

Andorra



Slip Andorra into the conversation and people may tell you, with horror or joy, that it's all skiing and shopping. They might add that it's a one-road, one-town minestate.

They're right to some degree, but also very wrong. Shake yourself free of the capital Andorra la Vella's tawdry embrace to purr along one of the state's only three secondary roads and you'll discover villages as unspoilt as any in the Pyrenees.

A warning though: it may not be the same a few years from now. Greed and uncontrolled development risk spoiling the side valleys. In the last five years, its resorts have invested over 50 million euros in mountain cafés and restaurants, chair lifts and gondolas, car parks and snowmaking machines.

Although Andorra, with a resident population of less than 80,000, absorbs well over 10 million visitors annually (most of whom just pop in to shop), there are still areas where you can be completely alone. Tucked into the Pyrenees and wedged between Spain and France, Andorra has the distinction of being the only country in the world where Catalan is the official language. Though short on historical interest and monuments of consequence, this tiny, political anomaly, rucked and buckled with scarcely a flat square metre to its name, has some of the most dramatic scenery and by far the best skiing in all the Pyrenees. And, once the snows have melted, there's great walking in abundance, ranging from family strolls to demanding day hikes in the higher, more remote reaches of the principality.

HIGHLIGHTS

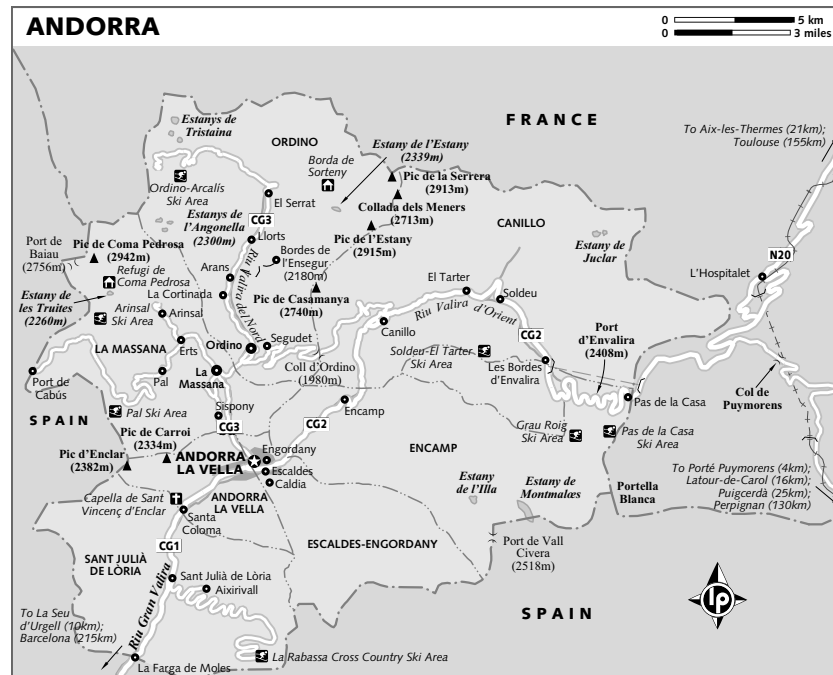
- Cross the spectacular **Port d'Envalira** (p410), the highest road pass in the Pyrenees
- Cross-country ski or walk the quiet countryside above **La Rabassa** (p403)
- Steep yourself in the warm mineral waters of the space-age **Caldea** (p400)
- Tramp a few of the walking trails that thread through the principality, especially around **Ordino** (p405) and **Soldeu** (p408)



■ AREA: 468 SQ KM

■ AVE SUMMER TEMP: HIGH 22°C,
LOW 12°C

■ POP: 76,900



History

By tradition, Andorra's independence is credited to Emperor Charlemagne, who captured the region from the Muslims in AD 803. In 843 his grandson, Charles II, granted the Valls d'Andorra (Valleys of Andorra) to Sunifred, Count of Urgell, whose base was La Seu d'Urgell, in adjacent Catalonia. From the counts, Andorra later passed to the bishops of Urgell, also based in La Seu.

In the 13th century, after a succession dispute between the bishops and the French counts of Foix to the north, Andorra's first constitutional documents, the Pareatges, established a system of shared sovereignty between the two rivals. This originally feudal setup created a peculiar political equilibrium that, over the centuries, saved Andorra from being gobbled up by its powerful neighbours despite recurrent tension between the coprinces down the centuries and French control passing from the counts of Foix to France's head of state.

In March 1993, after seven centuries of being a 'coprincedom', 75% of the 9123 native Andorrans who were eligible to vote (less than one-sixth of the actual population at the time)

opted in a referendum to establish Andorra as an independent, democratic 'parliamentary coprincedom'. The new constitution placed full sovereignty in the hands of the Andorran people, although the coprinces continue to function as joint heads with much reduced powers. The country retains its full name of Principat (Principality) d'Andorra.

Since the 1950s Andorra has developed as a centre for skiing and duty-free shopping, the latter a legitimate progression from the more dubious smuggling of French goods to Spain during the Spanish Civil War and Spanish goods to France in WWII (Andorra remained conveniently and profitably neutral in both). With its almost tax-free, no-questions-asked banking, Andorra increasingly attracts savers from all over the world, especially Eastern Europe.

Environment

Andorra, in the heart of the Pyrenees, is essentially a pair of major valleys and the steep mountains that hug them. It measures a mere 25km from north to south at its maximum, and 29km from east to west. Most of its 40 or so villages and hamlets – some with just a few

dozen people – are in the valleys. The main river, the Riu Gran Valira, is formed near the capital, Andorra la Vella, at the confluence of the Valira d'Orient and the Valira del Nord.

Pic de Coma Pedrosa (2942m) in western Andorra is the highest mountain, while the lowest point, on the Spanish frontier at La Farga de Moles, is still a healthy 838m above sea level.

Population & People

A mere 36% of Andorra's 76,900 inhabitants (well over half of whom live in Andorra la Vella and the contiguous parish of Escaldes-Engordany) are Andorran nationals. The rest are Spanish (37%), Portuguese (13%), French (6.5%) and others. While 76,900 souls may fit comfortably into a suburb of your home town, bear in mind that, scarcely 50 years ago, Andorra's population was only around 6000.

The state language, enforced by a 1999 law of the Andorran parliament, is Catalan. But nearly everyone can speak Spanish fluently. Local lore has it that everyone speaks Catalan, Spanish and French, but plenty of Andorrans know only a smattering of French and many Spanish residents have little Catalan. Young people and those working in tourism speak basic to good English.

Government & Politics

In 1993 the country's elected parliament, the Consell General (General Council), took over from the Consell de la Terra (Land Council), which had run the show ever since 1419. The Consell General has 28 members – four from each of the seven *parròquie* (parishes) – who meet three or four times a year. It appoints a *cap de govern* (prime minister) who chooses ministers, whose programmes in turn have to be approved by the Consell. Albert Pintat Santolaria, the current head of state, was elected *cap de govern* in 2005.

Women gained suffrage as late as 1970, and all Andorran citizens over 18 can now vote. Andorra is a member of the UN and of the Council of Europe, but not a full member of the EU.

Of Andorra's seven parishes, six have existed since at least the 9th century. The seventh, Escaldes-Engordany, was created in 1978 by dividing the fast-growing parish of Andorra la Vella.

Economy

Andorra's economy is based on cheap tax-free shopping, banking and tourism, which together

A TAXING SITUATION

It had to come. With neighbouring countries slapping on value-added taxes in excess of 15%, Andorra, an anomaly in so many ways, was way out of kilter. In January 2006, a relatively modest 4% service tax was applied to prices for hotels and restaurants, ski passes and the like. And oh, the fuss and palaver from the locals! Some places absorb this modest imposition within their charges; others include it as an extra element. If the pennies count, check before you eat, sleep, shop or ski.

account for some 80% of the country's GDP. Of the 11 million annual visitors (very many drive in, shop hard and drive out the same day), the vast majority are Spanish and French.

The residual agricultural sector (in the main, tobacco growing and cattle raising), these days represents only around 1% of total economic activity.

