



WE ARE met at Lyons airport by a cheery Irish girl in a polo shirt and happily bundled into the back of a people carrier. We don't have much luggage; what's to bring other than a proper ski jacket and pants, some thick socks and a few changes of clothes? Sarah does a quick headcount and then passes around the *jambon et camembert* baguettes and bottles of spring water as we begin the pretty drive to the pretty village of Morzine stuffing our faces like we are on picnic. When we get to our chalet in the foothills of the Alps we drop our bags off and make the five-minute journey to the ski-rental shop to get our boots and skis fitted and ski-passes validated. All ready for the morning. Not a moment wasted on directions or key-fumbling check-ins. No awkward moments in pidgin French or hassled arguments among ourselves about who forgot what.

Back at our wood-and-stone pad, as the mountains cast their eternal shadow over the village, we're greeted with a glass of hot wine and then drowsily retire to our rooms for a rest before dinner. Adam, the chalet's appointed chef for our stay, has prepared smoked duck cantaloupe melon with an apple and sherry vinegar dressing to start and roast salmon with lemon and garlic and buttered asparagus to follow. Being a lactose intolerant bore, he makes me some mashed potato with olive oil instead.

No trouble. We sit around the giant dinner table enjoying chocolate fondant ice cream with Baileys foam and someone plugs their iPod into the chalet's Bose piped sound system. The bar is well stocked and well utilised. Others lounge around in the TV room surveying the selection of DVDs. Everyone heads to bed early for the 8am wake-up call. Ski lifts open at 9am. We wake to find a selection of *pains au chocolat* and croissants and hot coffee waiting. Adam is back, offering bacon and eggs any style you like. It's going to be a long day on the slopes. We set off in mini-groups of two or three depending on our abilities and interest.

Our hosts give us bottles of water and some biscuits, just in case. All kitted out we head up the mountain to meet our guide for the day, Graham from Belfast. A few small runs iron out the cobwebs some of us are feeling, having not skied for a couple of years, before we head off for the morning and some more challenging runs. No time wasted fumbling around with giant maps attempting to plot the impossibly perfect route around the mountains. We ski at our respective levels for the morning and meet up atop a small peak to have a lunch that would put most people into a coma. Some decide to call it a day and go shopping around the village, others go for a soak in the chalet's jacuzzi. The rest of us keep skiing until our legs resemble one of Adam's desserts. By the time we get rid of our gear, the car is waiting to take us home for a nice cup of tea, some fresh baked scones and a sit down. And before you can say "that lactic acid is a right bastard", it is time to surrender to the waiting masseur. An hour of tenderising later, Adam returns with cured salmon and gazpacho with avocado purée and breast of duck with a sweet potato purée. A little more comfortable with our surroundings now, the bar is more confidently tackled. Others head into town to check out the bars and nightclubs. And so it goes. I've been skiing quite a few times before but the HighLife package outlined above takes pretty much every problem I've experienced from my previous trips – and solves them. I can remember trying to find our rental car in Geneva airport in the midst of a blizzard, taking the wrong tunnel and ending up in Switzerland when we were meant to be going to France. I remember arriving in Austria to find the town empty until the weekend when thousands of Swedish 16-year-olds mobbed the place for their version of spring break. I've been fleeced in Chamonix (even before the casino) and ended up getting so muddled by the ski maps in La Clusaz that our group ended up skiing on dirt and rocks. We eventually took our skis off and walked miles to the nearest pub.

There's never enough time on a ski holiday for a variety of reasons, most of them due to changing weather conditions and the work

constraints of taking a holiday in the winter. Plus, most folk are not physically fit enough to ski for more than a week. That's what makes all the detail that HighLife offers so important to having a great time. And from my experience, when you add up the costs associated with booking everything separately on the internet (unless you are very experienced and know exactly what you want), eating out every night in restaurants (even when you swore you'd cook yourself) is not that much more expensive (see panel). Believe me, you'll find it hard to leave the chalet to spend money when the bar is complimentary, the food is amazing and the log fire is raging.

GET A TASTE FOR THE HIGH LIFE

HIGHLIFE Ski & Snowboard (01-6771100, www.highlife.ie) has been operating since 2002. Established by three Irish lads, the company now has 10 chalets spread across the three French alpine resorts of Morzine (five chalets), Meribel (three) and Val d'Isère (two) – also known as the Three Valleys.

The standard of chalets is very high. Each has a log fire and hot tub and most have a sauna. One has a pool table, another a futsal table. They sleep between eight and 15 people so HighLife offers deals based on your group or family's requirements.

The season starts in mid-December and prices range from €805 a week for an adult to €658 for a child under 12. Everything above is included in the package except for the massage. Not included in prices are flights, ski equipment rental (about €140

for a week) and your ski pass (around €150 for the week). Optional lessons are also extra (€120 for five lessons).

This season a 'kids camp' (children over five) will run during the Irish school holiday season which allows kids and parents time to ski in separate groups.

During Christmas week HighLife is also offering free flights from anywhere in Ireland. Prices start at €1,185 per adult and €968 for children under 12.

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