



# How to have a merry old time in Meribel

**Emma Nolan** waves goodbye to sun and sand as she has her first holiday on ice

**D**UDES and dudettes, I'm officially saying "adios" to the monotony and predictability of the annual sun and booze holiday, as I have been converted to going on a totally different kind of piste. I've discovered that red bull and vodka isn't the only way of getting a buzz — it's skiing that does it for me now.

Nothing can compare to the adrenalin rush I felt while whizzing down the slopes with the crisp Alpine air in my lungs, the warm sun on my back and the majestic Mont Blanc as a backdrop. The sense of accomplishment on making it down a slope without ending up on my ear is second to none. And it's what all the cool kids are doing these days!

Being a ski virgin, I was a little apprehensive before the holiday, so I headed up to Kiltarnan for a few lessons on the dry slopes. Well, after a couple of lessons I found out I was as good at skiing as Bambi was at walking on ice, unable to master even the simplest of manoeuvres such as turning or stopping. I also found out that when you fall on the dry slopes it hurts. A lot. My advice is to wait until you get to the nice soft snow to do your learning — falling over doesn't hurt half as much.

From the moment we touched down in Geneva, a team from the Irish ski chalet company Highlife took care of our every need. Its staff were waiting at the airport with the minibus, had a little packed lunch for each of us for

the journey to Meribel, and on our arrival they took us straight to the equipment shop, where we were kitted out with our boots, skis and ski passes.

Then we followed the windy roads up the mountain to our chalet. Chalet Olivier was cosy yet spacious, with a big log fire, large ensuite bedrooms, fluffy bathrobes, and, at 1,800ft, spectacular views of the valley. The smell of freshly baked cakes was coming from the kitchen, there was wine and beer, DVDs and games.

What really did it for me was the fact that we had not only a hot tub outside to faff about in after a hard day's skiing but also our very own chef, a Ballymaloe-trained Englishman named Freddie, and the lovely Lynn, our housekeeper/host, to cater to our every whim.

For brekkie we had a choice of cereals, pastries, fruit, yogurts, porridge, delicious freshly made smoothies or, my favourite, a big greasy fry.

The fry coupled with the fresh air knocked any remnants of a hangover out of me. It's a shame the same couldn't be said for my pukey compadres, who had gone a bit mad on flavoured vodka the night before.

We were sent out on our merry way with chocolate bars and water for our knapsacks. One of the Highlife crew picked us up and chauffeured us to the slopes, where we were introduced to our ski instructors. We had small, private lessons as it's harder to progress in a larger ski class. It's not too expensive between three or four people and is

well worth the extra cost — especially when you have a super-hot instructor like Sexy Alexei, a George Clooneyesque Adonis, to spur you on.

I discovered that I'm not so bad on real snow, once I had perfected stopping with the "snow plough". Before long, I was zooming down the baby slope thinking I was the bees' knees. I did get a bit cocky and ended up flying into the rope that pulls you back up the slope and got quite bad bruising and burns on my legs. But it's like falling off a horse — you just have to pick yourself back up and get on with it.

We had lunch every day near the slopes. There is lots of fast food available or, for a little more money, some decent restaurants. It was so nice to relax for an hour or so in the afternoon, having a laugh and a few sneaky drinkies.

As total newbies we couldn't safely go on the runs alone, but thankfully Highlife provides guides to help you navigate the appropriate slopes for your level.

After a fun afternoon skiing we would stop off somewhere on the slopes for some après-ski. The most popular venue was the Rond Point, a great open-air bar, with a buzzing atmosphere and live music. Having a drink, sitting in the middle of the Alps under a warm sun was blissful.

Back to the chalet after après-ski and there was always freshly baked cake or biscuits waiting for us. Before dinner we would relax our aching muscles in the hot tub with an aperitif, or snuggle up in front of the fire and read a book. Highlife can arrange for beau-

ticians to come in and give you treatments. We chose to have massages, leaving us all limbered up and ready to put our body through more punishment on the dance floor.

Dinner was fabulous; you get a three-course meal, followed by a cheese board and lots of specially selected wine. Despite all the exercise on the slopes I still managed to put on a few pounds from all the fine food and drink.

There is a good nightlife in Meribel, with plenty of bars and nightclubs, and there are great bus and taxi services to and from the chalet.

Back to the skiing — we all seemed to progress quite quickly, bombing down green and blue slopes with gusto. It was exhilarating getting down bigger and steeper runs; we even managed an easy red, though, to be honest, I was petrified.

Mind you, whenever I fell (whether on purpose or not) there was always Sexy Alexei to pick me up.

## Getting there

*Highlife's ski holidays start from €940 for a catered week in January 2008. This includes direct scheduled Aer Lingus flights from Dublin, private transfers in mini-coaches, chalet accommodation with ski detox facilities, meals and wine, and a range of "Snowtime" programmes. For more information call (01) 677 1100 or visit [www.highlife.ie](http://www.highlife.ie)*

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**FALLING FOR HIM:** Whenever Emma took a tumble she could always rely on her instructor, Sexy Alexei, to pick her up