

Living the high life

THOUGH skiing is no longer the preserve of the upper classes, a week on the slopes is still a wallet-lightening business.

Even staying in budget accommodation, the cost of seven days in Austria or France can easily climb to £1,000 with the cost of flights, ski hire, a lift pass and food in the remote restaurants of the high snow capped mountains.

And staying for less than a week hardly justifies the expense of the flights and the often two or three hour coach journeys from the airport up to the snowline. Therefore, two basic things are crucial: snow and equipment.

Meribel, where I skied in the last week of March, has both. With high altitude runs,

Three thousand feet up in the French Alps, **SAM McBRIDE** discovers Meribel

some of which begin at 3,000 metres above sea level, there is reliable snow. Even should conditions at that elevation be too mild, ski lifts link the village to nearby Val Thorens, the highest ski resort in Europe.

And as the part of the Three Valleys, Meribel is linked by ski lifts which are among the finest in the world into what is the largest ski area in the world.

The 2011-2012 season in Meribel, as in many European resorts, was the biggest snow fall for years and even though I travelled in the closing few weeks of the season where lower runs

were turning slushy, there was excellent snow on many runs.

The splendour of Alpine skiing is its scale; the grandeur of the mountains and the unending ski lifts which theoretically let you travel hundreds of miles. Even a modest two-hour morning ski could easily take you 40 or 50 miles. On our final morning, I set off early, the snow still frozen like hard toast beneath my boots, to the two cable cars which climb from the valley (itself 1,750 metres above sea level) to the top of Saulire, the gaunt peak which stands between Meribel and Courchevel.

From just a few metres beneath the summit, where the lift ends, the view was magical – a vast icy wilderness on each side of the peak, broken only by exposed rock, ski lifts and the odd early skier.

Plunging down the sides of the mountain, I almost swept past Courchevel's extraordinary airport, which is built into the side of a mountain.

Making the deck of an

aircraft carrier look straightforward, it has an uphill runway, only one approach, no instrument landing system for poor weather and is surrounded by ski slopes and towering mountains.

Further down in the valley are the high-end hotels increasingly populated by wealthy Russian holidaymakers.

Highlife, the Irish company with which I travelled, pride themselves on the sort of service which an Oligarch would expect but at a fraction of the price.

The all-inclusive trips (though flights are not included) are based in luxurious chalets, complete with outdoor hot tubs set amidst the snow and indoor saunas. It's a world away from budget ski trips which in a recession one would assume should be taking over but the company says that it is doing well.

The Dublin-based company is a decade old and its owners ski themselves. Director Simon Egan, who was in the area and skied with us for a day says that their prices (excluding flights and lift pass, a week-long stay in our chalet at that time of year is about £900) is above what you would pay when adding in the various



Outdoor hot tub in the snow at Meribel

at the top of the world



One of the luxurious chalets in which Sam McBride stayed

extras on a standard ski holiday, but not by as much as you would first think. It has to be said that in sporting terms, this is to skiing what an all-inclusive beach holiday is to swimming; a relative, but a fairly distant one. It is certainly not a holiday designed for anyone looking to lose weight or with a drink problem; food is ever-present and, in true Gallic custom, the only alcohol which seems not to be available is spirits. On the food front, day begins with a breakfast which, other than the time of day, is by any definition

a dinner. Our outstanding chef, Sophie McCann sent us off to the slopes with freshly baked pastries and drinks for some skiing before lunch in one of the mountain top restaurants. Then eventually back home for dinner, a three-course meal is served with a different French wine each night. From a salad of blue cheese with pear and spiced candied nuts to potatoes pummelled with vast quantities of fresh herbs and Mediterranean olive oil, the food was almost as good as the skiing.



TRAVEL FACTS
 Sam travelled with Highlife to Meribel in March 2012. The Highlife season runs from December 1, 2012 to April 21, 2013 and the award-winning ski holidays are available from €805 for an adult and €658 for a child under 12. Short breaks are also available from three to four nights from €499 and include transfers to and from chalets, accommodation with saunas or hot tubs and log fires, delicious food, good wines and a complimentary bar and Highlife ski guiding. Ski passes are available from €40 per day. Skis, boots and poles from €30 per day. Pamper off piste – 60 minute massage €82 Aer Lingus One-way fares start from €70 including taxes and charges. For full details on Highlife's range of ski chalet holidays in France check out www.highlife.ie, call +353 1 677 1100 or email info@highlife.ie.