



SKI'S THE LIMIT

At first seeing only valleys, skiing is now all exhilarating peaks for an addicted **Sarah McInerney**

FOR years, people had been insisting that I'd like it. That it was exhilarating. Sometimes dangerous. Always addictive. And well worth the extra cash. Me, I wasn't convinced. Why go to the snow, when the sun is cheaper?

So it was with low expectations and some borrowed, oversized ski gear that I set off for the French resort of Meribel. We were greeted at Dublin airport by staff from 'Highlife', the Irish company that specialises in tailoring ski packages for Irish travellers. I gratefully handed everything over to them, bar my passport (despite my best efforts, they said I had to hold on to it myself), and immediately gave up all responsibility for myself.

Before I knew it we had arrived in Geneva. Someone heralded me towards a large comfortable car, and someone else did the driving, up miles of treacherously windy roads that were just barely carved into the mountainside.

I paid scant attention when we arrived at the ski shop and had our boots and skis fitted, and it was only when we pulled up outside our cabin that I decided to take a bit of a look around.

A little disorientated and sleepy (having not made any independent decisions for the best part of a day), I stumbled out of the car. Good God. Having only ever travelled to the sun, I was under the impression that it only looked like this around the Himalayas Mount Everest.

All around us, huge white peaks stretched upwards into the clouds. Below, a gaping valley plunged in between the mountains, dotted with small brown wooden cabins with sharply steeped roofs.

We were later informed that there's a planning directive here that forbids the building of houses that are not of a certain style or height. The result is, quite simply,

breathtaking.

The door to our own cabin was open, and a young man and woman were standing, grinning, in the hallway. As they introduced themselves (Freddie and Lynn, for your information) I had to fight the urge to giggle hysterically. I was looking at none other than our very own personal chef and host-

FACTS

Highlife's ski holidays are available at a lead-in price of €940 for a catered week in January 2008. This price includes:

- » Direct scheduled Aer Lingus flights from Dublin airport
 - » Private transfers in eight-seater mini-coaches
 - » Chalet accommodation with ski detox facilities included
 - » Food and wine, prepared by a trained cook
- For more information go to www.highlife.ie or call 01 6771100

ess. It was like being in a little tiny hotel with only five guests. All our meals were to be cooked by Freddie, who had trained in Darina Allen's Ballymaloe Cookery School. Our rooms were tidied and cleaned by Lynn, who also set and cleared the table, and was basically there to cater for our every whim. I quickly began to revise my opinion of this skiing business.

Having tendencies towards being a bit of a 'fuddy-duddy' (or so I've been informed), I would have been perfectly content to pull on my warmest pair of socks, ask Lynn for a glass of her finest hot port, curl up on the couch and try to count how many houses were on the other side of the mountain. But the others wanted to go out.

After a sumptuous meal (I rolled home,

half a stone heavier within three days – damn cheese boards) and copious amounts of wine, we took the bus into the town, which boasts a warm and active nightlife. My woolly socks were soon the last thing on my mind.

The next morning, however, it became immediately apparent that my kill-joy instincts had been right. A big night out before one's first time 'on piste' is not exactly the smartest of moves. Nonetheless, buoyed by a hearty breakfast from Freddy (who, by the by, cooks the most amazing French toast ever), we were soon trudging through the snow, holding our heads and our skis.

I immediately looked towards the ski lift. It seemed like fun. But instead I was gently shepherded towards a slight bump in the ground, covered in a blanket of small children on miniature skis. This, I was told, was the 'baby' slope.

I didn't even bother trying to disguise my scorn. Where were the black slopes? The jumps? The exciting stuff I'd seen at the Winter Olympics?

Fixing a disdainful, bored expression on my face, I turned to make some smart comment to my companion. And promptly lost my balance. And fell with a resounding whack onto the tightly packed snow. All the little children immediately began to point and chatter in various different languages. I suspect they were discussing the strange tall person who couldn't even stand up in skis.

My arm pumped a rather alarming amount of blood, but I bravely said I'd struggle onwards (it actually didn't really hurt, but I've still got a scar, which is great). With a little more respect for The Snow, I began to concentrate on learning how to ski and – much more difficult – learning how to stop. After a morning on the baby slopes, I was

whipping past the little children with satisfying ease.

This, I learned, was the most rewarding and addictive thing about skiing: within a very short space of time you can become relatively competent at staying upright and going in the direction that you want. Which, in my case, makes one feel like nothing less than a sporting genius.

By the third day, I was totally hooked. Having spent the previous afternoon falling repeatedly on the 'green' slopes, I was nervous but eager to move onto the 'blue' pistes. The Meribel resort is truly beautiful, and once I'd gained enough confidence to actually look up and take in my surroundings there was nowhere I would rather be. The beaches of any sun resort seemed boring and sweaty in comparison.

After acquiring a black eye on one of the final runs (I did an impressive cartwheel and landed face first in the snow), we made our way to 'Le Rond Point' or 'The Ronny' for a final session of après ski. This little venue has been voted among the top 10 bars in the world for après ski, and it's got the toffee vodka to prove it.

To finish off the trip, we availed of the Highlife offer to have a personal masseuse call to our cabin and work out all the knots and tight muscles from three days of falling over on the snow. Then, yet another amazing dinner was followed by a brilliant night out on the town.

I did not want to leave. I was depressed the next morning when I had to pack my suitcase. This is a very good sign, both for skiing and for Highlife. Normally, being something of a hermit, I'm not overly fond of spending large chunks of time in the company of strangers. But, no. I definitely did not want to leave. And I definitely do want to go back. There's a black slope there with my name on it.

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From backside to blue runs in just three days