

Méribel's magic slopes



Whether you're with a large group or going solo, a chalet holiday in celebrity hotspot Méribel is the perfect place for any skier – with miles of quality piste catering for all proficiencies, writes Fiona Ness

In the gathering gloom of recession-hit Ireland, financial wizards offer this sage advice: we must spend ourselves out of it. Yet it seems strangely perverse not to tighten your belt when all around you are tightening theirs.

Personally, I would recommend napping yourself out of it, and onto the side of an Alpine mountain. Once there, you would find nothing in the world to concern you between the sun above and the chalet in the valley below, save for a pair of skis and an endless stretch of pristine piste.

Not convinced that magic is the answer? Look at actress Emma Watson. She magicked her way through five Harry Potter films as Harry's wild-haired sidekick Hermione Granger, amassed a stg10 million fortune, turned 18 this year and set about spending part of it on a magnificent ski chalet in the Alpine town of Méribel. This winter, she plans to throw lavish house parties, speak perfect French and point her magic skis downhill, with n'era Quiddich broom in sight.

While this is admittedly a little beyond many of us, harnessing the services of a magic team of snow specialists to customise a dream cha-



Above: the snowy terrain of Méribel
Left: Amélie, Highlife's largest chalet

and a vacant room still available in Highlife's largest chalet – Amélie, in the centre of Méribel – meant I got the green light to travel.

Highlife operates five chalets of varying size in the Méribel area, some of which offer skiing to and from the chalet door during peak snow season. Amélie, which sleeps 22 people, is ideal for large groups travelling together, or singles and couples looking for a bit of company – both on and off-piste.

On our last night, we travelled between the parties taking place in the large dining area and the comfy, fire-lit lounge. The chalet also has a large, outdoor hot-tub and a separate games room with a foosball table, iPod docking station and Nintendo Wii.

At the heart of the Trois Vallées, Méribel is an ideal base for exploring the wider region. The huge scale of the area attracts keen skiers. Super-keen skiers can ski from Courchevel, Val Thorens, Les Menuires and the 'fourth valley' of La Maurienne in one day. While late-season skiers

let holiday for you is not. That's where Highlife comes in. The Irish chalet holiday company operates in three French resorts and, having previously tested the snow with them in two of them (Morzine and Val d'Isère), I was happy to trust in their magic touch during my mission to Méribel.

Highlife prides itself on its ability to customise ski holidays to its clients' individual needs. This can mean, variously, dropping off and

collecting the kids from their ski lessons, booking nannies, catering for specific dietary requirements, organising heli-transfers from the airport, providing branded ski clothing for business clients, or throwing a champagne reception on arrival.

But would the company deviate from its weekly booking schedule to facilitate my end-of-season skiing for a long weekend? The last minute timing of my request, combined with an unpredicted dump of April snow



The interior of the Amélie chalet



Méribel is heaven for committed skiers

from Russia in recent years, while Val Thorens is a less sophisticated, more functional resort where temperatures can plunge below -20 degrees early in the season.

Stay in Méribel and buy a Trois Vallées lift pass (about €215 for a 5-day) and you have access to the other resorts – and 600 kilometres of marked runs of all standards – on your own terms.

That means you can still venture over to Courchevel to see the champagne-quaffing Russians or spend a day testing your nerves in Val Thorens, the highest resort in Europe, which has 99 per cent of its pistes above 2000 metres.

The valley, with its north-south orientation, is also something of a sun-trap and, even when the sun isn't shining, its tree-lined runs can insulate you from the Alps' increasingly unpredictable weather – which has ranged from a light smattering of snow in 2006 to record dumps of snow last year.

If you experience the latter, there are fewer better places to be than Méribel: if it's the former, you'll be glad you have the option to go higher. At 2300 metres altitude at the top of the Trois Vallées in France, Val Thorens is almost guaranteed to be open when other resorts are shut.

Méribel itself is chalet holiday heaven. Before World War II only 527 people lived in the Valley Des Allues in which it is situated, these being mainly subsistence farmers struggling to live off the land. When Hitler invaded Austria, however, pion-

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nering Austrian skiers migrated west from the Austrian resorts and discovered the appeal of Les Trois Vallées. Today, the resort can hold up to 30,000 people, the majority of which in chalet accommodation.

