



Downhill all the way

With chocolate-box prettiness, powder pistes and reliable snow, France's Meribel is the perfect ski resort, says **Catherine Murphy**

Nestled high above Meribel in the heart of the French Alps, Chalet Olivier looked as if it had stepped straight from a classic winter postcard. Like spirited children in a sweet shop, we oohed and aahed at the open fire, the stylish cosiness, the outdoor hot-tub and the spectacular views of Les Allues valley, stretched out in front of our mountain hideaway.

Situated in the smaller satellite resort of Mottaret, where ski-out, ski-in is the norm when snow conditions are good, this crisp wonderland was to be our home for a week.

When we set out on our first morning on the slopes, our group's bubbling excitement was explained by the fact that it mostly consisted of beginners who had no idea what they were letting themselves in for. My own excitement was heightened by the fact that I was back in one of my favourite ski areas in Europe.

Meribel lies at the very centre of the vast 650km Trois Vallees, where — if you're fast enough — you can ski into Courchevel, Val Thorens, Les Menuires and into the 'fourth valley'

of La Maurienne in one day. Intermediates can spend a week here and never ski the same runs twice, strong intermediates can sample off-piste skiing on various 'itineraries' and in a lean snow season, Les Trois Vallees is one of the best bets in the Alps for finding good snow.

Meribel is dominated by chalets, with 26 hotels in a resort that can take over 30,000 guests. The buzzing resort centre hides an interesting history. In 1936, only 527 people lived in the Valley des Allues and were struggling to live off the land. Hitler's decision to invade

Austria resulted in British skiers, the pioneers of the sport, fleeing Austrian resorts. One of the areas they moved to and fell in love with was Les Trois Vallees.

As with other big-name French ski resorts, one of the things you notice most here is the infrastructure — the fact that money is constantly poured in to maintain high standards. For example, Meribel has 15 gondolas — more than any other ski resort in the world — and 42 per cent of the skiable area is covered by snow cannons. About one sixth of French ski instructors operate in Les Trois Vallees and the area accounts for 18 per cent of the turnover of all French ski resorts.

This season, a brand-new, high-speed chairlift has been installed on the Tougnete slopes, allowing skiers to travel from the Chaudanne plateau to other parts of the Three Vallees area without having to take their skis off. The new lift also means that another dreaded drag lift has been dismantled — a welcome bonus for boarders.

Also this season, two new 'zen' zones for beginners have been created alongside the Doron and Sitelle drag lifts and the Alouette piste has been remodelled and widened to make it safer and more enjoyable for intermediate skiers.

Skiers can also take advantage of the XXL pass, which gives them access to the Paradiski area (La Plagne, Les Arc) and Espace Killy (Val d'Isere, Tignes) for an additional €10 a day, provided they have a minimum five-day pass for Les Trois Vallees. The beginners in the group stayed in the Altiport area, with the more advanced skiers sampling small sections of off-piste higher up.

Conditions there were hard-

packed, bone-shaking and occasionally hairy, but we consoled ourselves with a ride on the Saulire lift to take in views of Courchevel and the chance to lunch with the jet set at the famous Le Cap Horn restaurant.

It's easy to recognise Meribel's strong points: its orientation and position. A number of runs lead from 3,000 metres down to 600 metres, and they are tree-lined, which is a big plus when visibility is poor higher up the mountain and far more pleasant for novice and intermediate skiers.

The valley's north-south orientation means it is bathed in sunshine,

the first rays of the day touching Tougnete before moving over the slopes of Saulire towards Courchevel. While beginners and early intermediates will get a buzz trying out the green runs of Altiport, one of the most spectacular descents among the resort's 150km of piste, is the run from the summit of Mont Vallon (2,900m) into Meribel.

We stopped to admire the breathtaking view of the Vanoise Massif and the Borgne and Gebroulaz glaciers before pointing our skis down La Combe and finishing up in the lovely pine-forested Tueda.

For those who don't think they'll

manage the entire 650km of the Three Valleys in a single week, Meribel's 150km of piste offers nine black runs, 23 red, 36 blue and 8 green. There are two snowboard parks, two slalom courses — one of which is lit for night skiing — and 33km of scenic cross-country trails.

No day on the Meribel slopes would be complete without an apres-ski stop at Le Rond Point, a lively bar on the slopes where skiers dance on the tables and play very simple, but effective, drinking games before skiing the final leg back to resort.

For us, it was back to the comfort of Chalet Olivier, where we could relax in the hot tub or sauna, have a massage, watch DVDs in front of a log fire and wait for dinner that turned out to be delicious.

We started with a homemade mushroom thyme pate with melba toast and onion confiture, followed by a main course of pork loin galantine with apricots and tarragon, served with spiced aubergine, steamed cabbage and a white wine jus. For dessert, the tarte au citron with mascarpone and raspberry coulis was irresistible.

For those of us who still had some energy left, it was a quick bus ride down to the centre of Meribel for drinks in the local wine bar, live music in Le Pub and a late-night jaunt to Dick's Tea Bar. The ride from Mottaret to Meribel takes about 15 minutes and while Highlife staff will pick you up and drop you off during the day, at night you're on your own — a late night taxi will cost around €20.

The absolute highlight of my Meribel trip was on the last day, following a light snowfall the previous night. A friend and I took the Marmotte, Creux and Chanrosa lifts with the idea of skiing to Courchevel. Along the way, we noticed a few skiers hiking to find fresh powder and while we demurred from hiking, we made the best decision of the week, following a trail on to a beautiful off-piste run to the Foret du Laitien, where a perfect gradient and just enough fresh snow had us whooping with pure childish joy.

Les Trois Vallees offers plenty of off-piste skiing options. If you are

tempted, make sure you know how to read the terrain and understand local weather patterns, or take an experienced guide. And always carry a transceiver, probe and shovel when going off-piste.

This season, the ski patrol will run avalanche safety camps, teaching skiers and boarders about search-and-rescue, first-aid and how to use equipment.

Equally importantly, make sure you know your fitness level. The long, arduous walk out of the Foret du Laitien almost killed me but, in retrospect, it may have been pay-back for all that apres-ski revelry the night before. ☒



NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Catherine Murphy travelled to Mottaret-Meribel with Highlife (01 677 1100, www.highlife.ie). A week for one adult costs around €1,247 in low season, €1,430 in high, with special offers available from the website. This includes direct scheduled flights between Dublin and Geneva/Lyon, private transfers, seven nights in a chalet, breakfast and dinner with wine and taxes. Optional extras include private nannies, helicopter transfers and ski-guiding services. For details about the Avalanche camp, call 00 33 4 79004344 or visit www.meribel.net or www.les3vallees.com.

WHEN TO GO

The season runs from early December until the end of April. Last month, Alpine resorts saw bumper snowfalls with many reporting the best start to the season in decades compared to this time last year.

DON'T MISS

- Watching the sunrise over the breathtaking Vanoise Massif and the Borgne and Gebroulaz glaciers.
- Soaking under the night sky in a hot tub as the snowflakes fall on your skin.
- Toasting your day on the pistes in the high-altitude Dick's Tea Bar.





Some of Meribel's
pistes have been
redesigned
to cater for
younger skiers