

# All about Sierra Nevada

11

## On top of the world

One of Europe's highest resorts, for the first time ever there are more than 100kms of runs in the Sierra Nevada, writes Jon Clarke



**D**ESPITE being the worst festive period for well over a decade, the Sierra Nevada is often praised for its clement weather.

The reason for this being its location at the foot of Europe (it is at the same latitude as Cyprus) and just 30 miles from the shimmering Med.

The most southerly skiing resort on the continent – not to mention one of the highest – its unique location is often said to allow a morning's snowplowing followed by an afternoon on the beach.

But it is a rarely tested claim.

This is why Granada newspaper *Ideal*, in conjunction with the resort of Pradollano, decided to try out the theory last year. Picking a sunny day in May, a couple of foreign students based in Granada were ushered up to the slopes where they skied 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, also known as Solynieve (or 'sun and snow').

"By 9pm they were having a tapas crawl around the Albaicin of Granada just to add the icing on the cake," he adds.

It is not necessarily everyone's idea of a relaxing day's skiing, but it is entirely possible therefore. As is staying, for example, in Granada city, or nearby Monachil, and heading up to the slopes on the early bus, or in your car.

For centuries the only people to labour up the Sierra Nevada's peaks were the *neveros*,

Turn to Page 12

## Avoid injury

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# A winter's welcome

From Page 11

or icemen, who carried blocks of ice down from the high mountains to sell in the city.

Today, though, the mountains draw ever increasing numbers of visitors for a huge range of outdoor activities, principally skiing at this time of year.

It is little surprise with the resort now counting 115 pistes covering 102 kilometres, with a good range of levels and over 20 ski lifts.

"It has grown a lot over recent years and is now as modern as any other in Europe," explains Jose Maria Rada Calvo, or 'Chechu', 54, who has been running his ski school and rental business Snowpeople in the resort for over 30 years.

"In 1973 there were only about 20 buildings here, today it is a big resort that can accommodate around 20,000 people a night." It certainly needs to at cer-



**DRUMMING UP ENTHUSIASM:** Despite the weather the clowns are out making a noise on the streets of Pradollano

tain times of the year when the place gets rammed, with big queues building up for the ski lifts and even to drive up to the resort. The busiest times are at Christmas and at Semana

Santa as well as half term, or *Semana Blanca* (literally 'white week') at the end of February, appropriately so that school children can learn how to ski. 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).



**SCENIC:** The Virgin of the snows monument

"Since then the infrastructure changes were huge and it is now a big resort," explains Chechu.

"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 this January there is at least a metre of snow on the higher slopes and plenty in the town."

Giles Birch, who has run the British Ski Centre in the Sierra Nevada for well over a decade, 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

**Sierra Nevada has one of the longest seasons in Europe, with snow sometimes falling in June**

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# Sierra Nevada special



**FRESH DUMP:** The damp Christmas has at least brought lots of snow to the Sierra Nevada - here a scene from last week - while (above) one of the 20 ski lifts looking down towards Granada and (bottom) there is loads of family fun to be had on the slopes, even for those who don't fancy skiing

over the terrain, very little avalanche risk and wide open expanses for all to enjoy." If you want to get away

from the madding crowd on the pistes, you can always try back country skiing. With synthetic skins attached to the base of the

skis, you can ascend slopes away from the masses. One of the best established companies Snowpeople offers a number of interesting routes, such as a two day trip over the top of Valeta down to Lanjaron in the Alpujarras. (see article on page 18)



**AS DRIVEN AS SNOW:** Entrepreneur Chechu has run business Snowpeople since 1973

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**Jason Heppenstall probes his "inner skier" while his four-year-old daughter has her first skiing lesson**

**H**AVE to confess from the outset that I cannot ski. The only time I have tried it was on a dry slope in Birmingham and I came home with friction burns on most of the protruding parts of my body. I also remember the agony of having cramp in my foot – which was heavily encased in a moulded plastic ski boot and thus impossible to flex or rub. So why on earth am I sending my four-year-old-daughter to ski school?

