



Management of the Ordino Arcalís mountain station ▶ Interview with the assistant to the general manager

Secnoa will ask the municipality to extend the concession

The company estimates a profit of half a million euros while betting on making Arcalís a «more familiar» resort

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Secnoa will ask the Ordino municipality to extend the current concession in order to continue operating the Arcalís station for a few more years – currently there are 45 left. In fact, this is a provision that was already contemplated in last year's budget law, when the Government understood that the crisis caused by covid-19 had meant losses to the snowfields that would take seasons to recover. «We must not forget that the pandemic generated a negative balance of almost three million euros [at the Ordino Arcalís station] and this has delayed the investment plans we had and which we are just now starting to recover little by little», pointed out the assistant to the general management of the Saetde group, Julio Ventaja. Thus, as other stations have already done, Secnoa will soon meet with the Ordino corporation to agree a new deadline that will allow the master plan planned before the health crisis to be realized and which includes various improvements both in tracks and in infrastructure and services.

Awaiting a positive response, Ventaja emphasized that the relationship between the municipality and Secnoa is «very good», especially because «the municipality has seen how it has gone from having part of its budget mortgaged with annual losses of two million of euros to be able to allocate part of this money to aspects that have a direct impact on citizens». In this sense, he advanced that this year a profit of half a million euros is expected, which will mean that «the Ordino Municipality will not only have stopped losing money, but will start to recover it». This positive result is due, according to the deputy to the management, to the great attraction of last year's summer, the sundial viewpoint of Creussans, to the desire to leave the population in general after the confinement, to the savings bags of customers who could not make international trips and bet on local tourism and exceptional weather. It should be remembered that the Saetde group became

a shareholder of Secnoa in the 2018-2019 season and the master plan signed at that time included an investment commitment of 10 million euros between 2018 and 2022. The figure up to the date, however, already exceeds 12 million, with the materialization of the Tristaina cable car (seven million), the assets related to the summer offer (one million), the improvement of the customer experience and buildings in the search for quality tourism (one million), new ski lifts (750,000 euros), the enhancement of the beginner area of Planells (500,000 euros) and the creation of artificial snow (500,000 euros). However, in the next decade, investments of 10 million are being considered, which will start next season with the reform of the Hortell area, the gateway to the ski resort.

For all that, Ventaja made use of the group's synergies – which includes Nevasa's entry into commercialization and marketing and Saetde's

The commitment provided for an investment of 10 million between 2018 and 2022, but as of today, 12 million have already been exceeded

corporate and operational services, among others –, giving access to resources that Secnoa by its own could not access them and, therefore, they represented a «big expense» for the municipality. Finally, and despite the fact that Arcalís is «a legendary freeride ski resort», one of the most immediate goals is to make it also recognized by the family public. «The works we are doing in the Planells area [snow garden and beginners' area] are already focused on this direction: we want to take people who want to learn to ski. We believe that we have a lot of potential to attract families and children», pointed out the director of the station, Israel Ramonet, who also recalled that Arcalís has, as a point in its favor, «the longest green track in the Pyrenees». ≡



«We have tools to reduce energy consumption without closing ski slopes»

JULIO VENTAJA Management of the Ordino Arcalís mountain station

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The assistant to the general management of the Saetde group, Julio Ventaja, announces the forecasts for next winter at the Ordino Arcalís station in a season that will be marked by the control of electricity consumption. He also explains the investments in the snow field, the aid the group offers to its temporary workers and takes stock of overcoming the pandemic and a summer with fewer visitors than the previous one, but the same turnover.

–It seems that this winter will be the first completely normal one after the pandemic. How do you face it?

– Our intention is, if the snow conditions permit, to open at the beginning of December. We hope to have the best season in the last three years, although the last one was already quite good, despite the fact that the bad weather and the avalanche in January that left La Coma restaurant unusable penalized us with a few days closing.

–How do you think the implemen-

tation of the Andorra Pass will benefit?

–I think it positions Andorra on a country scale at a very good level. One country, one pass, means facilitating the customer's stay and experience.

–Why did Ordino Arcalís want to re-gain the union with Pal Arinsal through the Nord Pass?

–To differentiate Grandvalira from the northern valleys with two independent products according to their proximity and price: in Grandvalira the day pass costs about 60 euros, in Arcalís 43, and in Pal Arinsal just under 50. We must also take into account that the customer who goes to Grandvalira is totally different from the one who goes to Arcalís or Pal Arinsal and that the season pass customer is usually resident in the country and chooses according to the valley where he lives.

–How are the sales of ski passes?

–On September 30th, when the early booking period ended, the rate of sales, both for the Andorra Pass, the Nord Pass and the Mountain Pass, was much better than

last season. I think that more and more, due to the current economic crisis, people are aware that they should take advantage of dynamic prices and book as far in advance as possible. The feelings are good, but no one can predict what the last-minute figures will be.

–One of the protagonists of this winter, aside from the snow, will be energy. Are you worried about the situation?

–From our group, we have been working for more than a year to have a sustainable alternative and invest in renewable sources. In addition, this year we have earmarked nearly one and a half million euros for the installation of a hydraulic turbine in Grau Roig and photovoltaic panels on the buildings, which will allow us to have an own consumption of 10 or 15%. In addition, we have also spent many seasons investing heavily in more efficient snowmaking systems and more optimized mechanical widgets, which helps to reduce expenses and energy consumption.

–Do you consider the possibility that there will be cuts in the supply?



«We have to understand that safety is fundamental and that's why the ski pass guarantees specific circuits for everyone»

«We are not looking for a massed station, but quality. Despite the 20% drop, we feel very comfortable»

«Between 20% and 25% of the total income is from the summer. This means that we have a real alternative to winter»

direction.