Getting There & Away

The only way into Andorra – unless you trek across the mountains – is by road. One route climbs in from La Seu d'Urgell in Spain, 21km south of Andorra la Vella. The other enters Andorra at Pas de la Casa, on the eastern border with France.

Top up your tank; petrol in Andorra is about 20% cheaper than in Spain and a good 30% cheaper than in France.

AIR

The nearest major airports are those of Barcelona (225km south) and Toulouse (180km north). Both cities and their airports are linked to Andorra by bus (see details below).

Discussions have long been underway about upgrading a small airport near La Seu d'Urgell, enabling it to take commercial flights. The talking continues...

BUS

Some of the bus services listed here may vary seasonally, so do check with the company or any Andorran tourist office.

Spain

Alsina Graells (☎ 826 567; www.alsinagraells.com) Four buses daily (€20, 3½ hours) to/from Barcelona's Estació del Nord.

Autocars Nadal (☎ 805 151; www.autocarsnadal.com in French & Spanish) Six buses daily to/from Barcelona's airport (€26, 3¾ hours), calling by the city's Sants train station (€21, 3¾ hours).

Autocars Novatel (☎ 803 789; www.andorraybus.com) Five minibuses daily (€26, 3½ hours) to/from Barcelona's airport.

La Hispano Andorrana (☎ 821 372; www.hispanoandorrana.com) Hourly buses between Andorra la Vella and La Seu d'Urgell (€2.50, 40 minutes).

Viatges Montmantell (☎ 807 444) Four buses daily to/from Lleida (€17, 2½ hours) to connect with the Madrid-bound high speed AVE train. Services stop outside Caldea (p400).

France

Autocars Nadal Twice each Friday and Sunday to/from Toulouse's bus station (€21, 3½ hours).

Autocars Novatel Two minibuses daily (€29, 3½ hours) to/from Toulouse's airport and train station.

Getting Around

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The largely ignored speed limit is 40km/h in populated areas and 90km/h elsewhere. Two problems are the recklessness of local drivers and Andorra la Vella's traffic jams. It's possible to bypass the worst of the latter by taking Avinguda de Salou, which becomes Avinguda de Tarragona, around the southern side of town.

MIND HOW YOU GO

Legally, Catalan is obligatory for all signage, publicity, restaurant menus, announcements and the like. However, since tourism is Andorra's lifeblood, most notices are also in Spanish, English and sometimes French.

But not always; even though Catalan is opaque to the vast majority of visitors, we came across the following monolingual signs, to which, for your safety, we append the English translation!

- Perill: Zona Voladures = Beware: Falling stones
- Caiguda de Neu = Watch out for snow sliding from roofs
- Risc Allaus = Risk of avalanche

Alternatively, just jump when the locals jump.

WHEN TO VISIT

The ski season (December to April) is the high season for visitors. For walking and temperate mountain warmth, choose July, August or September.

If you're driving between the parishes of Ordino or La Massana and those of Encamp or Canillo, avoid this motorist's nightmare by taking the scenically striking route over the Coll d'Ordino. This alternative is often impassable during winter due to drifts of snow blocking the road.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Six routes, run by **Cooperativa Interurbana** (☎ 806 555), radiate out from Andorra La Vella along the principality's three main roads. Tourist offices carry a free leaflet giving current timetables.

ANDORRA LA VELLA

pop 22,900 / elevation 1030m

Andorra la Vella (*vey-yah*, means 'old'), surrounded by mountains of up to 2400m, is the capital and only real town of the principality. Its main preoccupation is retailing duty-free electronics and luxury goods.

ORIENTATION

Andorra's capital is strung out along one main street, the name of which changes from Avinguda del Príncep Benlloch to Avinguda de Meritxell to Avinguda de Carlemany. The little Barri Antic (Historic Quarter) around Antic Carrer Major (Old High Street) is split by this heavily trafficked artery. The town now merges with the once-separate villages of Escaldes and Engordany to the east, and Santa Coloma to the southwest.

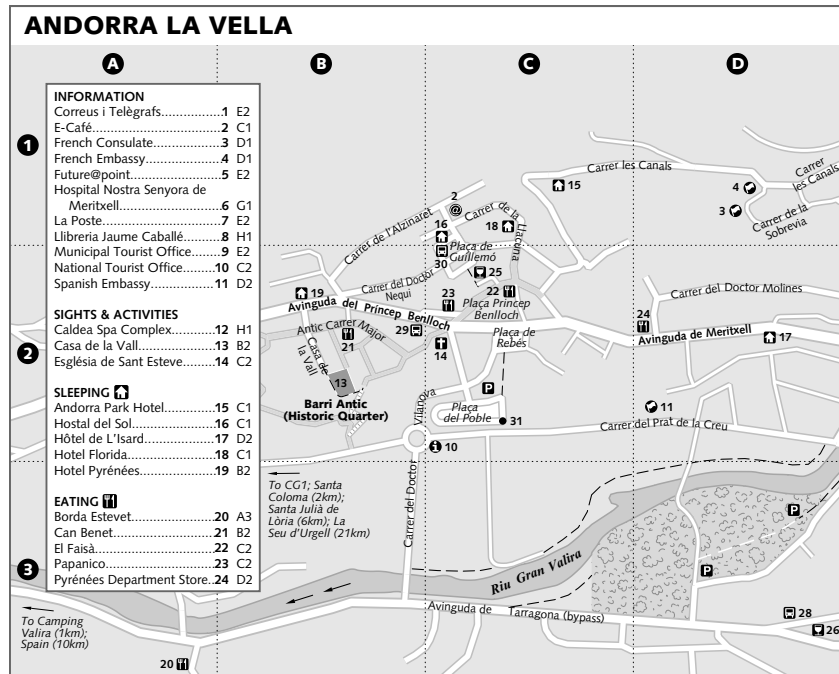
INFORMATION

Bookshops

Llibreria Jaume Caballé (☎ /fax 829 454; Avinguda Fiter i Rossell 31) A splendid collection of antiquarian and new travel books in Spanish, French and Catalan, plus a comprehensive range of walking and travel maps.

Emergency

Main police station (☎ 872 000; Carretera de l'Obac s/n)



Internet Access

E-Café (Carrer de l'Alzinaret 5; per hr €2.40; ☎ 7.30am-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-11pm Sun)

Future@point (Carrer de la Sardana 6; per hr €2.80; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10pm Sun)

Medical Services

Hospital Nostra Senyora de Meritxell (☎ 871 000; Avinguda Fiter i Rossell)

Post

Correus (Correos) i Telègrafs (Carrer de Joan Maragall 10; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm Sat) The Spanish post office.

La Poste (Carrer de Pere d'Urg 1; ☎ 8.30am-2.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) The French post office.

Tourist Information

Municipal tourist office (☎ 827 117; turisme@comuandorra.ad; Plaça de la Rotonda; ☎ 9am-9pm daily Jul & Aug, 9am-1pm & 3.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun Sep-Jun) Also has pan-Andorra information.
National tourist office (☎ 820 214; sindicatdinicio-tiva@andorra.ad; Edifici Davi, Local C, Carrer del Doctor Vilanova 13; ☎ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Jul-Sep, 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat Oct-Jun)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

