

TO TRULY appreciate the full pleasure of first-class air travel it's probably necessary to spend a good, solid apprenticeship in the economy seats. The same principle applies to ski holidays. Well, that's the thought that was running through my mind back in April as I sat munching a baguette on the shores of Lake Annecy.

I was one of five journalists and we were all guests of the Dublin-based Highlife ski holiday company.

Looking out across the lake and the surrounding mountains, I couldn't help thinking of my first ever ski-trip.

The resort was Livigno, Italy. It was a budget option. Cheap, cheerful, no frills.

The actual trip to Livigno was a mini-odyssey. The three-hour flight to Bergamo was followed by an epic five-hour transfer to the slopes. One particular memory from that journey remains fresh.

Midway through our marathon trip to the Dolomites the coach stopped at a small town where for the princely sum of €10 we were treated to a slap up meal of sloppy pasta, lukewarm tomato sauce and stale bread. Any self-respecting Italian would have continued to starve rather than eat it. But, we were Irish, and we were ravenous so we shovelled it into us.

Like I say, I was thinking about that rank, bad dining experience as I ate my baguette and listened to the water lapping against the wooden jetty. If Livigno was economy class, then I reckoned I had moved towards the front of the plane.

As the name suggests, Highlife's holidays aren't for those seeking the cheapest possible deal. Founded 11 years ago by three Dublin friends, Highlife has carved out a niche in the highly competitive chalet market. They offer accommodation in Morzine, Meribel and Val d'Isere. All their chalets come with a professional chef and a host.

With Highlife, they try to maximise the pleasure and minimise the pain. Our trip to Val d'Isere was a prime example. Following an early flight from Dublin, a shuttle bus was waiting for us when we arrived in Geneva. Promptly whisked away from the airport, we stopped for that brief lunch by the lake, yet it was still only around 2pm when we arrived at Chalet Morelle. We were skiing about an hour later.

The fact that it's possible to be skiing by mid-day means that many of Highlife's customers are now taking advantage of their three and four-night breaks. Leaving Ireland on a Sunday, it's possible to get your annual ski fix before returning home on Wednesday or Thursday.

Although the Highlife experience places a major emphasis on great food and excellent service, a ski holiday is still all about the snow and the slopes. Regardless of the comfort of your bed, or the quality of your morning coffee, it all comes back to the skiing.

And that's why I was particularly excited, and to be honest, ever so slightly nervous, about our destination.

Living the High



Factfile

■ The Highlife season runs from November 30 2013 to April 20 2014 and the award-winning ski holidays are available from €840 for an adult and €686 for a child under 12.

■ Short breaks are also available from three to four nights from €514. Prices include; minibus transfers to and from your chalet.

■ For full details on Highlife's range of ski chalet holidays in France see www.highlife.ie/, call 003531 677 1100, or email: info@highlife.ie.

Val d'Isere. It's an iconic location. The world's best skiers come here every December for the World Cup. It was also used for the 1992 Winter Olympics and the 2009 World Championships.

In short, it's a place for proper skiers. *Where to Ski and Snowboard* described it as "one of the world's best resorts for experts". The guidebook also stated that it was a great place for "confident, mileage-hungry intermediates".

No doubt such a review would leave most

'experts' and 'confident intermediates' salivating at the lips. My problem was that neither description fits me.

I am a thoroughly average skier. Like most Irishmen in the Alps, I compensate for my lack of silky technique with a mixture of recklessness and raw ignorance. And to be honest, this recipe normally does the trick. My real expertise actually lies in falling. I am quite brilliant at taking a tumble. (The trick is not to fight it). Despite some spectacular disasters, including one incident when I broke a ski, I've yet to come to any serious harm.

Admittedly, it's a suspect skillset, and privately I feared that the steep slopes of Val d'Isere would expose my limitations. Yet, by the end of the first afternoon, all my anxieties had been laid to rest. Yes, Val d'Isere is a superb spot for budding Olympians. But it's also provides a vast amount of excellent terrain for bog-standard skiers such as myself. Having spent a few hours speeding along some enjoyable blues and slightly more taxing red runs, I was confident that I'd return home with all my limbs intact, which I did.

For the record, a member of our party who was an absolute beginner actually learned

"Although the Highlife experience places a major emphasis on great food and excellent service, a ski holiday is still all about the snow and the slopes. Regardless of the comfort of your bed, or the quality of your morning coffee, it all comes back to the skiing"

to ski during our short trip. In terms of rewarding the demands of a typical skier, Val d'Isere ticks every box. But when you combine the thrills of this superb resort with the comforts of Chalet Morelle, it's the ultimate ski holiday. Warm and spacious, the chalet was a haven after a hard day of gliding (and sometimes



THE IRISH NEWS READER HOLIDAYS

4* Birmingham City Break

Departing Fridays, Nov 2013 - Jan 2014

3 Days - From only **£169** pps

Incl. Flights Belfast City to Birmingham - 2nts accomm at 4* Novotel Hotel - Breakfast - One piece of checked-in luggage - Airport Tax. **Not Incl.** Travel Insurance - Single Room Supplements - Transfers from Airport to Hotel - CAA £2.50 per person levy charge. Exclusions may apply. Subject to availability. Tour operated by Travel Solutions Atol 9078

TO BOOK CALL 028 9073 6529