The unselfish reason is I want her to develop a skill that will keep her fit and that she can enjoy for years to come. The selfish reason is that I want an excuse to go to the ski resorts at weekends. Yes, the sad truth is, I am a snowboarder.

Now, some of you may think that skiing and snowboarding are much the same thing. True, both activities are practised on snow and they both involve shelling out large sums of money that can never be justified. Both can be as fast or slow as you like and can involve jumping in the air and uttering silly jargon. But for me, I relish snowboarding for its grace of movement.

The late philosopher and Zen practitioner Alan Watts re-described surfing along the lines of the ultimate

## It's all child's play



**KEEP MUM:** Children pick up skiing far quicker by simply taking to the snow-covered slopes and learning for themselves

"being in the now" and I bet he would have ascribed snowboarding to the same category. For the purposes of simplicity I will include snowboarding under the same category as skiing for the rest of this article – given the health benefits of both are largely the same. Those said health benefits are obvious. All that fresh air and movement for hours at a time has got to be good for you. My computer screen spews

out over 1.2 million results when the keywords 'health' and 'benefit' and 'skiing' are entered.

A random look at one ([www.hanbag.com](http://www.hanbag.com)) says: "Pure zingy mountain air contains lower levels of oxygen than we are generally used to... the body becomes more efficient in its circulation and oxygen delivery... which is great for sluggish desk-bound types!" Quite. It goes on to talk about stress busting and facing

frustrations. One person who knows a thing or two about this is Lan-jaron resident Jon Phoenix. Since he quit drumming with some of the major rock acts of the 1970s he has taught about a quarter of a million people to ski "Without a single injury," he says.

In his time he has been a British freestyle ski champion and has coached the national team. He even test rode the very first prototype snowboard for sport inventor Jake Burton on an icy slope in Scotland.

This being Las Alpujarras, of course, Jon's ski tuition does not just cater for the physical act of pointing your skis downhill and assuming the crouch position. Being a desk-bound type, I asked Jon to take time off from the slopes and come into the office and explain the concept of "Inner Skiing" to me.

"It is a way of overcoming your fears through techniques developed on the ski slope," he explains.

He goes on to cite examples of people who have overcome difficult mental obstacles and negative self-impressions, through the act of skiing. As I jot all this down he is keen to point out he teaches "normal" skiing as well. Before he

leaves I ask him for any tips regarding teaching my daughter to ski. "Just let her play," he insists. "Kids pick it up much easier than adults and they do not relate well to verbal instructions about poise or balance."

With Jon's advice in mind I find myself in a cable car a

few days later, accompanied by my nervous daughter who is sporting a pair of red boots and skis. My fear is that she will reject it completely after only a minute – which will be the most expensive minute's entertainment in our family history. We meet up with Jo, the instructor at the bottom of the nursery slope and Jasmine is duly handed over to Karina, the second Norwegian to appear in this article. I am instructed to come back in an hour and we swap phone

numbers. I plod off and nervously await the expected phone call ("She is bawling her eyes out – come and get her"), but it never arrives.

I wander up to the slopes again and am astonished to see Jasmine skiing confidently down the slope holding onto Karina's ski poles. At the end of the lesson Jasmine is elated. "Can I have my own skis Dad? Blue ones? And boots? And a pink suit?" I should have seen that one coming...



**GET YOUR SKIS OUT:** Boarding chair lift

**I plod off for a coffee and nervously await the expected phone call**

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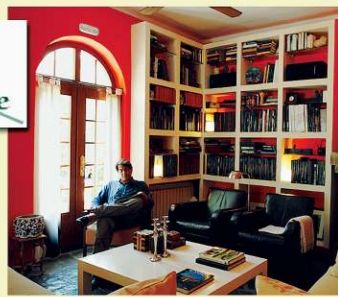
# A century of slipping and sliding

**T**HE Sierra Nevada's history as a ski resort dates back to the early 20th century. For Spain's third oldest ski club, the Sierra Nevada Society, was founded in 1912. However, it was not until the 1920s – with the modernisation of Granada's roads – that the Sierra Nevada started to increase in popularity. Visitor numbers gradually grew and, in 1964, Cetursa, a business dedicated to reserving ski tickets, was founded. This proved to be the catalyst behind the transformation of the resort to its present-day splendour. And it was the hosting of the 1996 World Ski Championships which signalled the slopes' arrival on the world scene as a skiing hotspot. It is yet to look back!