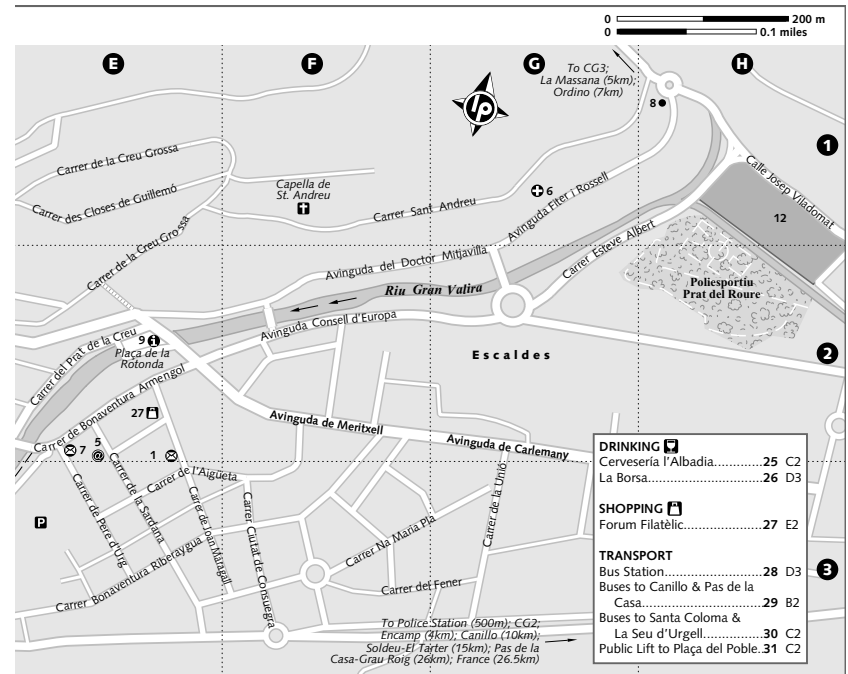
Caldea Spa Complex

In Escaldes, the **Caldea spa complex** (☎ 800 999; www.caldea.ad; Parc de la Mola 10; adult/child €29.50/22; ☎ 10am-11pm, last entry 9pm) is Europe's largest. Looking like some futuristic cathedral, it's a wonderful place for some soothing relaxation after exertions in the mountains. Fed by hot springs, its heart is a 600-sq-metre lagoon kept at a constant 32°C. A series of other pools, plus Turkish baths, saunas, spas and hydromassage, are all included in the three-hour entrance ticket.

You can sign on for a whole range of extras, including 'Turkish exfoliation', 'body scrub' and the enticing 'full hand care'. Caldea is a 10-minute walk upstream from Plaça de la Rotonda.

Barri Antic

The Barri Antic, intrusively and artificially bisected by Avinguda Príncep Benlloch, was the heart of Andorra la Vella when the principality's capital was little more than a village. The narrow cobbled streets around Casa de la Vall are flanked by attractive stone houses.



Andorra la Vella's parish church, **Església de Sant Esteve** (Avinguda del Príncep Benlloch), these days aligned north-south, dates back to the 11th century. Apart from the Romanesque apse on its eastern side, the church is mainly modern and has little of interest apart from some wonderfully warm, glowing stained-glass windows.

Casa de la Vall

The **Casa de la Vall** (House of the Valley; Carrer de la Vall), constructed in 1580 as a home for a wealthy family, has served as Andorra's parliament building since 1702. Downstairs is **El Tribunal de**

Corts, the country's one and only courtroom. The **Sala del Consell**, upstairs, has to be one of the cosiest parliament chambers in the world. **L'Armari de les Set Claus** (Cupboard of the Seven Keys) once held Andorra's most important official documents. Security was guaranteed because it could only be opened if a key-bearing representative from each of the seven parishes was present. There are free **guided tours** (☎ reservations 829 129; ☎ 9.30am-1.30pm & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 3-6.30pm Mon May-Oct, 9.30am-1.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1.30pm Sat Nov-Apr) in several languages, including English. Book at least a week ahead in summer to ensure a place – though individuals can often be squeezed in at the last minute.

Plaça del Poble

'People's Square', just south of Plaça de Rebès, occupies the roof of a modern government office building. Giving splendid views of the valley and mountains, it's a popular local gathering place, especially in the evening. The lift in the southeastern corner whisks you down to the car park below on Carrer del Prat de la Creu.

USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS

Weather & Winter Snow Conditions

☎ 848 852 (Spanish)
 ☎ 848 853 (French)
 ☎ 848 851 (Catalan)

Road Conditions

☎ 848 884 (Spanish, French & Catalan)

SLEEPING

Most hotels, except those in the budget category, hike their prices by 20% or more in the capital's high season (essentially August and major Spanish and French public holidays), when advance reservations are essential.

Camping Valira (☎ 722 384; campingvalira@andorra.ad; Avinguda de Salou; sites per person/tent/car €5.35/5.35/5.35; ☹ year round; 🚻) Just west of town, it has a small indoor swimming pool. You'll have to hunt to find a space between the resident caravans.

Hostal del Sol (☎ 823 701; fax 822 363; Plaça de Guillemó 3; s/d €14/28) This friendly, family-run place has 12 spruce, excellent-value rooms. It's set back on the northern side of a semipedestrian square, so noise is no problem, and there are several cheap eateries just below. Sadly, at the time of writing, it was being threatened with closure due to lease expiry.

Hotel Florida (☎ 820 105; www.hotelflorida.ad; Carrer de la Llacuna 15; s/d incl breakfast from €37/45) This welcoming modern hotel sits on a quiet side street. If you stagger in after a hard day's skiing or hiking, relax in the sauna (free to guests), or steep yourself in the bathtub that's a feature of all rooms, then tone yourself up for the morrow in the minigym. Rooms vary considerably in size; ask for one of the larger ones.

Hotel Pyrénées (☎ 860 006; www.hotelpyrenees.com; Avinguda del Príncep Benlloch 20; s/d from €35/56; 📞) After the Casa de la Vall and a Romanesque church or two, Hotel Pyrénées ranks among the most antique buildings in the principality. Constructed in 1940 and oozing style, its 70 rooms have plenty of appealing dark woodwork and are attractively furnished. Ask for one at the rear, well away from the traffic-clogged Avinguda del Príncep Benlloch. In high season, you have to take half-board (€69 per person). Its restaurant (menú €15, mains €9 to €14) serves Catalan, French and Spanish dishes amid sparkling chandeliers and two-tone tablecloths. Parking is €12.

Hôtel de l'Isard (☎ 876 800; www.hotelisard.com in French & Spanish; Avinguda de Meritxell 36; s €56-80, d €71-110; 📞) Behind the attractive stone façade is a comfortable, family-run hotel. All 61 rooms are double-glazed and have a bathtub. Ask for one at the rear, overlooking the valley and mountain beyond. The higher you go, the more impressive the views. It too runs a good restaurant (menú €15, mains €10 to

€14.50). Parking costs €15 and breakfast is included in the room price.

Andorra Park Hotel (☎ 877 777; Carrer les Canals 24; s €76-101, d €130-180; 📞 ☹ 🚻 🚿) This five-star hotel, opened in 2006, rises above its parent, the lovely slate roofed, stone walled original Park Hotel, these days the restaurant. The vast public space is bedecked with orchids and a venerable olive tree, retained from the original garden. Rooms are correspondingly large, equipped with a hydromassage bath and separate shower cubicle, and have a window and balcony with panoramic views. Reception, however, falls short of what you'd expect from such a prestigious venue. Parking is €18 and wi-fi is available.

EATING

In the heart of Barri Antic you'll find one or two good restaurants specialising in local cuisine.

Pyrénées department store (Avinguda de Meritxell 21) The top-floor cafeteria and restaurant of this megastore offer great fare at very reasonable prices. Pile your salad plate (€4.95) high at the self-service buffet and follow it with the dish of the day (€4.65), or select from one of the seven varieties of *plato combinado* (mixed plate; €7.25). One floor down, self-caterers will enjoy choosing from the shelves of its well-stocked supermarket.

Papanico (☎ 867 333; Avinguda Príncep Benlloch 4; mains €9.50-13) This cheery place does tasty tapas from €2.95 and a range of sandwiches and mains. Fun at midday and vibrant at night, it's also a place to see and be seen.

El Faisà (☎ 823 283; Cap del Carrer 4; mains €9-18; ☹ Tue-Sat & lunch Sun) 'The Pheasant' is a delightful place, committed to serving fine food, where the cuisine gives more than a nod towards both France and Spain. Trim, with crisp white tablecloths and gleaming glasses, its mains offer something for all pockets and preferences.

Can Benet (☎ 828 922; Antic Carrer Major 9; mains €13-20; ☹ Tue-Sun, closed 1-15 Jul) It's international cuisine and everything à la carte at this long-established restaurant. Eat in the intimate ground-floor bar or upstairs in the dining room with its attractive stone-clad walls.

