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e x t r e m e

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Special
French
Alpes
Issue

Surfin' Val d'Iserre

Secrets of the Savoie

Le Mystère de la Grave

e x t r e m e - l y hot holiday gift guide

Inside Track

There are alpes, and there is France.

But there is nothing quite like the French

Alpes. The e x t r e m e team spent a dozen days in the haute alpes to find out why...

*French
ALPES
Special*



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Cover: J. Spin makes it on La Meije at La Grave. Photo W. Wright;

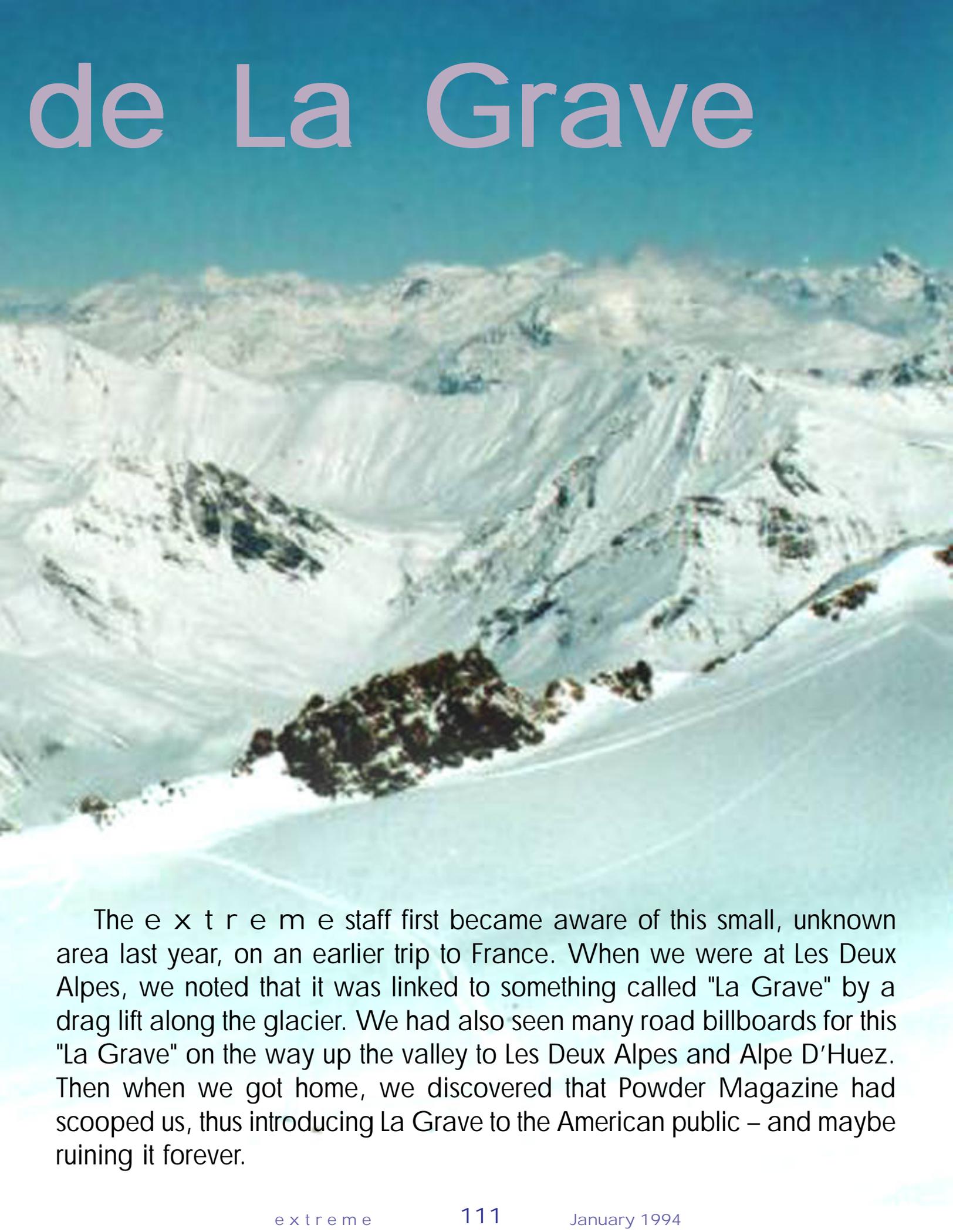
Contents: left:, Aiguille Midi, Chamonix. Photo A. Anon; top: Pic Blanc, Alpe d'Huez. Photo W. Wright; Bottom: Chemin du Cugnai, Val d'Isere Photo W. Wright

La Mystère



AT LA GRAVE, MYSTERIES ABOUND. MYSTERIES LIKE, "WHERE IS everybody?" and "This is the trailmap?" Or, "Which way did the trail go?", or "How do they service 7000 feet of vertical with only one lift?"

de La Grave

An aerial photograph of a vast, snow-covered mountain valley. The terrain is rugged with numerous ridges and gullies. In the foreground, a large, smooth expanse of snow is visible, likely a glacier or a high-altitude snowfield. A small, dark, forested area is situated in the middle ground, providing a stark contrast to the surrounding white snow. The sky above is a clear, pale blue.

