. Well, there are actually two Melia's in the town, to be exact, with the modern recently opened Sol y Nieve and the more traditional Sierra Nevada nearby.

There are a number of other luxury places to stay like the Lodge and the Vincci hotel, but they are not cheap. One of the most stylish – and popular – options, according to Trip Advisor is Hotel Kenia

Nevada, which is well located near the centre of town and open all year.

Run by the friendly Don Pedro, it is clean, well run and serves up an excellent breakfast. It also has gym and plenty of communal areas.

For those looking for a budget option the Hotel Nevasur a short five-minute walk uphill from the main square is perfectly adequate.

Just 40 euros a night for a single room, it is warm and perfectly comfortable with good WiFi access.

Another even better value option just outside the resort is the Hostal Los Puentes, which also has an excellent restaurant with superb home-cooked food.

Open now for nearly 40 years, the owners are friendly and



COMFORT: At Kenia and (top) Puentes and Nevasur

make a big effort to make you feel at home. You can park for free and get up early to drive into the resort. Close by you might consid-

er Restaurant Camping El Purche, which sits in a privileged spot in its own valley with a distinct Little House on the Prairie feel about it.



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WHERE TO EAT

THE Sierra Nevada has a surprisingly good range of places to eat.

For tradition though, Alpino takes some beating. This well established stalwart of the slopes is a joy to discover, sitting in a basement below a couple of buzzing tapas bars. Wonderfully decorated and seductively lit, it has classic Italian written all over it from the signed photo of Sophia Loren, to the huge range of cheeses and cold meats. It really does feel special dining here and the fact that it has a good range of Italian wines, including Barolos and Brunello de Montalcinos, is a huge boon.

Another brilliant Italian restaurant is Ci vediamo, where chef/owner Stevie Silva has picked up a lot of tips from his close friend Sergio, who has worked at a string of Michelin-starred restaurants, including Cafe de Paris in Malaga and San Celoni in Madrid. Also a professional snowboarder he has a great range of light bites, and a brand new pizza oven. There are fabulous mini 'gambas pil pil' hamburgers and a lot of the classics such as raclette and

The height of quality

TEAM EFFORT: Luis and Mayte from Campo Base

provolone with tomato. Bodegas Mazon is another great place for warm, traditional fare. With a roaring fire at the door and a series of dining areas, it is no surprise that it is often nearly full and it can serve up to 200 people at peak time. Best of all are its lovely old fashioned photos of the resort. One of the most exciting new additions is Pourquoi Pas? Well not exactly brand new, but under new ownership and a completely new style with Moroccan Salah Eddine Bentaieb at the helm. He has a superb creative eye

and an excellent grasp of price versus quality. Eat outside on the sunny terrace or inside in the charming restaurant, which has an original Spanish/Moroccan style, for the first time on the slopes, he claims. I certainly enjoyed his fabulous shoulder of lamb, with walnuts, raisons and a 'Mozarabic' sauce.

Another exciting new place is Campo Base, set up by a talented energetic couple Maite and Luis, who have a well known restaurant in Cabo de Gata in Almeria. A sophisticated place with great tables overlooking the slopes, the couple have other restaurants in Leon, a catering business in Madrid and a brand that claims to

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Sierra Nevada *special*

have nearly 100 different varieties of croquettes. The food was excellent and the addition of Guinness and other international beers was a bonus. If meat is more what you are after then look no further than La Carreta, which is next door to the Mont Blanc hotel. An exceedingly warm, cheery place, its owner Paco is a charming and attentive host, serving up an excellent mix of meat-laden dishes. Everything is cooked on the grill and there is a nice range of cheeses and hams to start with, not to mention a good wine list.

Other places worth checking out are La Muralla, which does a nice braised boar in

ba or Irish coffee. For fish La Lonja was set up by Antonio Lopez Huevos no less than 38 years ago, when the resort was in its infancy, the 'marisqueria' has simply gone from strength to strength. Next door you certainly should not miss Bodega Casablanca, run by Jose Carlos Villanueva, who grew up on the slopes, with his father opening one of the first hostals in the 1960s. He, of course, knows a fair bit about catering and hostelry, and the bar has a great range of photos and memorabilia and is a great place for tapas or simply to hang out.

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GUINNESS

It is a sophisticated place with great tables overlooking the slopes

Ci Vediamo

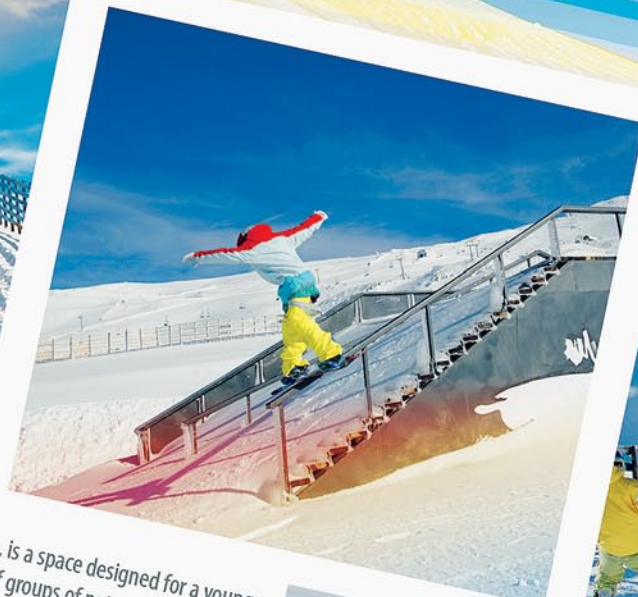
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WHERE ICARUS'S DREAM CAN BE FOUND

The great new feature at Sierra Nevada for 2010/11 is the inauguration of the Sulayr Superpark, the outstanding snowboard and freestyle stage that a prestige resort requires.



Sulayr, between the Peñon del Dilar and Loma de Dilar pistes, is a space designed for a young public and for lovers of freestyle skiing, with the installation of groups of natural and artificial modules for jumps and acrobatics, for both beginners and experts, for national and international ski-cross and snowboard-cross competitions.

The new terrain park is larger than the old Borreguiles, with greater distance between the fixtures allowing more jumps to be taken in with a single descent... and so is much more exciting. The Monachil and Loma de Dilar chairlifts are the most important lifts to access this area, which now has its own image and many new attractive features making it a cool spot in the world of snow.



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