



DREAMS OF MORZINE

Ronan Price went to the French Alps a ski virgin and came back smitten with the sport, even after a few tumbles...

It's midnight and I'm still skiing. All around is pitch black and near silent, except for the hiss and crunch of snow under my skis. The ground rises and falls beneath my feet, which feels really odd until my brain finally twigs I'm actually asleep in bed and wakes me with a start.

Just a few hours of skiing for the first time and already I've been dreaming fondly about it, eh? And this despite a painful debut on the slopes.

We had arrived a day earlier at the resort of Morzine, 1,000m up in the French Alps and east of Lake Geneva. The group comprised a bunch of experienced skiers and two beginners, including me — a complete ski virgin.

We were all billeted together at a luxurious chalet as guests of Highlife, an Irish company specialising in all-in ski packages. Taking care of almost every detail, from airport transfers to food, the tour operator embraces you like a warm hug.

Lesser known than the likes of Chamonix, Morzine is one of the most northerly of the French alpine resorts, a pretty town straddling a deep river gorge and surrounded by slopes.

You can choose from a range of accommodation types, but common to all chalets is a host who cares for the guests like a good Irish mammy. They cook all your meals, advise on the best ski runs and generally ensure a hassle-free stay.

At our chalet, a beautiful stone building lovingly restored and with room for more than a dozen people, we had to, ahem, make do with a top-notch chef. Each day, the crew prepared hot breakfasts and gourmet dinners complete with wine.

So to my first mistake. The guy at the ski shop measuring my feet asked me whether his selection of boot felt comfortable, but I didn't know what to say. They certainly didn't feel right, yet seasoned skiers assured me that ski boots are to be endured rather than enjoyed, with comfort coming a very distant second to ensuring you don't break your ankles in a tumble.

Next morning, even as we walked the couple of hundred yards to the ski lift with instructor Gregory, the boots gave off warning signs that we weren't going to be friends. But once we strapped on those skis, things would be golden. Gregory was a patient soul,

a bronzed Frenchman who'd seen many a no-hoper like me but was too polite to say it.

The rest of the party headed off to explore some of the 650km of ski slopes in the region known collectively as Portes du Soleil and encompassing the linked towns of Morzine, Avoriaz and Les Gets.

That left Gregory with me and fellow novice Annmarie to tackle some savagely tricky nursery slopes. At least it appeared that way initially as, time after time, we ended up in a crumpled heap or ploughed into Gregory, who acted bravely as a sort of train buffer.

Gradually, though, the skis became less unwilling accomplices and we grasped the snowplough technique — pointing the blades inward to slow down — which was a major breakthrough akin to learning to walk.

We still spent most of the time on our backsides giggling in the snow, but things began to click.

Despite my excitement, however, the crushing pain of the boots became impossible to ignore. So while Gregory and Annmarie enjoyed a few more circuits of the slopes, I sat woebegone near the ski lift, massaging my poor feet back from the brink.

The break for lunch couldn't have come sooner but required a short hike back up the mountain to Le Vaffieu, one of a handful of restaurants at altitude. Beneath the ski lift, a crowd of five-year-olds made a mockery of us novices by skiing expertly in formation after their instructor. When one fell over, our laughter was hearty, if a little hollow.

Le Vaffieu typifies the region's style of

cooking: robust fare consisting mostly of meat and cheeses in elaborate oven-cooked combinations. Utterly delicious and filling, the food lifted our sagging spirits and set us up for the afternoon.

Fortunately, ski lessons were finished for the day and I could consign those bloody boots to history. While the experienced skiers resumed their adventures guided by the ever-helpful Highlifers, three of us opted for an undemanding hike in showshoes.

Then it was back to the warm chalet for a soak in the hot tub, followed by a professional massage. The three-course meal passed in a blur as fatigue overcame me and I slunk off to bed, dog-tired, to dream of skiing.

Next day, new boots, new man. Wow! Suddenly, I was gliding effortlessly and painlessly across the pistes. Even Gregory couldn't suppress his surprise. We joined the experienced skiers and spent an exhilarating day on gentle but fast runs, still unable to turn properly but intoxicated by the adrenaline.

Of course, with confidence comes cockiness. As evening drew in, and with a light blizzard falling, I reached the last slope. Something told me too late that this one was different. Picking up speed, my skis refused to follow the approaching curve. Then I remembered how, just an hour earlier, I had crested a small hill more or less upside down and escaped unscathed.

I tumbled into the deep snow at what felt like 60km/h but was probably more like 30. Happily, there were no broken bones. Just slightly winded and, having eaten more snow than is good for an eskimo, my lesson was learned. Equally, though, I was hooked.

My days on the slopes left me with precious little energy in the evening for après-ski antics. But Morzine has several lively bars and restaurants and even a couple of dingy late-night joints for the compulsively social visitor.

By our last day, Gregory was satisfied we had grasped the basics and began to let his Gallic reserve drop a little. To show our gratitude, we taught him a little Gaeilge, and to this day he's probably telling Irish visitors to "Pog Mo Thoin" while pretending he doesn't know what it means. ☑

Highlife (01-677 1100, highlife.ie) offers a choice of 10 different chalets in three French alpine resorts — Morzine, Meribel and Val d'Isere.

The Highlife season runs from December 13 and seven nights cost from €805 for an adult and €658 for a child under 12. Prices include transfers, accommodation, all meals (except for one night of the week)

and a complimentary bar. Highlife hosts will also take you on guiding runs to show guests the best slopes for their ability. New this year is a free kids' club in Morzine to give mums and dads a break on selected weeks of the season.

Flights, ski hire and lift passes are not included, but Highlife can organise those for you.



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