The e x t r e m e staff first became aware of this small, unknown area last year, on an earlier trip to France. When we were at Les Deux Alpes, we noted that it was linked to something called "La Grave" by a drag lift along the glacier. We had also seen many road billboards for this "La Grave" on the way up the valley to Les Deux Alpes and Alpe D'Huez. Then when we got home, we discovered that Powder Magazine had scooped us, thus introducing La Grave to the American public – and maybe ruining it forever.

La Grave the town is small but kinda funky. There are several small hotels, and one larger one in particular. This, La Chaumine, is owned by some Brit and apparently has been contributing to the recent media buzz around the station.

There is but one main lift: a bizarre two stage cabin pulse lift with four stops at 1450m (Base), 1800m, 2400m, and 3200m. And we mean stops: whenever one set of cabins reaches a station, the whole line comes to a halt.

At the 3200m summit, you can proceed to a couple of rarely open T-Bars on the glacier de la Girose that ascend to the Dome de la Lauze summit at 3564m. From here, you can circle down to Les Deux Alpes or head back down the glacier to a short traverse which returns to the 3200m station. The two blue runs down the glacier are the only official on-piste and patrolled runs at La Grave.

The rest of the mountain, from 3200m back down to the base, is mostly unmarked and completely unpatrolled. There are but two ways down: the Itinerary de Chancel or the Itinerary des Vallons de la Meije. But the variations are limitless.

Do the math, kids. The base is 1450m. The Dome de la Lauze summit is at 3564m. That's 2114m of vertical, or

Do the math, kids. The base is 1450m. The Dome de la Lauze summit is at 3564m. That's 2114m of vertical, or 6933 feet. You'd think that with all that vertical, the trail map would be something awesome...

Turns, turns, turns. And, oh, those crowds!



6933 feet. You'd think that with all that vertical, the trail map would be something awesome. Well, it ain't. It measures a whopping 4" x 7.5", with seven squiggly lines suggesting routes down.

Sure, just follow the red trail down to the bottom. Easy, if they had something other than little wooden arrows hanging off a tree or a post every couple of kilometers.

La Meije, incidentally, is a huge spike in the sky (3982m or 13060') which dominates the area. This was the last major peak in the Alpes to be climbed, and one look at it will tell you why.

I got off to a slow start this day, lingering over coffee and conversation, a worsening cough, and a case of the jitters. All the press I have read concerning La Grave ran along the lines of, "Big, scary and dangerous. Do not attempt to ski here without a guide. My host, Gilles, told me it would be all right and not to worry. But he had already tried to kill me once, so I didn't really trust his counsel. Besides – he wasn't skiing that day. I was on my own, guideless and clueless.

Well, I finally arrived at the lift at 12:15. By the time I was dressed, booted, ticketed, and at the 3200m station, it was already 1:00 PM.

At the summit, the drag lifts on the glacier had just opened. I saw fresh lines of untracked powder above me, and so away I went. Some 8-16" of soft, loving

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fluff, depending on where you skied. I did two heavenly warm up runs with untracked snow plowing up to my knees. Yahoo!

Then it was down to business. I dropped down the right side of the Téléphériques des Glaciers for the glacier du Vallon and the Vallons de la Meije. Wicked wind and some wicked windblown slab at the top, but conditions improved greatly as I descended. It was the usual glacial mix of soft powder, crud, and hardpack. Followed various groups of people here and there and to and fro, took my time, and ended up in some bumps and trees near the 1800m access point. Total time from the top of the glacier de la Girose was about 70 minutes.

By the time I hit the summit again, it was already near 4 PM. I tried the Chancel descent. Much less wind, much better snow. Lots of powder. For a while, I kinda followed – at a discrete distance – what appeared to be a guide and 5 or 6 clients. They headed down an approach far to the right of that which was tacitly marked as "the piste" by those little red arrows which served as trail markers. This route took us

around a huge amphitheater like bowl – Le Col du Lac – ringed with rocks, cliffs, and some hidden couloirs.

This path terminated with one way down: about 200m of steep (I estimated the pitch at about 50 degrees), narrow couloir, filled with cubits of tracked but super soft snow. Tons and Tons, in fact. Thank god, else I'd be dead. The good snow made for easy skiing, except for the fact that at this point I was so fatigued I could have easily laid down for a long nap and skipped the whole affair.

At the bottom of the corridor, I stopped to take some pictures and watch some folks behind me negotiate the drop. A mixed bag of Coloradans, Scandinavians, and other internationals. Odd, but after two weeks in the Alpes, I ran into more Americans here at La Grave than I did everywhere else combined. Thanks for nothing, Powder Magazine!!!

From here, things mellowed considerably until a fork in the road. My brief acquaintances opted left for a drop down another steep, narrow, and long valley which lead away from my destination of La Grave village, so

I followed a long traverse through endless woods back to civilization. Got to the 1800m access just in time for the last cabins back down to my car (yes, I could have skied it, but it was after 5 and I was one tired puppy).

Despite my attempts here, words really can't describe this place. Unworldly beautiful, with free and open skiing anywhere one liked. Total freedom to live or die. Guide? Bah, humbug. Just follow the tracks, and take that leap of faith that whoever made them was neither dead nor Scott Schmidt.

The Alpes are big. Really, really big. Some places in the Rockies might be as high or higher, but the valleys in the Alpes are lower, which make for the amazing verticals and miles of terrain. But reading about it or looking at pictures don't do the region justice. Just do it!



One way up, two ways down., And oh, those crowds!