



In the lap of luxury

Located close to the Italian border, French ski resort Val d'Isère is known as one of Europe's premium luxury ski destinations, writes **Julian Fleming**

Just five kilometres from the French resort of Val d'Isère, there lies a magnificent and imposing dam known as Barrage de Tignes. With a giant fresco of Hercules on its side and snow-capped peaks towering all around, it is an arresting sight – made all the more captivating by the fact that the old town of Tignes lies submerged beneath the water beside it.

It is the perfect introduction to this spectacular resort, perched 2,000 metres above sea level.

With over 300 kilometres of trails to ski down, Espace Killy – the skiing area that encompasses Val d'Isère and the new town of Tignes – is a place not easily tired of. Whether you're used to expertly gliding down the slopes or spending most of your time tumbling down the mountain, the resort's high altitude ensures a surprisingly long skiing season; we travelled in April, but still saw plenty of snow.

The area is renowned for its luxurious chalet accommodation, with the winding Alpine road visitors take up to the resort made all the prettier for their presence, dotted among the mountains.

Highlife has two chalets in Le Fornet, just two minutes drive from the town of Val d'Isère. Along with the more conventional facilities you'd expect, these cosy hideaways include shared ski gear rooms with heated holders for ski boots which ensure they are cosy and warm in the mornings. Other welcome bonuses include a whirlpool bath and sauna along with an afternoon massage service, all of which go a long way towards soothing those

burning muscles after a hard day on the piste.

The pampering doesn't end there; our chef, Adam, was amenable to any culinary request we threw at him, no matter how awkward. We ordered up a wide range of breakfast options during our stay, from pastries and croissants to bacon and eggs, with the menu for the evening meal chalked up on a blackboard daily.

If anyone had an issue about the options, Adam was only too willing and able to fix something else. Among the treats we sampled was a starter of sweet potato, coconut and coriander soup and main courses such as rack of lamb with mixed vegetables. Suffice to say, this was a cut above the standard fare usually provided on a package ski deal. Indeed, it was tough to leave the cosy chalet in the evenings at all, but Val d'Isère's famed nightlife was calling us.

From quiet bars to thumping nightclubs, all tastes are catered for – the area is a playground for the rich and famous – with a steady influx of (mostly English) tourists ensuring that the beer taps are kept flowing.

While the walk from the chalet to the town is challenging enough – and somewhat dangerous, as there are no street lamps and the road gets quite icy in winter – there is an excellent bus service which runs regularly until 2am.

One of the more gratifying aspects of the trip was the availability of an experienced ski instructor from the Evolution 2 ski school. Our guide, Amigo, was himself a teacher of instructors, so we knew

we were in the right hands.

After a few hours of practice, the cobwebs were swiped at enough for

me to navigate my way down the mountain, albeit with a subconscious reluctance to lean forward which was unfailingly spotted by our eagle-eyed Amigo.

Indeed, the only low point of the trip – if an Irish group could have the temerity to say so – came with the weather.

Cloudy skies led to drizzle at the foot of the valley and blizzards at the top, which meant that we were unable to try out paragliding. If the views we did see were anything to go by, this would have been breathtaking. Paragliding requires hardly any instruction and the training can be completed in an hour or so, as you are strapped to an instructor who worries about the specifics of the jump.

The fresh snow affected the ski-

ing in different ways. The top of the mountain was covered with a fine powder, which made for excellent skiing, but resulted in 'white-out' conditions, which made it difficult at times to see more than ten feet in front of us.

The sleety precipitation towards the end of the slopes made for a slushy, slippery mix which ensured I hit the deck with laughable regularity. No matter, because there were plenty of good quality – albeit pricey – options on the slopes for lunch.

There is nothing like a good meal to give you the appetite for some more ducking and diving later in the day, and Amigo ensured we saw as much of the resort as possible. He even brought us off-piste on our second day, gliding through snow five inches deep, an experience which made us feel, in his own words, as if we were "skiing through a cloud". It is a feature of France's skiing culture that not only is off-piste skiing tolerated but actually encouraged, even though it is banned in other countries for fear of avalanches.

The track we skied down was quite flat so there was no danger; however, all skiers are required by law to carry a shovel, avalanche detector and homing device when venturing off-piste.

The experienced skier is catered for extremely well in Val d'Isère, with plenty of death-defying black runs and moguls to speed down – in fact, the locals pride themselves on the steepness of their slopes. Novice skiers need not be concerned about this though, as there are plenty of nursery slopes.

With so many excellent ski resorts located throughout Europe, I'd be reluctant to consider re-visiting the same one over and over again. However, Val d'Isère made such a strong case for itself as one of the best on offer that even Hercules himself would have been impressed.

Factfile

Julian Fleming travelled to Val d'Isère, via Lyon, courtesy of Highlife. Aer Lingus flies direct to Lyon with a bus transfer taking three hours. Prices for a week-long holiday are from €1,117 for an adult and €938 for a child. Prices include the bus transfer, food and wine. Optional extras include €50 for paragliding. A 40-minute massage provided by Pamper Off Piste costs €44.



Top: Val d'Isère; above: Chalet Marelle