



Slipping away to the slopes

Sloping off on a luxury skiing trip is the ideal way to top up your winter sport, savour delicious cuisine and enjoy some time-out, writes **Fiona Ness**

You can learn a lot about life from the top of a chairlift. When snowfall muffles the world, an unexpected lift stop leaves you suspended in silence and you realise how refreshing it is to look at things from a different angle.

When you sway confidently on the end of a wire while the pines shrug themselves free of their snowy burden and you realise that you can be as free or as trapped as your own perceptions.

When the ski instructor you are sharing the seat and the moment with says "you are, how you say... alone... non... single?" and you realise you should exercise a little more caution in applying Rule Number One When Meeting Internationals (ie, invite them to Ireland, thus ensuring you'll always have somewhere to stay when you go to their country).

My instructor, lamenting the lack of a good woman with whom to share his twilight years, has taken me too literally when I insist that he come to Ireland, where there will, no doubt, be plenty of Irish women only delighted to snap him up.

He misinterprets this as amorous intent, proving that as sure as the snowflake on your nose, sometimes you just can't see what is right in front of your face. But then the lift cranks into action, the snow turns to sleet and the moment is lost in the whoosh and slosh of skis in the disappearing April snow.

End-of-season skiing can be a bit of a gamble in more ways than one. Cheaper prices reflect a retreating snowline and the fact that what is one day a delightfully

fluffy run can be mush the next.

However, the snow lingers longer in the Savoyard town of Morzine. Here, an unexpected overnight snowfall coupled with a few days of scorching sunshine combine to make it, without a doubt, the ski of my life.

At the end of my first intermediate lesson my ESF instructor determines that we will ski the next day from the higher resort of Avoriaz, crisscrossing between France and Switzerland via the ominously titled 'Swiss Wall'.

The moguls on the steep pitched run are enough to turn professional skiers pale, and at 1,800 metres, this will bring even better snow and no doubt another moment alone on the Super Morzine cable cabin.

But I'm up for it. A skier of some years, I have long substituted skill for a fearless disregard. However, while my one-on-one lessons root out my bad skiing habits, I am itching to have some fun.

And anyone who has experienced the pleasure of frosty fingers cupped around a glass of vin chaud knows that fun is what skiing holidays really are all about.

Sitting neatly in the Dranse river valley, Morzine does not suffer the hordes of climbers and students that crowd the nearby resort of Chamonix, nor the groups of 'lads on the piste' that soak up many of the purpose-built ski resorts.

The town is the largest in the Portes du Soleil, which, in turn, is the world's largest ski area, with over 650 kilometres of piste and top quality infrastructure. The full scope of the Portes du Soleil can be explored from Morzine or the neighbouring

towns of Ardent or Les Gets on a Portes du Soleil hands-free ski pass, which costs €182 for six days.

The destination is still a well-kept secret in Ireland, and the holiday-making population comprises mostly French, Scandinavian, Italian and British visitors.

Still in ski boots, I clop into Le Crepuscule, a relaxed bar in the centre of Morzine where the others in my group – two L-plates and a ski virgin – are glugging picon citron. After a few lessons from the excellent ski school instructors the learners are ready for the big slopes, but the ski virgin determines to ride out the rest of the holiday under self-imposed chalet arrest.

Admittedly, this is an enticing prospect. Stepping into Chalet Myrtille, a five-bedroom chalet run by Irish travel company Highlife, is like sinking into a favourite armchair with a cup of hot chocolate and a box of Milk Tray.

Our immaculate alpine accommodation is equipped with a home entertainment system, log fire, private sauna and outdoor hot tub. Run-around balconies provide panoramic views of the valleys and especially weary bodies can avail of a local masseuse service without stepping outside the door.

The chalet and its Siamese twin Chalet Sorinne are also equipped with their own chef and host, both of whom double as ski guides. The chalet staff are so unobtrusive that we began to think faeries are whipping up the soufflé before nipping upstairs to turn down the beds.

Highlife can be justifiably proud of the standard of service it provides its invariably tired, hungry and lazy guests.

As we walk home we salivate about what might be on offer for dinner – "I'm eating too much of that artisan bread"; "Did anyone ask Sarah for her sticky toffee pudding recipe?" – before jumping ahead to breakfast and the thought of baker-warm pain au chocolat and homemade granola.

Chalet guests can choose to join the ski school, ski on their own or with guides over routes that cater for all abilities.

Beginners will find easy runs to get started, intermediates will be challenged by the vast number of reds on offer and experts will put hairs on their chest tackling the formidable blacks and plentiful virgin off-piste.

For the truly adventurous, Highlife run guided Discovery Days, which include a 22km off-piste route down the nearby Vallée Blanche with Irish mountain guide Robbie Fenlon.