–I asked because FEDA asks the stations to set an example and questions whether it is necessary to open every day or all the slopes.

–I think that the approach must be different. For years, the stations, depending on the volume of customers, have operated with one condition or another and, for example, we play with the speed of the widgets to save more or less. We have the mechanisms to achieve savings without having to close.

– The pandemic forced the postponement of several investments in Ordino Arcalís. What is the forecast currently?

–When Saetde became a shareholder of Secnoa in 2018, the station adopted a master plan with the commitment to invest around 10 million euros in four years. So far,

we have invested 12, two more than planned, and we intend to invest another 10 million between now and 2032. For now, we have allocated them to the cable car, new snow production systems and new ski lifts. This year, as I said, we will allocate 2.5 million to the Coma area, corresponding to the renovation of the restaurant with one million euros, and to the Planells area, with one and a half million euros with two new ski lifts, one new track, the retrofitting of the buildings and various improvements to the tracks with widening and artificial snow.

–Which circuits will there be inside the ski station for the Mountain Pass?

–In Ordino Arcalís there are five itineraries for Mountain Pass users, which will be well differentiated and signposted, because both here and in Pal Arinsal the mountain skier is a very important customer. In this sense, I must emphasize that we have strengthened and improved the signaling and protections at the station in general with an investment of 200,000 euros. I think it was a topic we had pending for some time.

–After the pandemic, it has been a sport that has gone up, right?

–After the pandemic, what has gone up is that people want to go out in the mountains in all its variants. Mountain skiing, specifically, allows you to do a lot of physical effort with little gradient and gives you a lot of freedom.

–The problem is that coexistence between mountain skiers and alpine skiers is not always easy.

–We must understand that safety is fundamental, which is why the ski pass, in addition to providing assistance and different advantages, guarantees specific circuits for each one. Together we must maintain the mountain ecosystem, without massifying it and without risks. It is not a matter of eagerness to collect, because if you check what you pay for the ski pass and what you get, it pays off very quickly.

–What is your assessment of the summer?

–Very positive. Regarding the number of visitors, it was lower than last year; in 2021 there were 85,000 and this year, we estimate, we will close

with around 70,000. We are not looking for a crowded station, but we want to offer quality, so, despite the 20% drop, we feel very comfortable with this figure. In addition, the income has been maintained, thanks to the complementary services of the station, such as the restaurant or the shop, because when the customer feels comfortable, he values the effort behind it and pays for it.

–Tell us about these complementary services.

–I am thinking above all the impact on the average customer expenditure that, for example, the renovation of La Coma restaurant has had, which offers high mountain cuisine accompanied by all kinds of gastronomic offer for the whole family, with the combination of the terrace with a more informal dining concept. At the same time, and ahead of winter, the user will see the culinary offer of Planells, focused on families, completely renewed, as well as of Hortell with a wide range of sandwiches and fast food in order to give hosting events such as the Borrufa Trophy and the Freeride World Tour, which has positioned the station on a global scale within this modality and we will have it back between February 4th and 9th, 2023.

–Do you have any forecast of how the war in Ukraine may affect the arrival of tourists?

–In Arcalís we have never had a major client of Russian origin, so the impact will be zero. In Grandvalira, on the other hand, before the health crisis, it was between 5% and 10% of the total with a very high average expenditure. But already last season, on a national scale, the reduction in Russian tourism was offset by local markets, especially the Spanish one. We will see what happens this winter, because the same war in Ukraine and all the inflation generated will affect the economy of families in all countries, and therefore their spending on skiing will be less.

– One of the main problems the country has is housing and temporary workers are not stranger to it. How do you help them from Saetde?

–We have a system of rented hotels for temporary workers who arrive with nothing. In Ordino we have Hotel Arbella, in Encamp La Mola and

Hermus, and in Pas de la Casa we have several apartments. In total, we offer 400 places for a first reception, which includes sleeping, breakfast and dinner; lunch is served on the ski slopes with a couple of menu options. We also help them at origin, by purchasing the plane ticket, a cost that they then pay back as they work. The total workforce of temporary workers exceeds 900 people, so almost half of the workers who come from outside are covered by this first reception.

–How do you envision a future in which it is clear that it will snow less and less each time?

–This is a reality, but the difference between Ordino Arcalís, along with Pas de la Casa, is that they are the highest stations in Andorra and the Pyrenees, so we start with a certain advantage. In addition, with just the installation of two or three mechanical widgets, we can open practically the entire ski area. Another benefit we have is that it can be accessed with little operation. For example, we are now in La Coma, at 2,200 meters, and we got there by car, a reality that is not very common in Andorra. In addition, as I said, we have been strongly committed to artificial snow for years.

–And you also bet on alternatives in the summer.

–Yes. If we compare with Pas de la Casa–Grau Roig, summer accounts for 3% of our income statement, while in Arcalís it is between 20% and 25% of the total income. This means that we have a real alternative to winter, although we still depend on the snow without a doubt.

–What differentiates Andorra's ski resorts from those of the rest of the Pyrenees?

–The après-ski. In Andorra people can find a good deal in terms of ski resorts, but after there are so many options that they don't end. You only need to go around the Pyrenees ski resorts to see that there is a great need for investment in very aging infrastructure. On the other hand, in Andorra, among all the resorts in the country, we invest 15 million euros in one season and that, beyond Baqueira Beret, is very difficult to find. We have a big differential in terms of equipment, slopes, snow production, buildings and, of course, après-ski. ≡

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