

extra

Live the high life in Méribel

LOOK TO THE SKIS: A ski break and chalet stay proved to be a great trip for *Yvonne Gordon*

LOOK 50 metres down the mountain! The idea is to forget about your skis! Frédéric the French ski instructor issues these instructions in my direction before zooming off down between the trees. I try to take my eyes off the snow directly in front of me, and the hill I am going down, and focus further into the distance. It works. I forget about my skis for a second and glide more seamlessly down the hill, soon racing into the chairlift to get back up for another run.

It's all quiet on the way back up, and it offers a chance to admire the scenery of Méribel in the French Alps, where we've come for a short ski break. Wide, sunny valleys are surrounded

by distant snowy peaks. There's a gentle hum from the chairlift but the only other sound is birdsong from the trees. Far below, an expert skier is making his way down the moguls under the chair lift.

The French resort of Méribel is at the heart of an area known as 'Les Trois Vallées' – the three valleys. With 73 ski runs and 50 lifts, Méribel also connects by lift to resorts like Courchevel and Val Thorens. It's easy to get to – after an early morning flight from Dublin to Geneva, a two-hour drive and lunch, we're on the slopes by early afternoon.

After an afternoon perfecting parallel turns and sideways slides, gliding through a forest trail and zooming down some steep slopes, we're ready to go back to our cosy chalet accommodation to unwind in front of the fire while the chef prepares dinner.



There are seven in our group and it's my first time staying in a ski chalet (pictured below). It's spacious, with an open-plan living and dining area and bedrooms on different levels. There's an open fire, lots of candles, and big cosy couches to curl up on, while the outdoor hot tub is perfect for easing achy muscles after a day of skiing. Another bonus is the arrangement with a local driver service, so we can organise lifts straight to the slopes and back, without having to lug skis around.

The chalet chef also prepares hearty breakfasts, and after a morning out on the snow, we stop for lunch at a mountain restaurant. As we admire the panoramic views, Frédéric tells us more about the resort, where he has

worked for 25 years. There's every type of skiing and snowboarding here – black, blue, red and green runs, Olympic slopes, slalom stadiums and snow parks, with everything from steep runs to quiet forest trails. Skiers follow the sun through the valley – some slopes are better in morning or afternoon; the crisper morning snow softening up as the day goes on.

Méribel also has lively après-ski, with happy hours and live bands. At Rond Point, skiers strip down to T-shirts to soak up the sun, tucking into mini kegs of beer, with a live outdoor band in the background. Inside a nearby bar, the band Bring Your Sisters are bringing the jam-packed house down with their lively tunes.

Later, back in the chalet, we all sit down to a delicious dinner together and discuss the day's skiing – and rumours that Will and Kate are also in the resort (which turn out to be true). After dinner, we delve into the



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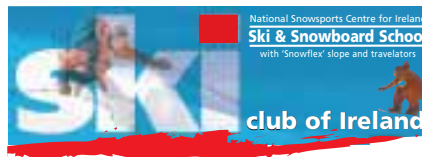
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For more visit www.suas.ie/everest



chalet's games cupboard and are soon playing dare-Jenga. Later, some of the group feel brave enough to take out the chalet's guitar and songbook for a sing-song.

You can rent a chalet in a group or go as individuals. Highlife has a ski guide service, chalet staff – they'll take you up to the slopes and guide you around different runs, so there's no checking piste maps and working out chair lifts. The guides don't teach or instruct, but they keep the group together. We're all of mixed skiing abilities but we ski together on the last day and there's great freedom skiing behind a guide rather than an instructor. But still, it takes a few days to get Frédéric's voice out of my head. I try to look down ze mountain and forget that I am on skis...

THE BARE ESSENTIALS

A seven-night ski holiday with Highlife in Morzine, Méribel or Val d'Isère in France costs from €805 (adult) and €658 (child under 12), or short breaks from €499.

