



Bonhomie of the cross-country skier

Shane Fitzsimons found learning to ski surprisingly easy — in the right hands

I'M A novice skier, so bear with me while I get these damn things off my feet. There.

Until recently I was just a wannabe novice skier. I'd seen the movies and marvelled at the grace and elegance of those nonchalant skiers speeding through scenes of awesome beauty, the *bonhomie* of the *apres-ski* in little bars, the warm log fires and good food of the alpine nights. But I never thought it would be so easy.

That's probably because when I went, I went with Highlife, a young Irish company bursting with enthusiasm for mountain life in Morzine-Avoriaz, villages high in the Haute Savoie region of France, nestled around an outcrop of Switzerland — right in the heart of 650km of marked ski runs. So even if you were an expert, you'd be in the right place.

With flights from Dublin to Geneva, the Highlife team picks you up from the airport for the hour-long jaunt into Morzine and brings you to your luxury wooden chalet, where Ballymaloe-trained cooks cater to your every whim. Hot-tubs and saunas jostle for your attention with the log fire, games room and starlit balconies. There's even a masseuse on call, to knead away all the stresses of the day-to-day. And after you've relaxed and settled in, you look forward to climbing every mountain.

But for beginners like me, thankfully it's not so steep a

gradient. And after two days of lessons, interspersed with the hearty breakfasts and three-course evening meals, you begin to find your feet on the mountain.

It's impossible not to enthuse about skiing. The combination of the adrenaline rush of speed and the awesome serenity as you glide through wooded valleys and over the little hillocks formed by the bodies of fallen snowboarders is unlike anything you've felt before.

You will talk about the day with the Highlife team as they guide you on to the most suitable runs, you will also learn to talk knowledgeably about the snow. You will talk about the grandeur of the mountains, and you may even talk about the wildlife.

But as our expert teacher from Ecole Ski de France (the Highlife team hook you up with the best instructors available) told us with frozen tears in his eyes, not everyone can go skiing every day. And on those days, he said, the women like to go shopping.

Like most guys, I'm not a shopaholic. Never have been. In fact, I can get parsimonious to the point of miseryhood. But — like skiing — once you build up a bit of speed, you get carried away.

It began when unclehood started becoming a competitive sport and the race is now on to become "favourite uncle" among the nieces and nephews. So I let myself go.

The shops in Morzine are a world away from the Parisian boutiques of St-Germain-des-

Pres. In keeping with the village atmosphere, everyone is friendly to the point of bending over backwards to help.

Sure, the shops are mostly geared towards the active life, so they stock lots of stretch pants — the garment that first made skiing a spectator sport. But to really appreciate mountain life, the most important thing to buy is chocolate. It's for the energy.

I was transfixed by one shop's window display, filled with bursting with rows and rows of chocolate with almonds, chocolate with honeycomb, chocolate with candied roses and sprigs of sugar edelweiss — and best of all, a chocolate fountain that just poured and poured litres of the stuff. But I didn't stand there long. And I would now be undisputed top uncle — if only I'd kept it for the nieces and nephews...

I don't care how this sounds, but perhaps the second-best... no, make that the third-best thing about being in France is that the French are different from us. And *vive la difference*, as they once said in all the best top-shelf mags.

But nowadays when they talk about *la difference* they're talking pure smut. They're talking about smoking cigarettes and visibly enjoying them. In public.

I've been (on and) off them for two years now, but always find reasons to smoke when I'm abroad. In the US, it's just to drive home the point that I'm European; but in Europe... well, in Europe it's just be-

cause it looks so damn appealing. A Marlboro Light with a short espresso in a winter-sun-drenched bar where the owner's friendly St Bernard patrols between the tables is proof of 2,000 years of European civilisation.

As William Wordsworth remarked on a smoking France: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!"

Very heaven. Good words to describe Morzine. One thing you soon realise about this most charming of alpine villages is that you're not in Ranelagh any more. You realise this because of the lack of four-wheel drives. In fact the car of choice among the year-round residents of the village is the famously Gallic Mini-Cooper. Ooh la la.

You'd see more rugged all-terrain vehicles in the leafy boulevards of south Dublin, negotiating the perils of the school run with bull bars on, or undertaking urgent missions of mercy down to the local boulangerie (aka M&S).

Don't take this as a sign that French drivers have been emasculated by the bottle blondes of Irish suburbia. When the French want an all-terrain vehicle, they just nip round the back and crank up the tractor — low speed, high power. Eh paf!

Speaking of all-terrain, one of the unique joys of Morzine is that certain runs take you from France into Switzerland and back home in time for *apres-ski*. Cross-country skiing in its purest form.

After a couple of days, once

you've stopped knocking down trees with your face, and the ambulances no longer congregate at the bottom of the mountain after you go up, you begin to realise that all the cliches you ever heard about skiing can come true.

And it's all downhill from there.

Prices for the Chalet Myrtille in Morzine start at €990, with discounts for children. This includes seven nights half-board, direct flights from Dublin, transfers and taxes — and the dedicated services of the Highlife team before, during and after your holiday. A key feature is the high quality of the food prepared by qualified chefs. Fresh juices, cereals, yoghurts, smoothies, fruit, breads and pastries make for energising breakfasts. A three-course evening meal menu is served nightly with unlimited fine French wines.

Visit www.highlife.ie or contact (01) 6771100. email info@highlife.ie



MOUNTAIN LIFE: It's impossible not to enthuse about the adrenaline rush, left, and the awesome scenery of the Haute Savoie region, above