Borda Estevet (☎ 864 026; Carretera de la Comella 2; menú €35.50, mains €15-18.50) Here's a place for meaty mountain fare with a strong Catalan twist to the menu. Try its *graellada de muntanya*, a selection of meats and sausages

sizzled on hot slates. Conclude a great eating experience with a *digestif* from its table full of liqueurs and spirits. Among the chef's many accolades and commendations is the intriguing Golden Cock Award.

DRINKING

La Borsa (The Stock Exchange; ☎ 827 657; Avinguda de Tarragona 36; ☹ 11pm-3am Tue-Sun) Like a drink now and again and the chance to dance? Enjoy a little flutter? Here you can indulge in all three. Keep a weather eye on the electronic, computer-controlled screen; the price of each drink fluctuates according to the night's consumption. Some you win, some you lose. It's like life, really, only rather more fun as the evening wears on...

Cerveceria l'Albadia (☎ 820 825; Cap del Carrer 2) The place for serious beer drinkers, with over eight classics on draught and more in the bottle than you could possibly manage in a weekend of heavy tipping.

ENTERTAINMENT

Contact the town tourist office (p400) for information about festivals, dance performances etc. These intermittent events apart, once the shops have closed, Andorra la Vella is fairly moribund.

SHOPPING

Andorra has over 2000 shops – more than one for every 40 inhabitants. Most of Andorra la Vella's duty-free shops border the eastern part of Avinguda del Príncep Benlloch, the length of Avinguda de Meritxell and into its continuation, Avinguda de Carlemany in Escaldes. Opening hours are normally 9am to 1pm and 4pm to 8pm daily, though the big stores work through the break lest they miss a buck or two. On Saturday and in July and August, when the eager hordes pour in, shops remain open until 9pm daily (until 7pm on Sunday).

At **Forum Filatèlic** (☎ 822 894; Altell 4D), up the steps beside Carrer de Joan Maragall 2, stamp-, coin- and phonocard-collectors will find themselves in heaven.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Buses to La Seu d'Urgell via Santa Coloma and Sant Julià call by the stop on Plaça de Guillemó. Those for all other destinations within Andorra pass by the bus stop on Avinguda del Príncep Benlloch.

Long-distance buses use the main bus station on Avinguda de Tarragona.

Call ☎ 863 000 to order a taxi.

Andorra la Vella is compact, and is a traffic nightmare; you're much better off walking. Drop your car in the multistorey car park beneath Plaça del Poble or, at less cost, in the huge open-air park just north of the bus station.

AROUND ANDORRA LA VELLA

La Rabassa

elevation 2050m

At the end of a 20km zigzagging drive from Sant Julià de Lòria (there's no public transport or accommodation), **La Rabassa** (☎ 759 798; www.larabassa.ad in French & Spanish), hunched up against the frontier with France, is a wonderful mountain playground, particularly for families. In winter, it has 15km of groomed cross-country ski routes, toboggan runs, dog sleds, snow-shoe trails and a snow playground for younger children. In summer, there's mountain biking, walking, horse riding and more. A taxi from Andorra la Vella costs around €20, one way.

Sant Julià de Lòria

Six kilometres south of Andorra la Vella is the splendid **Museu del Tabac** (☎ 741 545; Carrer Doctor Palau 17; admission €5; ☹ 10am-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2.30pm Sun). Occupying a one-time tobacco factory, it recalls the pleasurable sins of tobacco and smuggling. Three rooms are furnished with the trappings of tobacco cultivation, and cigarette and cigar making. There's an optional English audio accompaniment and a 15-minute film ('Who hasn't been a smuggler for a day?', it rhetorically asks). Allow at least an hour.

Església de Santa Coloma

The pre-Romanesque form of the Church of Santa Coloma, mentioned in documents from the 9th century, and the principality's oldest church, has been much modified over the centuries. The four-storey, freestanding circular bell tower was raised in the 12th century. All the church's 12th-century Romanesque murals, except one entitled *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), were taken to Berlin for conservation in the 1930s and still languish there. The church is 2.5km southwest of Plaça de Guillemó along the main road to Spain.

NORTHWESTERN ANDORRA

La Massana, 6km north of Andorra la Vella and gateway to the ski centres of Arinsal and Pal, has little to detain you. From it, the CG3 continues north into the mountainous Parròquia d'Ordino, for us the country's most beautiful parish, with its slate and stone farmhouses, gushing streams and picturesque old bridges. Up there is the ski area of Ordino-Arcalis and, in summer, soul-stirring walking.

The four small ski resorts and La Massana have recently fused (administratively, at least; there's no lift link between the two centres) to form the ski domain of Vallnord (www.vallnord.com) with a common lift pass (€27/69.50 per day/three days – €32/82.50 in high season). The slopes can be considerably colder than those of eastern Andorra but, on the plus side, skiing usually starts earlier here and the snows are the last to melt from the pistes.

LA MASSANA

pop 3000 / elevation 1250m

La Massana's **tourist office** (☎ 835 693; ☹ 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), at the base of a brand new cabin lift, covers both Arinsal and Pal.

In Sispony, 1km off the CG3 at the entry to La Massana, is **Casa Rull** (☎ 836 919; Carrer Major, Sispony; admission €2.40; ☹ 9.30am-1.30pm & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), a predominantly 17th-century restored farmhouse and rural museum.

Just outside La Massana on the road to Arinsal are two restaurants offering quality Andorran cuisine and a good selection of wine. **Borda de l'Aví** (☎ 835 154; Carretera de Arinsal Km0.5; mains €16-23), low-beamed and popular, is a stylish upmarket choice specialising in grills and roasts, but offers an ample selection of more subtle fare. **Borda Raubert** (☎ 835 420; Carretera de Arinsal Km1.5) is smaller, less expensive and more informal. It also specialises in mountain cuisine and grills and is equally tempting.

Buses between Andorra la Vella and Ordino pass through La Massana about every half-hour from 7am to 9pm Monday to Saturday.

ARINSAL & PAL SKI AREAS

Arinsal (☎ 737 020), 5km northwest of La Massana, has good skiing and snowboarding for beginners and intermediates, and a lively après-ski scene. The smaller ski station of **Pal** (☎ 737 000), 7km from La Massana, has gentler slopes, making it ideal for families.

Skiing

A fast cabin lift can rush you from La Massana to the Pal sector. The combined stations are linked by a cabin lift and have 63km of pistes with a vertical drop of 1010m.

Walking

For an excellent walking guide in English, pick up a copy of *Thirty-six Interesting Itineraries on the Paths of the Vall d'Ordino & the Parish of La Massana* (€2) from either parish's tourist office. Walk descriptions are altogether tauter than the title.

From Aparthotel Crest at Arinsal's northern extremity, a trail leads northwest, then west to **Estany de les Truites** (2260m). **Refugi de Coma Pedrosa** (☎ 327 955; per person €8; ☹ Jun-Oct), Andorra's only staffed mountain refuge, is just above this natural lake and does snacks and simple meals for all comers.

The steepish walk up to the lake takes around 1½ hours from Arinsal. From here, it's a further 1½ to two hours of vigorous walking to **Pic de Coma Pedrosa** (2942m), Andorra's highest point.

Other Activities

Pal, in particular, offers a wealth of summer-time activities, including mountain biking, horse riding, go-karting and archery. In July and August, you can ride the long La Serra chairlift (adult/child €6.80/4.75 return), with the option of a pleasant walk down.

Sleeping

Camping Xixerella (☎ 836 613; www.campingxixerella.com; sites per person/tent/car €4.95/4.95/4.95; ☹ Nov-Sep; ☹) Between Pal and Arinsal, this large, well-equipped site has an outdoor pool and plenty of shade and greenness.

All accommodation is in Arinsal (Pal has none); each of the places we recommend here is on the main drag.

