

Leading the Highlife in the French Alps

Despite a few initial problems with dodgy skis, **Paddy Heaney** feels the Highlife skiing holiday in the French resort of Morzine provides excellent service, good food, comfortable living quarters and a great skiing experience

I am standing almost 3,000 metres above sea level – on the French Alps to be precise. It is snowing hard, the wind is howling fiercely and I have just realised that my skis have not been fitted properly. It is a grim and slightly terrifying revelation. They came off on the first sharp turn. The rest of the group has continued with the tour. It's just me and the guide from Highlife, Graeme Hannah. Graeme is originally from Bangor, a fellow northerner. He had been working in Dublin as a landscape gardener until he jacked it all in and took a job with Highlife. Graeme has irrepressible enthusiasm but even he can't mask the seriousness of the situation. If he can't fix the problem, we'll have to trudge back to our starting point and get new skis. But, as I inform Graeme, that will only happen after I've beaten up the surly French lad responsible for this awful predicament. The slog back to base will take at least two hours and it will be impossible to catch up with our fellow skiers. Fortunately, Graeme used to work in a ski-shop and he understands the mechanics involved. His intimate knowledge of the resort also means he is aware there are screwdrivers at the cabin on top of the mountain. We make the steep and lung-busting climb to the summit and the unflappable Graeme fixes the fault on both skis. The day is salvaged. My guide beams with delight and the

tension in my stomach finally subsides.

We set off afresh on the Port du Soleil circuit, an 80km tour through eight different French and Swiss resorts and we'll never be on the same chairlift twice.

Graeme leads the way into Switzerland where we meet up with the others for a much-needed cup of coffee. The remainder of the day is Alpine bliss and these guided sessions are one, if not, the best feature of a Highlife holiday.

The idea is simple. Two members of the team take skiers of a similar standard around the various pistes. One guide goes to the front, the other to the back. Everyone follows the leader and any fallers, or unfortunate stragglers with broken skis, are picked up by the trailing guide.

It removes any need to consult maps and plot routes. There is zero worry about closing lifts or dead ends. It's maximum pleasure with minimum hassle which neatly encapsulates the concept behind Highlife, my hosts in the French resort of Morzine earlier this year.

Prior to that particular trip, my skiing experiences were more of the 'lowlife' variety, namely a couple of package deals to Livigno in Italy: basic hotels with a basic bed and breakfast service.

It's the economy option and decent value if you can withstand the five-hour transfer. I certainly wouldn't knock such ventures but, if the bank balance permitted, my preference would be to spend a week in one of the Highlife chalets located in

Morzine, Meribel or Val d'Isere.

The company was founded by three Dubliners. Eight years ago, they sensed that times were good and they spotted a niche in the market for a more sophisticated, stress-free, ski experience.

Their target market is families and those who prefer their après-ski to consist of three-course meals rather than three double vodkas.

Having experienced the standard ski-holiday, it was a pleasure to sample a more upmarket version.

The differences are stark and immediate.

On arrival in Lyon, we were greeted by a Highlife guide who took us to our eight-seater shuttle-bus.

Before setting off, we received our sandwiches, bars of chocolate and bottles of water – a nice touch.

And the journey was no half-day odyssey. Within two hours we had pulled up at Chalet Valmont – the company's flagship venue in Morzine.

To describe Valmont as a chalet is something of an understatement. It is more like a boutique hotel.

Think wet rooms with mosaic tiles and show room showers and beds packed with pillows but in rooms with ample storage space.

The kitchen, dining space and cosy communal living area were equally impressive. Not all the Highlife chalets are so wonderfully appointed but Valmont is their best and most expensive option.

In saying that, all chalets share standard features such as hot tubs and in-house chefs.

A typical day started with breakfast and not one of the stale baguette and tasteless ham variety.

Warm croissants, fresh bread and a range of cereals were available. Our chef, Adam, provided other options. Hot porridge, omelettes and bacon and eggs were served within minutes of being ordered. The proper coffee was also keenly appreciated.

After food, we were escorted the short distance to the Caribou ski shop to pick up our gear and then it was a short walk to the lifts.

Lessons had been booked for the morning and our instructor was Lionel.

There was only three in our group and all of us were of a similar standard. Blues and greens were comfortable, reds were manageable and blacks were to be avoided.

Lionel was a good instructor and he was quick to spot our many

shortcomings.

A good teacher, he was prepared to give intense tuition but his pupils lacked the ambition and will to remedy their multiple failings.

After a quick discussion, we informed Lionel that we wanted to ski as much as possible and if we picked up the odd tip, then it would be a bonus.

Lionel understood perfectly and duly complied with our requests as he took us over the vast range of red slopes that Morzine has to offer.

After a delicious lunch at Le Vaffieux, it was time for a guiding session and we joined up with skiers from the other chalets.

Because the overwhelming majority of customers are Irish, it was easy to strike up conversations and find common ground.

The absence of all maps means it's possible to pack in a lot of skiing every day so it's just as well that every chalet has a hot tub. For those who need more than water to ease their aches and pains, it's also possible to book masseurs who will come to the chalets.

If the guiding service is perhaps the key benefit of a Highlife holiday, then the food is a very close second.

This season's customers will also be able to enjoy a complimentary wine bar at every dinner.

