



Ease on skis

Not so taken with the slopes after two previous trips, **Clara Mannion** was a convert after sampling Highlife's glorious package of pampering

It takes a lot to spoil me to the point of embarrassment. And yet the pampering bestowed upon me during my last ski-trip left me blushing with self-conscious sloth. I call it the 'Princess-syndrome'. They call it the 'Highlife'.

It was April last, and I was only mildly excited about my upcoming jaunt to Val d'Isere in France. I had been on another ski holiday to Austria a few weeks previously, and was in the process of adapting a thoroughly dislikeable, but entirely fashionable, air of 'ennui'.

Thus, when we arrived to a golden wooden chalet, I contrived to conceal my delight under my layers of scarves. And when we walked inside to the cosy warmth of a roaring fire and the scent of freshly cooked food, I still managed to retain my unimpressed demeanour. It was when they told me about the hot tub I permitted a squeal.

The chalet, the food, the chef, and the bubbly spa facilities were all part of the package provided by 'Highlife', Ireland's luxury ski-tour operators. The company was set up a couple of years ago by three young entrepreneurs who had been on a swathe

of mediocre ski-holidays and thought they could do better. Thus was borne a system where attention to detail is paramount. A previous customer sums it up on the website: "I think the Highlife staff would breath in and out for us if we asked them to

After a few glasses of top notch vino, we settled down to the large oak table for dinner. We spent the next few hours working our way through a sumptuous three-course meal followed by a selection of cheeses and fruit.

But enough about the food. For now. The skiing, as it turns out, was pretty good too. For amateurs though, Val d'Isere is not the best spot. Highlife also has chalets in the French resorts of Morzine and Meribel, which are more fall-friendly.

Having said that, my relative lack of experience was not really a problem as the staff had arranged for our small posse to get lessons from a rather alarmingly enthusiastic instructor called Amigo (really, very common in Austria, apparently). However, his enthusiasm was infectious, and by the end of the day, despite my smarting der-

riere, I was sorry to be taking off my skis.

But then dinner, again was a lesson in godliness. Afterwards, rubbing our bellies, we agreed on checking out the nightlife. We headed directly for Dick's Tea Bar and sampled as many local beverages as possible.

Noting our hangovers, the next morning Amigo guided us through some fabulous off-piste territory

It was truly breathtaking. So busy was I soaking in the scenery that, for the first time all week I forgot about the chef's food. The combined effect of concentrating on the landscape while not thinking about the treacherous cliffs stretching out in front meant that, for a blissful few hours, I didn't fall once. Then I got hungry, and it all went back to normal.

It was with a heavy heart I returned to Ireland. The Highlife was over. I lifted the golden pages and flicked to the spa listings. Time for some pampering to cheer me up.

TOP 10 CHECKLIST

- 1 Ski goggles, for when it's really cold.
- 2 Sunglasses, for when goggles are just overkill.
- 3 Thermals. Thermals. Thermals.
- 4 Sun-block. Yes. You can get very badly burnt in the snow.
- 5 Waterproof gloves.
- 6 A well-fitting ski-suit.
- 7 Real ski socks. Wearing two pairs of normal socks will give you blisters.
- 8 Camera. Vital.
- 9 A range of woolly hats and/or ear muffs.
- 10 Lip Salve

HOW DO I GET THERE?

Flights are from Dublin to Lyon with Aer Lingus, then Highlife organise a minibus collection from the airport to the resort. The transfer takes about three hours.

HOW MUCH?

Prices start at €987 per week for an adult. This varies, depending on the chalet and the time of year. The price includes flights, transfers, accommodation, ski detox facilities, food and wine and complementary guiding on the slopes. Depending on your requirements, Highlife can also organise ski packs for an extra fee.

WHERE IS IT?

Set in the French Alps, Val d'Isere has been the setting for great sporting events, including the Olympic Games, Criterium de la Premiere Neige and the World Alpine Championships. However, the legendary skiing area is not just for champion skiers. With 300km of slopes, a snowpark and a high altitude which almost guarantees good snow, Val d'Isere has something to offer everyone.

WHERE DO I BOOK?

For more information, go to www.highlife.ie or call 01 6771100