Prices include minibus transfers, accommodation with saunas, hot tubs and log fires, food, wines, complimentary bar and ski guiding.

See www.highlife.ie or call 01 677 1100.

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to Lyon/Geneva from €55.99/€49.99 each way, see www.aerlingus.com.

Look good in the Great Outdoors



Left: Sorel Tofino boots, €185.25; Right: The North Face Peskara Jacket, €269.99; Centre right: Helly Hansen Warm Freeze Half-Zip Top, €65; Far right: Columbia Bugaboo Pant, €109.99. Available from Great Outdoors. www.greatoutdoors.ie



TRAVEL DEALS OF THE WEEK

Destination: Christmas in Austria
Price: From €719 per person sharing
Details: Seven nights at the three-star Hotel Panorama in St Johann on a B&B basis, with return flights, transfers, rep service. Depart Dec 22 from Dublin.

Contact: Topflight, tel: (01) 240 1700. www.topflight.ie

Destination: Asia
Price: Save 15 per cent on most tours
Details: Book by Dec 12, 2012, with code 9284, to travel by Oct 31, 2013.

Contact: Intrepid Travel, tel: (01) 524 0071. www.intrepidtravel.com/discover

Destination: Las Vegas
Price: From €649 per person
Details: SFour nights at the three-star Circus Circus hotel, including flights, departing Dec 13.
Contact: Sunway Holidays, tel: (01) 231 1800. www.sunway.ie

Destination: Lanzarote
Price: €455 per person
Details: Three sharing for seven nights at the three-star Club Sirocco in Costa Teguisse on a one-bedroom self-catering basis. Departing Nov 25.
Contact: Thomas Cook Ireland, tel: (01) 514 0328. www.thomascook.ie

Destination: Gran Canaria
Price: €359 per person
Details: Two sharing for seven nights in Castillo Del Sol apartments. Includes flights, transfers, taxes and charges. Departing Dec 1 from Dublin.
Contact: Thomas Cook Ireland, tel: (01) 514 0328. www.thomascook.ie

Destination: Gran Canaria
Price: €469 per person
Details: TTwo sharing for seven nights at the three-star IFA Buenaventura, Playa Del Ingles, in a twin room. Price includes flights. Departing Nov 24.
Contact: Direct Holiday Ireland, tel: (01) 514 0341. www.directholidays.ie

Ski season: what to expect this year

AFTER a couple of torrid years, the feel-good factor is beginning to creep back into the ski industry. Last season's bumper snowfalls helped, but behind the scenes, resorts and tour operators have been busier than ever. This season, the big resort news comes from Austria where the Alpbach and Wildschönau ski areas are now linked by gondola. The resulting 'Ski Juwel' will offer 145km of family-friendly slopes served by some of the prettiest villages in the Alps.

In Switzerland, concerns over falling visitor numbers have not stopped Verbier entrepreneur Marcus Bratter (owner of the famous Farm club) launching a new bespoke luxury hotel and residence, La Cordée des Alpes. Less 'urban' than Bratter's previous venture Hotel Nevai, it promises 'innovative interiors mixing the best of old-school ski and the latest in Swiss chic'. Opening on December 12, La Cordée des Alpes will offer 34 suites and guest rooms, each with state-of-the-art technology, as well as an exquisite spa featuring a 15-metre panoramic pool. In France, fans of the Folie Douce franchise (Val d'Isère, Val Thorens) may be interested to hear that a third branch of the bar/restaurant will open in Méribel this season, bringing with it its own unique brand of après mayhem. Méribel's fun and frolics will take place on the site of the former Choucas restaurant under the Saulire 1 gondola.

If all this is whetting your appetite, you can squeeze in a few turns before Christmas. Austria's Obergurgl is among the first non-glacial resorts to open, and one the safest bets in the Alps for an early season get-away. It even offers 100 per cent artificial snow coverage – just in case nature should fail to deliver.



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