The downside of the British migration is that Méribel has been marked with a distinctly English stamp. Those expecting the charm of a French Alpine village, therefore, will be a little disappointed. Staff in the town centre bars will invariably be English, so avoid them if you don't want to hear "Alright mate?" as you jostle to order one of their sloshy €7 pints.

As with many ski resorts, the price of alcohol throughout the town is high; however, there are still bargains (by Irish standards) to be had in wonderful French wine.

Wine lovers should seek out La Taverne restaurant and wine bar (tel: 04-79003688). With a good wine list, an international menu (soy mari-

nated duck magret carved onto mango for €18), local Savoyard specialities (raclette at €10) and imaginative vegetarian dishes, it's a popular venue and reservations should be made in advance.

For more traditional French fare, La Galette near the town's tourist office is one of the town's most popular eateries. Fondues & raclette cost from €15 and you can cook your own beef at the table with their Pierre Chaudre Royale for €24 per person (tel: 04-79085390).

We took advantage of our chalet chef's night off to walk ten minutes uphill from Amélie to Méribel's famed Che Kiki restaurant, which has an incredible wine list crammed full of top-quality wines. Kiki is the haunt of the rich and famous, none more so than Kiki himself, who still cooks his renowned C du Boeuf (€52 for two) on an open fire.

In addition to a superb choice of meats (we recommend the duck), the menu includes fondues from €25 and fish from €25. Forget about ordering the house red and forgoing homemade dessert – Kiki's is an intimate eatery for those looking for a gourmet experience to remember (tel: 04-79086668).

The next day, look out for the same jet set as they lunch at Le Cap Horn restaurant, which can be accessed via Méribel's Saullire lift. Or take the new high speed chairlift on the Tougnette slopes and travel from the Chaudanne plateau all over the ski area, without once having to remove your skis. Magic!

choose the area as it is the best for finding good snow, intermediate skiers can spend a week here and never ski the same runs twice. If it's advanced skiing you're after, the area offers lots of off-piste opportunities.

Méribel has the edge over its neighbours in some respects – Courchevel has been taken over by (conspicuously) wealthy visitors

Getting there

Fiona Ness travelled to the French Alpine resort of Méribel courtesy of Highlife Ski and Snowboard

Getting there: Highlife fly to Lyon with Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) and there is a two-hour transfer by minibus to Méribel.

Where to stay: Chalet Amélie sleeps 22 guests in 12 en suite bedrooms.

How to book: Highlife organises week-long ski packages

for groups, couples, single travellers and families. Packages include flights, all transport, en-suite chalet accommodation, breakfast, afternoon tea and three-course evening meal with wine, lift, drop off and pick-ups, and free ski guiding. Lift passes, tailor-made ski lessons, childcare, packed lunches, equipment hire and in-chalet massage can also be arranged. Adult packages vary throughout the season but cost from €1,257. Child packages cost from €1,043. E-mail info@highlife.ie

or tel: 01-6771100.

Ski season: early December to end of April.

Lifts and runs: Méribel has 15 gondolas and 150km of piste, comprising nine black runs, 23 reds, 36 blues and eight greens. There are also two snowboard parks, two slalom courses (one lift for night skiing) and 33km of cross country trails. If you get through all of this in a week, the entire Three Vallées area covers 600km of pistes runs –

34 black, 108 red, 101 blue and 50 green.

For the kids: the ESF (French ski school) runs five-day courses for children aged four and upwards. Course includes morning skiing, snow games and mountain education. Cost €285.

For the intermediates: on powder days, try the run from the summit of Mont Vallon (2,900m) into Méribel, taking in views of the Borgne and Gebroulaz glaciers and ending

in the pine-forested Tauda.

For the experts: To explore safely the Three Vallées off-piste options, advanced skiers can enrol in Avalanche safety camp run by ski patrol members. Lessons include search-and-rescue techniques, emergency first-aid, and equipment use. See www.meribel.net or tel: 0033 47 9004344.

Useful websites: www.meribel.net; www.highlife.ie; www.les3vallees.com.