Adam was a wizard. His breast of duck with sweet potato puree, stir fried vegetables with honey and soya sauce was every bit as good as it sounds. So too was the roast salmon with lemon and garlic crushed potatoes with buttered asparagus.

The cheese fiends in our group also stuffed themselves on the range of French staples and local favourites that Adam sourced every day.

Those of us who preferred cream to cheese were also well catered for with desserts like crème brulee with roasted nectarines, almond tuilles and nectarine sorbet.

Highlife is able to attract staff of such a high calibre because the job allows them to ski and snowboard as much as they please after they have finished their duties.

Adam was a young chef from Hull who had been bitten by the snowboarding bug but most of the staff who worked in the chalets and acted as guides were Irish undergraduate students.

All hopeful recruits must spend a week training in the Wicklow hills and the company's recruitment procedures must be commended

because the staff do embody the claims about service and attention to detail made in the company's marketing literature.

To anyone who has the necessary budget, a Highlife holiday can be thoroughly recommended.

The extra shillings will certainly not be wasted by those who want excellent service, fine food, comfortable living quarters, and a pleasurable skiing experience.

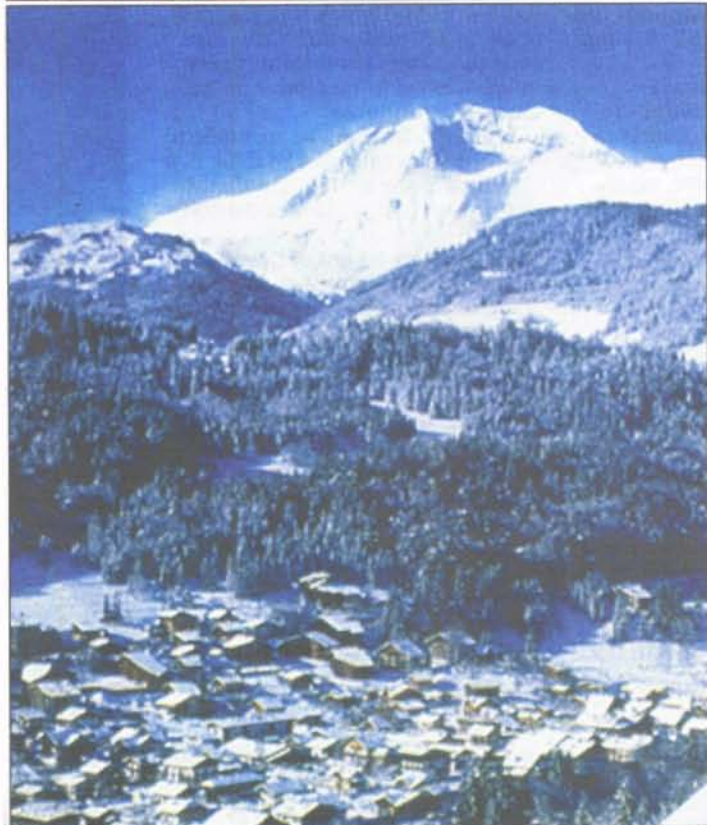
"To describe Valmont as a chalet is something of an understatement. It is more like a boutique hotel. Think wet rooms with mosaic tiles and show room showers and beds packed with pillows but in rooms with ample storage space"



■ RELAX: (Left) Superguide Graeme Hannah enjoys a well deserved pint



Factfile



Highlife customers can choose from 10 chalets located in the French resorts of Morzine, Meribel and Val d'Isere. Each chalet is serviced by a qualified chef and a host. Breakfasts, afternoon snacks and three-course meals are included on six nights. A complimentary wine bar has been introduced to each chalet for the 2009/2010 season. Soft drinks, tea and coffee are available at all times and are included in

the price.

A shuttle service is available to and from the pistes.

The Highlife season runs from December 13 2009. Week-long breaks are available from €805 per adult and €658 for under 12s.

Three and four-day breaks are available in Morzine.

Prices quoted by Highlife do not include the cost of flights, lessons, ski-gear hire or ski-passes. Highlife will pre-order equipment and lessons.

To give parents more time to ski, Highlife has introduced a Kids' Club for 2009/2010. This complimentary service will only be available in Morzine during key family weeks.

To find out more visit: www.highlife.ie or call: 003531 677 1100

For this holiday...

Paddy Heaney stayed at the Chalet Valmont in Morzine. Morzine is located in the world-renowned Portes du Soleil ski area. Just a 90-minute drive from Geneva airport it is one of the most accessible ski resorts in Europe. It is an ideal resort for beginner and intermediate skiers.

There are a good variety of blue and green slopes and over 100 reds.

Features of the Chalet Valmont include:
A lounge area with log fire and seating for 14 people

Flat screen television in all bedrooms

Two hot tubs and a massage room

Home cinema

Stereo and iPod docking station

Table-football

Between December 20 2009 and March 28 2010, prices at Chalet Valmont range from €1,015 to €1,435.

This does not include the cost of flights, lessons, ski-gear hire or ski-passes.

Highlife will assist customers with flight booking and it provides a tailored service for the pre-ordering of ski hire, passes and lessons.

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■ **IN DEEP:** Hot tubs come as standard in all Highlife (below) Morzine enjoys excellent snowfall as a result within the Mont Blanc microclimate