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## OPINION

A UNITED Nations report last year stated bluntly that the world's ski resorts faced a bleak future in the face of global warming. Using evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which uses data from 2,000 scientists around the world, the report predicted an end to downhill skiing at many top resorts as the average European snowline recedes to above 5,000 feet (1,500 metres) by 2030. There is certainly plenty of anecdotal evidence to back the report's findings. Many European resorts in the Alps and the Pyrenees are suffering from lack of snow at a time of year when they would normally have had several layers of the slippery white stuff. Closer to home in the Sierra Nevada there was barely enough snow to have a snowball fight last Christmas. Then again, on a recent visit I witnessed a group of frustrated skiers arrange an impromptu football match in the blazing sunshine of the main plaza. And a woman who normally hires out plastic sledges was refusing to do so, citing angry parents demanding their money back when they discovered the toboggan run was more of a mud slide. This stands in contrast to my first visit to the resort ten years ago when the problem was too much snow. Then, the snow cover was so deep you could drag your feet in it from the chair lifts and everyone was praying for

## Is the skiing industry facing meltdown? asks Jason H

those damned snowflakes to stop just two snapshots in time and hope but some fear these types of climate harbingers of worse to come. Across Europe, forward-thinking diversification. Alpine regions are scrambling to tempt potential tourists, fearful of unemployed resort workers. Ski insurance companies are said to be the risk of calamitous avalanches. Other resorts (including Sierra Nevada) in artificial snow making machines at least guarantee the tourists are monster gobblers of energy installed in Catalonian ski fields the same amount of power as a





**METAMORPHOSIS:**  
There have been lots  
of changes since 1912.  
From snowboarding  
to traditional skiing  
lessons (left), while  
(above and far right)  
the resort in the 1950s  
and here, the resort  
today. Below ski lifts  
past and present



## Industry down by 2030, Leppenstein?

...up falling. Of course, these are  
hardly a scientific comparison,  
climatic extremes are the

resorts are investing in

to promote the summer season  
...of the spectre of legions  
...Swiss banks are reportedly  
...ski development projects and  
...to be following suit as  
...es increases.

(evada) are investing heavily  
...es. These shiny yellow snow  
...possibility of skiing but they  
...and water. Snow machines  
...for example, consume  
...town of 15,000 people.

Environmental group Ecologistas en Accion points out the  
irony of this vicious circle: more energy use leads to more  
global warming which leads to less snow.

The peculiar end result is glittering white pistes of chemical  
snow (which, do not forget, will eventually melt and enter the  
lower water systems) running like ribbons around the  
mountain side.

Not everyone is convinced. Some point to the above average  
levels of snow in North America - and indeed this Christmas  
in the Sierra Nevada - and this is all just scaremongering -  
deliberately picking out discrete examples of adverse weather  
conditions to back up a 'belief' in climate change.

One skier speaking to *The Olive Press* this week said: "Every  
three or four years there is a panic. Nobody thinks it will snow  
again, but it always does."

Perhaps so, but does this excuse us from entertaining the  
theory the world's icy patches are the proverbial canary in  
the coal mine? No right thinking person could argue that the  
worst effects of global warming will be the loss of our privilege  
to slide down a snowy slope for enjoyment. The melting of  
the icecaps, while well documented, is not observed by the  
majority of us who have never and will never travel to those  
regions. Perhaps we are now witnessing first hand the next  
stage of climate change on our doorstep. That is something to  
bear in mind as you swish down the pistes this season.



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## Sierra Nevada

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"You are likely to see mountain goats, foxes and plenty of rare birds on the journey," explains Jose Maria 'Chechu' Rada Calvo, of company Snowpeople.

"It is a real adventure and something you will not forget for a long time."