Hotel Coma Pedrosa (☎ 737 950; hotelcoma.pedrosa@hotmail.com; d €40, half-board per person €30; ☹ Apr-Nov; ☹) The new owners of this welcoming place have brightened rooms up considerably. Most

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hostal Poblado (☎ 835 122; sti@andorra.ad; B&B per person with shower €22.50, with bathroom €30; ☹ Dec-Oct; ☹) Hostal Poblado sits right beside the cabin lift, handy for skiing in winter and for taking off on summer day walks. It's friendliness itself and a great place to make contact with other skiers or walkers. There's a lively bar and an internet point (€3 per hour), and you couldn't be more at the heart of the action.

rooms have a bathtub, there's free public parking just behind and you can relax in the cosy bar. In winter, it's fully occupied by ski tour operators.

Hotel Solana (☎ 737 999; www.hotelsolana.com; s/d €46/66, half-board per person €55; ☹) This is a very comfortable choice with a covered, heated pool and sauna, free to guests. All 95 rooms have a balcony; those facing the front have attractive views, while from the rear ones all you see is a wall of hillside. Reservation well in advance is essential in the ski season. In high season, the Solana insists on half-board.

Eating

Restaurant el Molí de la Plaça (☎ 835 281) This popular place, open year-round, bills itself as Italian – and indeed offers the usual staple pastas and pizzas (both €7.50 to €9.75). But its chefs are Argentinean and it also has more exotic fare such as Chinese chicken (€11.50).

Refugi de la Fondue (☎ 839 599; ☹ noon-11pm Tue-Sun, 4.30-11.30pm Mon Sep-Jun, lunch Sat & Sun, dinner daily Jul-Aug) As a change from the plentiful snack and sandwich joints in Arinsal, try this restaurant, on its own up the hill towards the main chairlift. Its speciality is cheese and meat fondue dishes (€14) and in summer it does outdoor barbecues on the small terrace.

Entertainment

In winter, Arinsal fairly throbs after sunset; in summer, it can be almost mournful. When the snow's around, call by **Surf** (meals €8.50-13), near the base of the cabin lift. A pub and restaurant until 11pm, then *discoteca* upstairs, it specialises in Argentinean dishes of juicy grilled meat.

Bar Cisco (☹ 4pm-2.30am Dec-Apr), up the lane beside Restaurant el Molí de la Plaça, occupies

a wonderful old barn. There's a lively après-ski scene in the downstairs bar, low-beamed, stone walled and fuggy, with a nightly DJ and regular live music. The upstairs restaurant (mains €10.50 to €12.50) specialises in Tex-Mex fare.

Getting There & Away

Nine daily buses (€1.50) leave Andorra la Vella for Arinsal via La Massana. There are also at least nine local buses (€0.90) daily between La Massana and Arinsal, and four (€0.90) between La Massana and Pal.

In winter a special ski bus runs eight times daily between La Massana and Arinsal.

ORDINO

pop 1600 / elevation 1300m

Despite all its ongoing development, Ordino is a charming little village. All new buildings are constructed in local stone, its main square is pedestrian only and a chuckling stream sluices through it.

The **tourist office** (☎ 737 080; www.ordino.ad; ☹ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun Jul-Sep, 8.30am-1.30pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun Oct-Jun) is within the Centre Esportiu d'Ordino sports complex beside the CG3.

Museums

The ancestral home of one of Andorra's great families, the Areny Plandolits, was built in 1633. Modified in the mid-19th century, it's now the **Museu d'Areny i Plandolit** (☎ 836 908; adult/student €2.40/1.20; ☹ 9am-9pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-1.30pm & 3pm-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Sep-Jun), which offers half-hour guided visits, in Spanish or Catalan, of its richly furnished interior.

In the same grounds as the Museu d'Areny i Plandolit, the **Museo Postal de Andorra** (Postal Museum; adult/student €2.40/1.20; ☹ 9am-9pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-1.30pm & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Sep-Jun) is fun and interesting even for nonphilatelists. There is a 15-minute audiovisual presentation (available in English), and set upon set of stamps issued by France and Spain specifically for Andorra.

Walking

From the hamlet of Segudet, 1km east of Ordino, a path goes up through fir woods to the **Coll d'Ordino** (1980m), reached in about 1½ hours. **Pic de Casamanya** (2740m), where you can enjoy expansive panoramas, is some two hours north from the coll.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Borda d'Ansalonga (☎ 850 374; www.campingansalonga.com; sites per person/tent/car €5/4/4; 🏠 mid-Jun–mid-Sep; 📶) This large, grassy option enjoys an attractive valley site just outside the village.

Hotel Santa Bàrbara de la Vall d'Ordino (☎ 738 100; www.santabarbara-hotel.com; Plaça d'Ordino; s/d €45/60; 🏠) Above the main square and facing the church, this 21-room family-run hotel with its attractive bar is good value for money. Staff speak English, all rooms have a bathtub and its two large split-level rooms (€96) are ideal for a family or two couples. Parking costs €5.

Hotel Coma (☎ 736 100; www.hotelcoma.com; per person incl breakfast €37-65, with half-board €48-75; 🏠 Dec-Oct; 🏠) Curling around the hillside like a boomerang, this spacious 48-room hotel has attractive rooms, all with parquet flooring and Jacuzzi. All except the top-floor eyries have a balcony giving fine views. Not least of the Coma's pleasures is its superb restaurant, much favoured by wealthy Andorrans for weddings and other rites of passage.

Casa León (☎ 835 977; menú €12.50-18.50; 🏠 Tue-Sun) offers a wide range of tapas and à la carte meat and fish dishes (€9.50 to €15). **Bar Restaurant Quim**, next door, friendly and more snacky, also has plenty of tapas and does a filling midday *menú* (€10).

Getting There & Away

Buses to/from Andorra la Vella (€1) run every half-hour from 7.15am to 9.15pm Monday to Saturday.

VALL D'ORDINO

The **Centre d'Interpretació de la Natura** (Nature Interpretation Centre; ☎ 837 939; adult/student/child €2.45/1.75/free; 🏠 10am-1pm & 3-5pm or 4-8pm Tue-Sat) in **La Cortinada** is a good multimedia introduction to Andorra's flora and fauna. A guided visit follows a 10-minute slide-video presentation (both with English option).

In the same village, the tiny, partly Romanesque **Església de Sant Martí** (🏠 Jul-Aug) has some well-preserved 12th-century frescoes and four finely wrought gilded altarpieces. Opposite is a small working water-powered **flour and sawmill** (adult/child €2/1; 🏠 approx 10am-1.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun Jun-Aug).

Walking

Exhilarating trails lead from the small settlements that nestle beside the CG3, north of

Ordino. Arm yourself with *Thirty-six Interesting Itineraries on the Paths of the Vall d'Ordino & the Parish of La Massana* (see p404).

A track leads west from **Llorts** (1413m) up the Riu de l'Angonella valley to a group of lakes, the **Estanys de l'Angonella**, at about 2300m. Count on three hours to get there.

From slightly north of the even smaller settlement of **El Serrat** (1600m), a secondary road leads 4km east to the Borda de Sorteny mountain hut (1969m). From there a trail goes southeast to **Estany de l'Estanyó** (2339m). Another heads east up to the **Collada dels Meners pass** (2713m, about 1½ hours), from where you can go north to **Pic de la Serrera** (2913m, 30 minutes) or a couple of hours south and west via **Pic de la Cabaneta** (2863m) to **Pic de l'Estanyó** (2915m), Andorra's second-highest summit. In about eight hours of tough trekking from Borda de Sorteny you could bag all three peaks and continue via the Coll d'Arenes (2539m) and Pic de Casamanya to the **Coll d'Ordino**, enjoying great views along the way.

From **Arans** (1385m), a trail leads north-eastwards to **Bordes de l'Ensegur** (2180m), where there's an old shepherd's hut.

Sleeping

Camping Mitxeu (☎ 850 022; mitxeu@hotmail.com; sites per person/tent/car €3/3/3; 🏠 Jul–mid-Sep) Some 200m north of Llorts, it's small, basic – and one of Andorra's most beautiful camping grounds with its own spring.

