



Champagne life, chalet

style

Chalet living adds a touch of luxury to any skiing holiday, writes **Helen Boylan**

Whether you favour icy black slopes or are still mastering the snow plough, basing yourself in a luxurious chalet can make a pedestrian snow holiday into a truly great one.

Chalets are ideal for families, a group of friends, couples or people travelling on their own who want to socialise. Irish travel company Highlife Ski & Snowboard has 12 high-end chalets across three French resorts – Val d'Isère, Morzine and Méribel – and its organisers aim to accommodate like with like. They won't, for example, book a stag party in the same chalet as a family with young children.

Their chalets are tailor-made for skiers and snowboarders and are equipped with saunas, hot tubs, log fires and a heated wet room for outdoor gear.

Looking for skiing and R&R in equal measure, we headed for chalet Delphine in Morzine on the banks of the River Dranse in the Haute Savoie region of the French Alps. Located at 1,000 metres, the village is linked with pistes at up to 2,350 metres.

Morzine is a traditional 16th century market town in the heart of the Portes du Soleil, the world's largest ski area. The resort is linked to 650 kilometres of pistes, snow parks and off-piste skiing. We concurred with the Good Ski Guide which says "you can ski all day without doing the same run twice".

Chalet Delphine is an easy ski-booted walk away to lifts and bus transfers. It sleeps up to 14 people and was our home for a week. Perched high up over a valley, most of its bedrooms have views of the looming mountains. What a sight to wake up to: the red, dawn sunlight shifting across snowy mountain peaks.

The kitchen is the domain of the chalet's private chef and one of the highlights of

the holiday. Because if there is a chalet chef who provides better, tastier and healthier food than ours did, I'll do a ski run naked.

Typical ski resort fare includes a lot of cheese-based dishes, but this may get tiring

after a couple of days. In contrast, our chalet chef, Joey, created a different menu each day, packed full of seasonal, healthy winter staples.

For breakfast we could choose between cereals, porridge, fresh croissants and

pastries, homemade bread, eggs cooked any way you like, full fry-ups, homemade pancakes, freshly made juices and fruit-and-yoghurt smoothies.

After the first morning's ski lesson, I couldn't resist trundling back to the chalet for a sauna. A stack of chewy homemade chocolate chip brownies sat waiting to be devoured on the dining table. In their place the following day was a plate of freshly-made biscuits cooling out of

the oven. And if the afternoon snacks were a little taste of heaven, the evening meals were to die for.

Joey's recipe book read like a foodie bible and she could whip up a meal for 14 people with ease. Dishes included char-grilled vegetable kebabs served with tzatziki, followed by Moroccan lamb tagine with taboulet; mozzarella and cherry tomato tartlets, followed by roast duck with plum sauce. Carefully selected wines accompanied each meal, which helped the group's storytelling of adventures from the day.

With tummies full, we either fell into bed, exhausted and merry, or sat chatting around the log fire. A nighttime ramble also throws up a few nice surprises. Families skated around an outdoor ice rink, and a marquee in the village square gave shelter to a selection of board games, where we challenged a few locals to oversized versions of Connect Four and Tetris.

Down a side street off Route de la Plagne is the sweet shop La Bonbonnière. This is a haven of bon-bons, foot-long jelly snakes and a selection of Haribo that would make any sweet tooth tingle. Oh, yes, the skiing. There are plenty of north-facing slopes within the Mont Blanc area. In January this

year, when many other European resorts suffered from lack of snow, an overnight fall covered the area's slopes with thick layers of powder.

This was my second time learning how to ski properly, and Highlife had arranged ski lessons for me before I arrived in the resort.

Over a few days, local teachers brought me from a basic beginner's level to an AD2 level. I can now finish turns with skis parallel on blue and red runs and I know how to slip slide. Ski school with a group is fun, but the progress I made with one-to-one tuition was invaluable.

Some of the more advanced skiers and snowboarders returned to the chalet with dizzying off-piste stories. The fearless among them even braved the infamous Swiss Wall. Highlife guiding is always on-piste, but professional mountain guides can be provided for off-piste skiing.

After a tough but invigorating fourth afternoon on the slopes, my legs were crying out for a massage. A local business called Pamper Off Piste provides a range of in-chalet massage and beauty treatments.

Foldable plinth in hand, a therapist gave me a back, neck, shoulder and leg in the privacy of my room. Once you go chalet, you'll never go back.

The facts

How to get there: Helen Boylan travelled to Morzine courtesy of Highlife Adventures. A weekly Aer Lingus charter flies direct from Dublin to Geneva. An hour-long private transfer brings guests from the airport to the chalet.

Where to stay: Chalet Delphine, Chemin de la Chenalette, Morzine, 74110, France

Costs: from €1,135 per adult and €951 per child aged 2-11 (inclusive). Includes return flights and private transfers, seven nights accommodation, breakfast each morning, six evening meals with wine, bed linen, towels and toiletries, Highlife services before, during and after the holiday and all taxes. A six-day Portes du Soleil lift pass costs €189 per person.

Where to eat: On the chalet chef's night off, book dinner at La Chamade which serves traditional Alpine food with friendly service. Tel 0033(0)450-791391 or e-mail restaurant@la-chamade.com.

Extras: For Pamper Off Piste treatments in your chalet, tel 0033(0)617-608902, e-mail enquiry@pamperoffpiste.com or book in advance through Highlife. Highlife is signed up to the Carbon Neutral programme, which ensures two saplings are planted for every customer that travels with them.

Contact: Highlife Adventures Ltd, 40 Dame St, Dublin 2; e-mail info@highlife.ie; tel 01-6771100 or visit www.highlife.ie



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