

# From canyoning to agritourism and cultural tourism. The diversification in lower or mid-altitude ski resort, French Alps

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The diversification of tourist activities in small, low altitude resorts has long been a major concern for these locations, especially since the 1990s (Messador, 1996; Bourdeau, 1993; Helion, 1999; Guérin, 1989) and still now (Tuppen & Langenbach, 2015; Marcelpoil, 2011; Jorand, Mao, Biard, Obin, & Suchet, 2009; Gauchon, 2012). Compared with their high-altitude counterparts, many such resorts might be considered as intrinsically more diversified, benefiting from both a summer and winter season. However, the risk of inadequate or irregular snow-cover in winter has proved a limiting factor on development. In contrast the inherent beauty of the natural landscape and the attractiveness of traditional villages, surrounded by forests and pastures, provide a setting particularly conducive for outdoor recreational leisure activities. Taking account of these factors, many resorts have attempted to reinforce their family image, catering for a wide age-range and a variety of interests of which many do not have a sporting character. Activities and facilities for young people (such as safe ski-lifts) have become especially popular. The result is a proliferation of activities, especially in summer but also during the winter.

As in most resorts, upgrading of skiing facilities is commonplace (renewal of chair-lifts, the introduction of snow-making equipment even in modestly-sized resorts), as are attempts to appeal to a wider range of winter-sports enthusiasts (based around cross-country skiing, snow-shoe trekking and tobogganing, for example). Skiing areas reserved for young children and families have multiplied. In terms of widening the appeal of such resorts, opportunities for other outdoor activities are also proposed, ranging from signposted walks to visits to local monuments or sites of interest. Visitors are encouraged to discover local traditions and folklore and holiday periods such as Christmas and the New Year are strongly promoted as festive seasons.

The summer is characterised by a proliferation of outdoor pursuits, whether of a sporting character (mountain biking, paragliding, rock-climbing, tennis, golf, canoeing, fitness classes) or of a more recreational nature (hiking, horse and pony riding). In addition, a range of farm visits, cultural excursions, thematic courses and visits to improve understanding of the local environment are frequently on offer, as well as a series of daytime and evening fetes and entertainments. For these resorts and their surrounding areas, the mountain can be seen as a reservoir of under exploited resources, with a personal character, where history and culture constitute a potential competitive advantage, compared with high altitude resorts, (François, 2007). Similarly, resorts have increasingly become important outlets for a part of local agricultural production (wines, fruits, cheeses, jams and honey), which can further add to their tourist appeal. These mountain environments also represent a particular challenge for the sustainable development of sites (Clarimont & Vlès, 2007; Suchet and Jorand, 2008). Considerable research is currently underway into these issues (François, 2007, 2009; Jorand and al., 2009).

Resorts at this altitude have also become more diversified through the development of their residential function, particularly where they are located in relative proximity to urban centres such as Grenoble, Chambéry or Annecy (or even centres further afield such as Lyon, Geneva and Nice). Two forms of residential growth are evident, the first induced by retirement migration and the second related to the possibility of benefiting from an adjacent and large labour market while living in rural surroundings. The small resort of Lans-en-Vercors which is a short distance from Grenoble illustrates this principle.

A number of examples may be used to explore the issue of diversification in more detail as well as some of the problems it poses. Suchet, Jorand and Raspaud (2010) have studied the village of La Chapelle, but other case studies such as Font d'Urle and Saint-Pierre-de-Chartreuse, illustrate more successful diversification (Jorand and al., 2009). Font d'Urle is a small ski resort, in the Vercors, an area which held several events during the 1968 Winter Olympics in Grenoble. There is no permanent glacier on the Vercors plateaux, so the Vercors might be considered as one of the most weather dependent areas of the Alps. This has not prevented, however, the extensive development of cross-country skiing which is considered, as at Font d'Urle, to be of a high quality. The Vercors can be considered as a vast cross-country area linking the main resorts of Autrans, Meaudre, Lans-en-Vercors, complementing the emphasis given to downhill skiing at Villard-de-Lans. At Font d'Urle, different stakeholders have combined to develop sports and outdoor activities in a sustainable manner. In particular, the local authorities of the Drôme department have given a major priority to promoting and planning such activities over the last decade. Saint-Pierre-de-Chartreuse, lies at a crossroads between the Alps and the Jura Mountains. The Chartreuse Massif is close to Grenoble to the south and Chambéry to the north. In winter, Saint-Pierre-de-Chartreuse and other ski centres in the same area, provide 64 ski runs and 255 km of cross-country skiing and snowshoe trails (Sénil, 2004). In summer, as elsewhere in the Alps, a wide range of outdoor pursuits is proposed (for example, climbing, caving, canyoning, mountain biking, paragliding, donkey rides, and horse riding) by a variety of professionals who generally reside in the town. However, they rarely work together on such projects, using their own informal power to develop their businesses. The result is a lack of co-ordination and an absence of clarity in the image transmitted to tourists. At the same time, Saint-Pierre-de-Chartreuse, due particularly to its proximity to Grenoble, is an example of a resort which has also grown as a residential centre and which attracts a large number of day visitors.