Pensió Vilaró (☎ 850 225; s/d with washbasin €20/35, half-board per person €33; 🏠 Dec-Oct; 🏠) This simple, friendly place, 300m south of the village, is a favourite with both walkers and skiers and does copious meals for guests.

Getting There & Away

Hourly buses linking Ordino and Arcalís also serve El Serrat and the small communities of the valley.

ORDINO-ARCALÍS SKI AREA

Several of the rugged peaks in this beautiful area reach 2700m and provide challenging and spectacular summer walking. There's no accommodation in Arcalís.

Restaurant La Coma (2200m) at the end of the paved road (closed in winter) is a useful landmark. From there, the **Creussans chairlift** (adult/child one way €5/4.10, return €7.60/4.50; 🏠 Dec-Apr & Jul-Sep) whisks you up to 2625m.

Skiing

The slopes of the **Ordino-Arcalís ski area** (☎ 739 600), in Andorra's far northwestern corner, are better for beginner and intermediate skiers. There's a decent selection of runs but gosh, it can be cold and windy. There are 14 lifts covering 26km of pistes at elevations between 1940m and 2625m.

Walking

The trail behind Restaurant La Coma leads eastwards across the hill, then north and over the ridge to a group of beautiful mountain lakes, **Estanys de Tristaina**. The walk to the first lake takes about 30 minutes.

Eating

Restaurant La Coma (🏠 10am-6pm) is open from December to early May and late June to early September, offering both snacks and a full menu.

Getting There & Away

In the ski season there are up to 12 buses daily (€1) between Ordino and the ski station, and six in summer.

EASTERN ANDORRA

Eastern Andorra has the principality's best skiing (see the boxed text, right), while in summer walks around Soldeu and Canillo rival those of northwest Andorra for beauty and grandeur.

ENCAMP

elevation 1300m

Encamp is really little more than a sprawl on either side of the CG2. The **tourist office** (☎ 731 000; 🏠 9am-1pm & 3.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 3-7pm Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) is beside the CG2, 100m south of Encamp's town hall, a striking smoked-glass cube.

Sights & Activities

The **Museu Nacional de l'Automòbil** (National Automobile Museum; ☎ 832 266; adult/student €2.40/1.20; 🏠 9am-9pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Jul & Aug, 9am-1.30pm & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Sep-Jun), beside the CG2, displays about 80 vintage cars and motorcycles, plus over 100 bicycles from old bone-rattlers to sleek racers.

Most of the **Església Sant Romà de les Bons**, about 1km north of Encamp, dates from the

12th century. The Romanesque frescoes in the apse are reproductions of the originals, now in Barcelona's Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (see p299).

To the right of the CG2, 3km north of Encamp, the austere **Santuari de Nostra Senyora de Meritxell** (🏠 9am-9pm daily Jul & Aug, 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Wed-Mon Sep-Jun) looms over the highway. Designed by the internationally renowned Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill, it replaces the original shrine to the Virgin of Meritxell, Andorra's patron, which was destroyed by fire in 1972.

Funicamp (adult/child return €10.50/7.50; 🏠 operates Dec-Mar & Jul-Aug), the long bubble lift at the northern end of Encamp, hauls you from 1300m to 2500m, giving access to the Grau Roig and Pas de la Casa ski fields.

Getting There & Away

Buses (€1.25) run from Andorra la Vella to Encamp every 15 minutes between 7am and 9.30pm daily.

GRANDVALIRA SKI AREA

Each of the five ski resorts within Grandvalira has a different character. Canillo, the smallest, is family-oriented and remains our favourite. El Tarter and, 2km to its east, Soldeu (which has the bulk of the accommodation and facilities), are both very popular with British skiers. At Andorra's eastern extremity, the linked ski stations of Pas de la Casa, a favourite of French skiers and young Brits out for nocturnal fun, and Grau Roig lie on either side of the Port d'Envalira pass.

The skiing differs too. Canillo is essentially a way of linking into the system. The exposed ski areas of Pas de la Casa and Grau Roig are great when the sun shines but oh, how the wind

SNOW MATES

In the winter of 2003, the ski resorts of Soldeu-El Tarter and Pas de la Casa-Grau Roig, after decades of jealously eyeing each other's slopes and fortunes, agreed to install a short umbilical lift and join forces. The result is the combined snowfields of **Grandvalira** (☎ 801 060), far and away the most extensive in all the Pyrenees, with 193km of runs and a combined lift system that can shift 96,000 skiers per hour. Lift passes, valid for the combined area for one/three days, cost €37/97.50.

can lash. The lower reaches of the Soldeu–El Tarter segment are pleasantly wooded and black runs into the villages are steeper and more picturesque.

The website www.grandvalira.com gives a rundown on the resorts and, in winter, the latest snow conditions, including a see-for-yourself webcam if you don't trust the official weather forecast.

CANILLO

elevation 1500m

Canillo is a pleasant, expanding ski village, small by comparison with Soldeu–El Tarter 7km to its east, yet ideal if you're looking for a quiet family winter holiday spot. A cabin lift links into the Grandvalira slopes so that you can zigzag all the way to Pas de la Casa and the French frontier.

Once the snows melt, Canillo adopts an even gentler pace and is a delightful base for a summer activity holiday. It offers canyon climbing, guided walks, four *via ferrata* climbing routes and a climbing wall. The **Palau de Gel** sports complex, with its ice rink and swimming pool, is open year-round, and there are endless possibilities for walking (including La Ruta del Gallo, an easy 6.5km signed nature walk that follows the valley downstream from Soldeu).

The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 751 090; www.vdc.ad; ☹ 9am–1pm & 3–7pm Mon–Sat, 8am–4pm Sun), on the main road at the east end of the village, also covers Soldeu and El Tarter. A little beyond is the splendid 11th-century Romanesque **Església de Sant Joan de Caselles** (☹ Jul & Aug). Year-round, you can collect the key from Hostal Aina (below). Inside is a rare stucco *Christ in Majesty* and a fine 16th-century altarpiece.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Santa Creu (☎ 851 462; camping_santacreu@yahoo.com; sites per person/tent/car €3.50/3.50/3.50; ☹ mid-Jun–Sep) It's the greenest of Canillo's five camping grounds and, since it's the furthest from the highway, the quietest.

Hostal Aina (☎ 851 434; colonias.aina.andorra.ad; dm €13, half-board €19; ☹ Sep–mid-Jun) This place functions as a children's holiday camp in summer and as a hostel for all-comers for the rest of the year. Ring ahead during the ski season as it's often full. Dorms sleep six and you need your own sleeping bag.

Hotel Bonavida (☎ 851 300; hotel.bonavida.andorra.ad; Plaça Major; per person incl breakfast Dec–Apr €40–59,

Jun–Oct €34–40; ☎ ☹) Only a well cast snowball from Canillo's telecabin, the Bonavida couldn't be better placed for skiers, and there's a minigym with sauna and Jacuzzi to relax the muscles at day's end. Most of its cosy rooms have balconies overlooking the river and mountain beyond. The copious buffet breakfast has real espresso coffee and dinners are ample too.

Cal Lulu (☎ 851 427; menú €14, mains €16–18, pizzas €7.50–10; ☹ closed Mon & Tue except high season) Intimate (it's divided into small booths), full of character and often packed to the gills, Cal Lulu serves up tasty Catalan and French dishes in generous quantities.

Palau de Gel Restaurant (☎ 800 840; menú €12.50, mains €7–14) Part of the Palau de Gel sports complex, it isn't the kind of place you'd automatically associate with good cuisine. The bar is a good spot for a snack and has free wi-fi – for entertainment you can watch the swimming and skating below.

SOLDEU & EL TARTER

elevation 1700m

Soldeu, the larger of the two villages, is especially popular with British skiers. The major hotels are here and there's an active après-ski scene. El Tarter, just down the valley and set back from the main highway, is altogether quieter and more relaxed.

The telecabins in Canillo and Soldeu (adult/child €8.50/7 return) also operate in July and August, whisking you up to the higher reaches, from where you can walk or hire a mountain bike and whiz down.

Centre d'Equitació Calbo (☎ 852 101), at the western end of Soldeu, does horse rides.