The next morning my ski instructor stomps off huffily when I elect to ski with a guided group led by Highlife's Alan in Avoriaz. I flee down the mountain, throwing off with due decorum the skills of the previous day's lesson.

The modern ski resort is designed to blend in seamlessly with the cliff face, and is quite a contrast from the picture postcard town below with its clutter of alpine residences, glacial river and gorge-straddling suspension bridge.

A no-car zone, people walk, ski or take horse-drawn sleighs to their door. Bear in mind that temperature and winds at the top of the mountain can be fierce; so extra layers should be carried just in case.

Our guide's knowledge of the area means we can throw the piste maps to the wind and follow him through the snowy wonderland like so many Alices chasing the illusive white rabbit.

We lunch lavishly on French onion soup, mountain meats and cheeses that peep from pretend-healthy salads. Then we down the ubiquitous warming shots of G n pi, before heading off *  la* Alan once more.

This time we travel lazily down through a long forest track, whooping and pulling each other along by our ski poles.

That night our chalet hosts take a well-deserved night off, but not before booking us a table in the nearby la Chaudanne restaurant. Here, local dishes are slow-cooked with dried fruit, cured meats potatoes and – the migraine-prone beware – lashings and lashings of cheese.

The smell of juniper and wild garlic mixes with the heady flavour of local Mondeuse wine. We busy ourselves spearing gooey lumps of fondue, winding our forks full of raclette and drizzling dressing over salads, while our meat cooks on a block of granite on the table. It's hot

work, but we refuse to stop stretching and prodding till the last piece is gone.

After dinner, it's a choice between chilling out at the Buddah Bar or shaking out at L'Op ra. Or seeking out some more lessons in life on a moonlit suspension bridge while high above, the piste groomers prepare tomorrow, scuttling in the darkness across the empty, frozen slopes.

Fiona Ness travelled to Morzine courtesy of ski chalet specialist Highlife

We welcome readers' queries, suggestions and feedback. Have you discovered a nice hotel, or got a dilemma for our Holiday Clinic?

Write to travel@sbpost.ie or The Travel Editor, The Sunday Business Post, 80 Harcourt Street, Dublin 2

FACT FILE

Getting there: Aer Lingus scheduled flight from Dublin to Geneva in Switzerland. One-hour transfer time

Where to stay: Myrtille chalet in Morzine costs from  1,490

(eight days and nine nights) over New Year to  1,050 in April. Prices are per person sharing and include direct scheduled flights from Dublin, private transfers and all taxes, seven nights half-board accommodation at the Chalet Myrtille (with wine at dinner), and the dedicated services of the Highlife team before, during and after your holiday. Chalet Clair Matin sleeps 20 people and includes a six-person apartment which can be rented separately. The company's flagship property, Chalet Lolana, has seven bedrooms, a reading room, pool table and a ski detox area

Alternatively: Highlife also offers chalet holidays in the French ski resorts of M ribel and Serre Chevalier. M ribel is

situated at 1,450 metres in the Three Valleys ski area with 600km of pisted runs. Serre Chevalier will hold the winter Olympics next year and has 250km of runs

Currency: euro

What to buy: confiture du lait; saussissons; vin chaud; delectable ski and snowboard gear

What to avoid: dancing in ski

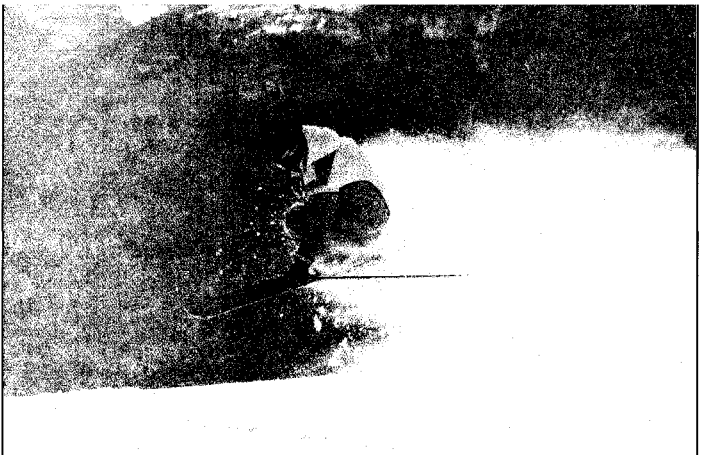
boots; amorous ski instructors; speaking English

Useful websites: www.highlife.ie; Morzine ski school, www.esf-morzine.com/eindex.html offers a range of guided activities, including individual and group lessons, a 'flaming descent' and children's ski school; Morzine tourist office www.morzine.com; Morzine paragliding school, www.aireole.com

Prices are correct at time of going to print, but may be subject to availability



There's plenty of vibrant nightlife to enjoy in the town of Morzine itself



The Alpine resort of Morzine has late season skiing and does not suffer the hordes of climbers and students that crowd nearby Chamonix