



Time to take French leave to the Alps

High in the French Alps is one of the biggest skiing regions in the world - Les Trois Vallees - rated one of the best. Six hundred kilometres of slopes are dotted with more than 180 lifts between Courcheval, Meribel and Val Thorens.

Meribel, in the middle valley, is the ideal place to explore the vastness of this great area of the Savoie. The village is a typical quaint ski resort with wooden chalets and windy roads, and will remain like this due to stringent planning guidelines by the local council.

The town is lively with a good selection of shops, pubs and restaurants. Originally Meribel was developed after the Second World War by an Englishman and retains popularity with British skiers. It also has good non-ski facilities such as swimming pool, ice rink, ice-hockey, casino, gym and arena for concerts.

It is the perfect destination for a mix of ski abilities. The Ecolé Ski de France instructors and guides are some of the best anywhere. From young children learning to ski to the adventurous off-pister or Heli-skier, you will find it here. Our instructor, Philippe, had trained five French Olympic champions and is a Meribel local.

Over four days, we managed to ski parts of all three valleys, thanks to Philippe and our Highlife guide. It was a lot of skiing, and fortunately the weather was good at the beginning of March. Two of the days we had some fantastic powder, and there is nothing like the feeling of being the first making tracks.

We stayed with Highlife in a typical mountain chalet. Highlife is a small Irish company, just four years old.

It was set up by three friends who had skied a lot and felt there was an opening in the Irish market for an up market and com-

fortable chalet experience.

The concept of chalet skiing has been around for years, but they added little touches to make it even better, such as great chefs, hot-tubs, saunas, fun guides and hosts, home massage visits and a great atmosphere.

Highlife's chalets in Meribel are very comfortable places, real homes from home. Great big log fires are lit each evening, and all the guests gather over dinner and recall the highs and lows of the day. The chalets accommodate from 10 to 18 people, and you can rent one just for yourself and your friends or family, or share. It sounds a bit odd sharing a chalet, but it works surprising well. I met a couple, a group of eight friends and an aunt with two teenage nieces who were sharing, and all loved it.

Skiing is a great leveller, and everyone has something to contribute over dinner. In fact before many days had passed everyone was going skiing and out on the town together.

The day in Chalet Larine began with a hearty breakfast, which includes fresh French bread, delivered hot each morning.

The chalets are close to one of the gondolas, but if you want, a Highlife host will take you to the ski school or to meet your guide each morning.

After a morning skiing with our guide, lunch was an opportunity to explore the cuisine of Haute Savoie, there's lots of cheese and ham and they love potatoes too: serious stick-to-the-ribs food for skiing. In the afternoon there is a choice of joining a Highlife guide to take you on ski trails, going to ski school or doing your own thing.

However, if you can ski at all, the best fun was to join the staff guides. They have had a chance to explore the region and this is the best way to get to know people on and off the pistes. And they know the best places to meet for *après-ski*.

A week with Highlife includes flights, transfers, luxury accommodation, food and drinks and guiding. They can also arrange ski hire and schools. Prices are from €1,100.

For more information www.highlife.ie or phone 01-677 1100.

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A Highlife chalet at Meribel