Sleeping

Most hotels are in thrall to the tour operators throughout winter. There are, however, two splendid exceptions at each end of the price spectrum.

Hotel Roc de Sant Miquel (☎ 851 079; www.hotel-roc.com; Soldeu; half-board per person winter €30–68, summer €27–45; ☹ closed May & Oct) The pleasant young Anglo-Andorran owners, both ski instructors and experienced walkers, can arrange nature walks and hikes. It's a relaxed, laid-back option (one of the owners plays lead guitar in a local band) and guests can also hire mountain bikes for a nominal fee.

Hôtel del Clos (☎ 851 500; www.grupnordic.ad; Carretera General s/n, El Tarter; half-board per person €46–83;

☹ closed Nov; ☎ ☹) Above the main road in El Tarter, this attractive 54-room hotel, built into the mountainside, has wood everywhere and a distinctly Scandinavian feel. All rooms are equipped with a bathtub and most have a balcony. Those overlooking the ski slopes are an extra €9. Guests have access to the pool of Hotel Nordic, opposite. Parking costs €6.

Sport Hotel (☎ 870 600; www.sporhotels.ad; Soldeu; half-board per person Dec–Apr €58–100, May–Nov €37–60) and **Sport Hotel Village** (☎ 870 500; Soldeu; half-board per person Dec–Apr €68–122, May–Nov €42–69) Imagine a pair of Alpine chalets on the scale of a department store, where woodwork predominates and the vast open spaces are broken down into more intimate lounges and bars. Guests get a 30% discount at their **Sport Wellness** spa with its range of aquatic and fitness activities. At Sport Hotel Village, with its internal atrium soaring upwards for four storeys, most rooms have balconies overlooking the ski slopes.

If you're prepared to push just 2.5km eastward to Les Bordes d'Envalira, equidistant between the Soldeu–El Tarter and Grau Roig–Pas de la Casa ski fields, prices drop significantly (though this may change in 2008 if the projected gondola lift connecting the fields takes off). Both hotels have restaurants, so you aren't obliged to drop down to Soldeu to eat.

Hotel Austria (☎ 735 555; recepcioaustria@andorra.ad; d €50–90, tr €69–124; ☹ Dec–Apr; ☎ ☹) This family-friendly, English-speaking place has 62 rooms, including four for the handicapped. Parking costs €9.

Hotel Confort (☎ 852 288; hotelconfort-b.env@andorra.ad; s/d/tr/q €58/70/95/119) Next door to Hotel Austria, the Confort is a family-run hotel, with 30 rooms, all with bathtub. It requires half-board (€80/92 for singles/doubles) during the ski season. Don't be deterred by the gloomy reception area.

Eating

Hotel Bruxelles restaurant (☎ 851 010; Soldeu; menú €11–20) A cheerful place with a small open-air terrace overlooking the pistes. It does full meals, well-filled sandwiches and whopping burgers (around €9).

Restaurant Fontanella (☎ 851 750; Soldeu; mains €7–13) This restaurant does a range of very reasonably priced Italian specialities, plus the usual pizzas and pastas (€7.50 to €9). Arrive early to grab a table on its terrace overlooking the ski slopes.

Borda de l'Horto (☎ 851 622; mains €12–16; ☹ Tue–Sun) This upmarket restaurant, 1km west of

El Tarter, is one of few places in the valley where you can be sure to find Andorrans dining. With its low beams and whitewashed walls, it's a congenial, attractively restored farmhouse offering good cuisine.

El Mosquit (☎ 851 030) Off the main highway and in the village of El Tarter, 'The Mosquito' is at once intimate bar, restaurant and, below, heaving pub. The restaurant, run by a young Belgian pair, has robust wood furnishings, its chairs and benches as heavy as church pews. It does fondues (€13 to €16), large and lavishly topped pizzas and Tex-Mex.

Entertainment

The night scene at Soldeu–El Tarter gets hopping once the first snows fall. Pussy Cat and its neighbour, Fat Albert, both one block from the main drag, rock until far too late to allow impressive skiing next day. **Avalanche** (☎ 852 282) and, three doors away, **Aspen** (☎ 851 974), both feature music every day and live bands regularly. Also on the main drag, the Stone Bar has broadband internet access, table football and occasional live music.

Getting There & Around

Buses run at least hourly from Andorra la Vella to Canillo (€2.50) and on to El Tarter and Soldeu between 8am and 8pm. In winter, there are free shuttle buses (just flash your ski pass) between Andorra la Vella and Pas de la Casa, passing by Canillo, El Tarter, Soldeu and Les Bordes d'Envalira. They run hourly (with a break from noon to 3pm) until 8.30pm.

All four villages are also on the route of buses travelling between Andorra la Vella, Pas de la Casa and the French railhead of L'Hospitalet.

PAS DE LA CASA

elevation 2050m

Pas de la Casa, on the French border and the largest of Andorra's ski resorts, is a fairly tawdry and architecturally bleak place, catering principally to French visitors and day trippers on a duty-free shopping orgy. In high season, especially the French winter school holiday from mid-February to early March, it's near impossible to get a bed and lift queues can be frustratingly long.

Pas de la Casa's **tourist office** (☎ 855 292; fax 856 275; ☹ 9am–1pm & 3–7pm Mon–Sat, 9am–4pm Sun) is in a kiosk opposite the Andorran customs station.

Activities

The **Centre Esportiu** (☎ 856 830) is an architecturally striking leisure complex with swimming pools, solarium, hydromassage, sauna, squash, a climbing wall and more.

Activitats d'Aventura (Adventure Activities; ☎ 355 053) in Grau Roig runs a variety of fun snowy activities, including snowshoe treks, igloo building, dog sledding and short, 10-minute helicopter flights.

Sleeping

During the ski season and, to a lesser extent, July and August, it's almost impossible to find reasonably priced accommodation in Pas de la Casa since so many hotels are occupied partially or fully by tour companies.

Hotel Central (☎ 855 375; www.hotelcentral.ad; Carrer Abelleses 5; s/d/tr/q Apr–Nov €30/50/66/80, compulsory half-board per person Dec–mid-Apr €43–59) Open year-round, the vast concrete Hotel Central has bland, unexceptional rooms, and the same could go for the cuisine. That said, it does represent, in Pas de la Casa currency, good value for your euro.

Hotel la Muntanya (☎ 855 318; fax 855 898; Carrer Catalunya 12; r per person incl breakfast €27–51, half-board €39–63) This welcoming place is also open year-round. In the ski season, half-board is compulsory at weekends and during French school holidays.

Eating

In Pas de la Casa, you can eat sandwiches and burgers until they ooze out of your ears. For more substantial fare, try the battery of restaurants around the base of the ski slopes but don't expect gourmet cuisine.

La Belle Époque (☎ 855 173; Carrer de Catalunya 12; mains €12–15, menú €9–12.50) The new owners of La Belle Époque, which also styles itself Si-Ski-Klan, offer a range of fondues (€13 to €16) and grilled meats. It does a pair of bargain lunch *menús* and offers an imaginative range of dishes based on French cuisine.

Tristaina (☎ 739 739; Carrer Beam 20–24) More up-market, the restaurant of Hôtel Font d'Argent does an excellent value lunchtime *menú* (€8.50) and a richly varied buffet dinner.

Entertainment

What Pas de la Casa lacks in places to sleep or eat, it compensates for in its ski season nightlife. Centred around Plaça del Vaquers and adjacent Plaça Sant Josep, it pounds from

sunset onwards. Dance away your bruises at West End and Billboard, both on Carrer Maià. **Milwaukee** (Carrer Beam; ☎ 5pm–1am), a favourite of the British snow crowd, also packs in the après-skiers, as do **Kyu** (Plaça dels Vaquers; ☎ 5pm–3am) and nearby **Underground** (☎ 8pm–3am).

Vertigo, next door to Underground and on a smaller scale, is more versatile. There's the hip pub with its resident DJ, a less noisy bar and also a pleasant restaurant (mains €13 to €19). **Habana Club Latino** (Plaça del Vaquers), where Cuban rhythms play and rum is king, is a pleasant Latin alternative to too much Anglo-Saxon heartiness.