It is one of a number of routes and excursions being offered by the company, which runs a skiing school, as well as a couple of shops, a burger bar and a supermarket, which even sells Krug champagne

at 170 euros a throw. Set up in 1973 by Chechu from La Rioja, it now prides itself on its attention to detail and its particular slant towards families.

Snowpeople is offering Olive Press readers a 20 per cent discount on all ski hire

and other rental equipment, plus a ten per cent discount on any purchases.

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## WHERE TO STAY

### From traditional to chic and stylish

IT is hard to describe Pradolano 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 nothing beats the stylish Sol Melia in the heart of the town.

Well, there are actually two Melias to be exact, with the modern recently-opened Sol y Nieve and the more traditional Sierra Nevada nearby.

The former has all the style and frills you would expect from a top-of-the-range four star hotel, while the latter is cosier and more chalet-like in style.

Nearby you will also find the Citymar Hotel group, which has a number of hotels in the resort.

They include Hotel Mont Blanc, Hotel Santa Cruz and the cheaper option Hostal El Ciervo, which is well located and of a good standard.

Another altogether different option is to stay in beautiful countryside just outside the town, on the celebrated 'picturesque route' down to Granada, via the charming town of Monachil.

It is here, just ten minutes from the slopes, that you will find Restaurant Camping El Purche.

A privileged spot in its own valley it has a *Little House on the Prairie* feel about it. With excellent roaring fires, its restaurant is charming and serves up a superb selection of local dishes.

Go for either a room in the hostel or one of the roomy wooden chalets that sit on the other side of the road.

Nearby, for those looking for the best value budget option, look no further than the friendly Hostal Los Puentes just ten minutes out of the resort on the

**CHARM:**  
*Hotel el Purche, Citymar's Hotel Santa Cruz and (below) Sol Melia's Sol y Nieve*



main road back to Granada. Looking for something really stylish? Then head a little further down slope to the ancient town of Monachil itself, where you will find the chic retreat La Almuna del Valle.

Owned by a pair of urbane Madrilenos, the hotel is a mix of modern and ancient, with slate roofs and thick walls on one hand, but hip stylish paintings and decor.

Luxuriate within its grounds, sit in its well appointed library and eat in its delicious guests-only restaurant.

Then, when the mood takes you, get in your car and take a ride up to the slopes for a bit of snowploughing action.

## WHERE TO EAT

### Flying high on the food front

UNSURPRISINGLY for a skiing resort, the emphasis in the Sierra Nevada is not fine dining.

In fact, there are a large amount of very average run-of-the-mill cafeteria-style places to eat.

But that said, once you start exploring there are actually quite a few excellent places to dine.

Without a doubt, the pick of the resort has got to be La Lonja, a fabulous fish restaurant specialising in seafood.

Set up by livewire 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.

There is a tremendous spread of seafood from around the country; from Galicia, from Cadiz and from the Mediterranean.

The walls are surrounded in photos of the famous footballers and bullfighters who have eaten here, and surprise, surprise, there was a celebrated matador having lunch with his family upstairs.

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 cherry sauce, and in particular Mutante, whose chef Jose Ignacio Pinto knocks out a great mix of dishes.

Part of the same group that owns the Huer-ta Juan Ranas in Granada, during the day

the food is simple, basic dishes, such as chicken wings and a superb beef taco with mozzarella cheese and spicy to-mato chutney.

By night the place becomes very sophisticated, with well sourced "super luxury" products including Kobe beef from Japan and the equally good beef from Valle de Esla.

A great cafeteria for somewhere to warm your cockles with a typical steaming hot gluvine, lumumba or Irish coffee is Vertical on Plaza Andalucia.

Finally, another interesting place to have a cocktail is the Crescendo bar, a hyper-cool hangout that has not changed since the 1970s.

As well as various newspaper articles hanging on the wall from when the owners used to run a bar in Puerto Banus there are photographs of Sean Connery on various visits.

**TASTY:** Paco at La Carreta (top), while (here) Antonio at La Lonja





# Sun and snow at Sierra Nevada



Andalucía

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