



Pampered in powder

Morzine's beautiful surroundings ensure a skiing holiday with as many high points as downhill moments, writes Susan Mitchell

It is hard to get a better endorsement for a ski operator than meeting their first-ever clients on a chairlift overlooking the picturesque Alpine village of Morzine. The couple, ski enthusiasts, have returned year after year – and often a few times a year – with the Irish firm Highlife.

Morzine, they tell me, is a firm favourite. They prefer it to the likes of Meribel, where the purpose-built style and high-rise buildings contrast starkly with the centuries-old traditional village of Morzine. Having visited a number of other ski resorts in France, I can see their point. In Morzine, postcard worthy chalets are set against a backdrop of snow-laden forested slopes. The village lies in one of the most extensive ski regions in the Alps – the Portes du Soleil – which connects 15 ski resorts in France and Switzerland.

It is full of wooden chalets with slate roofs and stone foundations – and there is no shortage of character and Savoyard charm. Morzine is the largest village in the region, with 3,000 residents and 21,000 guest beds in hotels and chalets.

It is popular with French skiers and increasingly popular with British tour operators, so expect to hear a good bit of English. Highlife runs 13 chalets in the Alps

and six of those are in Morzine. The biggest is Valmont, where the owners quite obviously took great pride in restoring the original building into a four-star chalet.

If your chalet experience has been anything like my own, with flatpack furniture and bland decor, then Chalet Valmont is a welcome change. It is one of Morzine's oldest buildings and has been beautifully furnished and restored by its owners. The chalet has a large open-plan kitchen and dining area and a living room with a tall vaulted ceiling and log fire. Some of the unique features included are a mezzanine study area, a glass staircase with a striking iron bannister and a five-person hot tub.

The chalet sleeps 13 guests comfortably in its seven bedrooms – each of which is decorated differently. All the bedrooms have flat screen televisions and en suite bathrooms.

Experience has also taught me that you are much more inclined to sample the local bars when stuck in a chalet that resembles a shoebox. We mustered up the energy once or twice, making our way to the Buddha bar for some après ski. In general, we stayed put in the evenings.

Chalet food is catered for by a chef. Our chef, Adam, made sure we enjoyed delicious breakfasts each morning, freshly baked treats when we returned in the afternoon and a feast worthy of a top class restaurant every evening. The food was superb: think cured salmon, gazpacho and avocado puree soup, breast of duck and chocolate fondant and you will get the picture.

The only disadvantage to this is that you can get overly comfortable. The chalet was so luxurious that I found it hard to tear myself away on the first morning that we set out skiing.

The fact that Highlife or-

ganises a minibus to ferry its guests for the short journeys to and from the slopes eased the pain. We had also organised all our ski gear the previous evening, thereby ensuring no time was lost.

By 9.30am, we had met our instructor from the École du Ski Français (ESF). He was local and the statistics rolled off his tongue. To be fair the ski area, called Portes du Soleil, has overwhelming statistics: runs up to seven miles long, 410 miles of tended trails and slopes, extensive off-piste terrain, and 207 lifts of every shape, size and description.

Competent intermediate skiers can quite literally cruise for miles and the skiing takes in all levels, from the double black 'Swiss Wall' in Avoriaz to the snow parks of Les Ges and learner slopes in Morzine. Half of Morzine's slopes are rated beginner or intermediate, which attracts families to the resort. You go through turnstiles with a hands-free, electronic pass tucked in your jacket. This makes all the difference, as there is no rummaging – and less chance of losing the ski pass. After a leisurely lunch we spent the afternoon doing long runs into Morzine from the Pléney télécabine all the way around the mountain. That evening, the minibus collected us and brought us back to Chalet Valmont.

Superb service is how Highlife tries to distinguish itself from its competitors. And they do excel. Forget your laptop and need access to e-mail? No problem.

One of Highlife's employees took me to her own apartment so that I could use her laptop. Break a ski when traversing the slopes? Don't worry. Graham from Highlife takes on the unenviable task of walking back up a mountain in the hope of finding some sort of tool with which to fix the ski. He did.

On that day a small group

of us were availing of one of the unique features of Highlife – its ski guiding. It is a strong selling point.

Free to guests, the Highlife team use their local knowledge to guide small groups around the slopes. It left us free to put our piste maps away and enjoy some brilliant runs.

When a blizzard descended and I could barely see one foot ahead, the fact that Graham knew the slopes was reassuring.

The ski guiding is available to skiers of all levels and ranged from half-day sessions on blue slopes for novice skiers to full-day tours for experienced skiers.

That day we had headed up the other side of the valley towards the more challenging ski area of Avoriaz which connects to the ski resorts of Champéry/Les Crosets and Champoussin in Switzerland and the La Linga section of the Chatel ski area. At 8,000 feet Avoriaz is roughly a mile higher than Morzine.

A pedestrianised resort, it is perched on a cliff and was purpose-built in the 1960s. We referred to it as Morzine's ugly sister, but it does offer immediate ski-in ski-out access to the pistes.

The journey into Switzerland and back was definitely our most exhilarating day's skiing. There were some entertaining wipeouts, broken skis and plenty of bumps and bruises. But happily nothing that a *vin chaud* didn't cure on arrival back in France.

If, like me, you hit a point – possibly when you were peeling off your wet ski gear having trekked from the slopes back to the cramped 'chalet' your friends have raved about – when you realised a good ski holiday is about more than good snow; Valmont is a very safe bet indeed.

Getting there

Getting there: Aer Lingus scheduled flight from Dublin to Geneva in Switzerland. One-hour transfer time.

Highlife can organise flights from any point of departure including Dublin, Belfast and all major British airports.

Where to stay: Chalet Valmont in Morzine typically costs about €1,155 per person, but can hit €1,435 over New Year (children are about half that price). Prices include transfers, accommodation, breakfasts, afternoon tea, three-course evening meals with free-pouring wine, a complimentary bar, Highlife ski guiding and in-resort shuttles to take you to the ski slopes. Chalet Valmont sleeps 14 (13 comfortably) and all bedrooms are uniquely designed.

Alternatively: Highlife has another four chalets, where the prices are slightly cheaper. It also operates in the French resorts of Meribel and Val d'Isère.

Additional costs: A seven-day ski pass for the Portes du Soleil costs €225. It has 207 ski-lifts and 248 ski runs (26 blacks, 100 reds, 106 blues, 34 greens). You can ski from France into Switzerland.

What to buy: Ski gear, cheeses, wines and French liquors.

Useful websites: www.highlife.ie; Morzine tourist office at www.morzine.com; and Morzine ski school www.esf-morzine.com/index.html



Above and right: Chalet Valmont is luxurious ski accommodation and one of Morzine's oldest buildings. It has a large open-plan kitchen and dining area and a living room with a tall vaulted ceiling and log fire



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Publication: Sunday Business Post Agenda

Date: Sunday, November 22, 2009

Page: 36

Extract: 3 of 3

Circulation: 55.971

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Headline: Pampered in powder



Morzine is a postcard-perfect French ski village surrounded by slopes where skiers can cruise for miles