Getting There & Away

There are eight buses daily (€4.50) between Andorra la Vella and Pas de la Casa.

Drivers can avoid Port d'Envalira by taking the 2.8km toll tunnel (€5.70) between Pas de la Casa and Grau Roig. But unless you're pushed for time or the weather's poor, you'll be missing out on the spectacular drive up and over Port d'Envalira with dramatic views in all directions, at 2408m the highest road pass in the Pyrenees.

ANDORRA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Andorra, which survives on 'touroeuros', is low on budget accommodation. Most visitors come as members of an organised group. Indeed, if you're happy to stay in one place, the cheapest option, especially during the ski season, is to sign up for a package. All major tour operators in Britain, for example, offer Andorra as a destination.

Hotels are fullest from December to March and in July and August. During these months, some places put prices up substantially, sometimes wildly, or insist on half-board, while others simply don't take in independent travellers. They also sometimes fail to post their prices.

There are no youth hostels in Andorra. In compensation there are several great camping grounds, many beautifully situated.

You don't need to make reservations at any of Andorra's 26 *refugis* (mountain huts). All are some distance from the road and all but one are unstaffed and free. Most have bunks, fireplaces and drinkable water, but no cooking facilities.

Tourist offices stock a free booklet, *Guia d'Allojaments Turístics*, but it's far from a comprehensive listing and, while the rest of the information is reliable, the prices it quotes are merely indicative.

ACTIVITIES

Skiing

DOWNHILL

Andorra boasts the best skiing and snowboarding in the Pyrenees, and its ski passes work out cheaper than those of many other European resorts. Tourist offices and **Ski Andorra** (☎ 864 389; www.skiandorra.ad) offer up-to-the-minute information.

The longest and best runs are in the Grandvalira ski area (p407). Skiing in the four resorts of the Vallnord complex, Arinsal, Pal (p404) and Ordino-Arcalis (p406), is more limited and often windier yet less expensive.

Skiing is good for all levels – especially so for beginners and intermediates. The season normally runs from December to mid-April.

Ski school costs around €35 per hour for one-on-one tuition (much cheaper per head if you're in a small group) and €71 to €101 for 15 hours of group classes, prices varying according to resort and season.

Downhill ski-gear hire costs around €10 per day, while snowboards go for €17.50 to €20 per day.

CROSS-COUNTRY

There's a great little cross-country skiing centre with 15km of marked forest trails at La Rabassa (p403), near Andorra la Vella.

Walking

The best walking map is *Andorra & Cadí* (1:50,000), produced by Rando Éditions. Close on its heels comes *Andorra* (1:40,000), by the Spanish map company Alpina. Another option is the *Mapa de Refugis i Grans Recorreguts d'Andorra* (1:50,000), which pinpoints all of Andorra's 26 mountain refuges and network of marked trails.

Andorra's unspoiled back country, where more than 50 *estanyes* (lakes) lie hidden among the soaring mountains, begins only a few hundred metres from the bazaar-like bustle of the capital.

The best season for walking is June to September, when temperatures climb well above 20°C, dropping to around 10°C at night. June can be wet. Ordino in the northwest and

Canillo or Soldeu in eastern Andorra make excellent bases for day walks.

The GR11 trail, which traverses the Spanish Pyrenees from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, enters Andorra by the Port de Vall Civera pass (2518m) in the southeast and crosses to the challenging Port de Baiau pass (2756m) in the northwest.

Walkers and cross-country skiers can sleep for free in any of Andorra's 26 mountain refuges dotted around the high country.

CUSTOMS

Tourist offices carry a leaflet outlining duty-free allowances for goods entering Spain, France or any EU country from Andorra. These include 5L of still wine, either 1.5L of spirits or 3L of lighter spirits or sparkling wine, and 300 cigarettes. Spot checks for smugglers are fairly rigorous on both Spanish and French borders.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Roads follow the floor of Andorra's tight valleys and traffic jams can clog Andorra la Vella's main arteries. Andorran drivers must rank among Europe's most reckless, hurtling around the tight mountain bends as if propelled by some collective death wish.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Andorran Embassies & Consulates

Andorra has embassies in France and Spain: **France** (☎ 01 40 06 03 30; www.amb-andorre.ad in French and Catalan; Place d'Andorre 1, 75016 Paris) **Spain** (Map pp114–15; ☎ 91 431 74 53; Calle de Alcalá 73, 28009 Madrid)

Embassies & Consulates in Andorra

France and Spain maintain reciprocal missions in Andorra:

France (Map pp400–1; ☎ 736 730; www.ambafrance-ad.org in French) Consulate (Carrer de la Sobrevia 7, Andorra la Vella); Embassy (Carrer de les Canals 38, Andorra la Vella) **Spain** (Map pp400–1; ☎ 820 013; Carrer del Prat de la Creu 34, Andorra la Vella)

HOLIDAYS

Public holidays fall on 1 January (Año Nuevo), 14 March (Día de la Constitución; Constitution Day), Good Friday (Viernes Santo), 8 September (Día de Meritxell, patron saint of Andorra) and 25 December (Navidad; Christmas Day).

INTERNET RESOURCES

www.andorra.ad Site of the Ministry of Tourism and Environment.

www.skiandorra.ad For skiing and practical wintertime info.

www.turismeandorra.com Maintained by the local hotel association.

MEDIA

The principality's two daily papers, both in Catalan, are *Diari d'Andorra* and *Periòdic d'Andorra*. You can watch Spanish and French TV, along with the local Andorra Televisión (ATV).

Local radio stations include Ràdio Nacional Andorra (RNA; 91.4MHz and 94.2MHz); Andorra 7 (101.5MHz); Ràdio Valira (93.3MHz and 98.9MHz); and Andorra Uno (96.0MHz).

MONEY

Though not a full member of the EU, Andorra uses the euro. For exchange rates, see the inside front cover. Banks and ATMs abound in this commercially minded country.

POST

Andorra has no postal service of its own. France and Spain each operate a separate postal system with their own Andorran stamps. They're valid only for items posted within Andorra – and needed only for international mail, since letters for destinations within the country go free. You can't use regular French or Spanish stamps.

International mail (except letters to Spain) is better routed through the swifter and more reliable French postal system. There are two kinds of post boxes, but if you use the wrong one your letter will be transferred.

The best way to get a letter to Andorra (except from Spain) is to address it to 'Principauté d'Andorre via FRANCE'.

SHOPPING

With low customs duties and sales tax, Andorra is an Aladdin's cave of cheap electronic goods, sports gear, shoes, clothing, perfume, petrol and, above all, alcohol, cigarettes and French dairy products. Shops selling these goods cluster in Andorra la Vella, Pas de la Casa and near the Spanish border.

Some warranties are valid only in the country of purchase, so read the fine print.

TELEPHONE

Andorra's country code is ☎ 376. To call Spain from Andorra, dial ☎ 00-34 followed by the local number. To call France, dial ☎ 00-33 then the local number.

Directory assistance (☎ 111 for numbers within Andorra, ☎ 119 for international information) has multilingual operators.

To phone, use euros or an Andorran *tel-estarja* (phonecard), sold at tourist offices and tobacconists for €3 and €6.

TOURIST INFORMATION

There's a municipal and a national tourist office in Andorra la Vella (p400) and several smaller ones around the country. Most carry information about the whole of the principality and sell both stamps and phonecards.

Andorra's tourist offices or tourism representatives abroad include:

France (☎ 01 42 61 50 55; 26 Ave de l'Opéra, 75001 Paris)

Spain Madrid (☎ 91 431 74 53; Calle de Alcalá 73, 28001); Barcelona (☎ 93 508 84 48; World Trade Center, Moll de Barcelona, Edificio Nord, Planta Baja 27, 08039)

UK (☎ 020-8874 4806; 63 Westover Rd, London SW18 2RF)

VISAS

Visas are not necessary; the authorities reckon that if Spain or France lets you in, that's good enough for them. But bring your passport or national ID card.

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