



Chalet girl

If **Siobhan Cronin** failed to enjoy the experience of remembering how to ski, having her own chef, hot tub and luxury chalet in Meribel took most of the pain out of it

"VERY CLASSY, very classy," my French ski instructor Phillippe said as I skidded to a very wobbly stop in front of him on the slopes of Meribel valley in the magnificent French Alps.

"Oh thank you," I said, a bit surprised at his version of my legs-a-kimbo skiing of the previous hour. "No, I said 'It's very glass-y'. Be careful!" he replied, referring to the icy patches at his feet. "And not very stile-ee," he added, reinforcing my own suspicions.

It was Day Two of our week on the slopes and myself and my companion Joan were attempting to find our ski legs after a break of too many years. My last outing in the adjoining valley of Courchevel had resulted in a six-month break from work - thanks to a little argument between myself, my errant skis and a tree I met after an unexpected journey off-piste. And the arrogance of my instructor on that day did little to heal my wounded pride - or back.

Needless to say, that had made me a little hesitant about returning to the Three Valleys, and even more hesitant about French ski instructors. But the Gods had smiled on my return, and supplied me with the crème de la crème of the French Ski School (ESF).

When you book instruction with the local experts, easily identifiable by their red, white and blue ski suits, some say you are leaving yourself in fate's hands regarding what kind of instructor you are assigned. If that's really true, then fate dealt us a very lucky hand on our Meribel trip, because Phillippe was just what the doctor ordered.

FORGETTING HOW TO STOP

I HAD always known that the lure of the landscape, and my addiction to white powder and après ski would lead me back to the slopes sooner or later, and I had always prayed I would have a safer landing the next time around.

I needn't have worried. Phillippe, a former trainer of the French Olympic team, with six gold medals to >>>

>>> his students' credit, was the perfect antidote to my nerves. In his spare time Phillippe trains the childrens' ski school on a voluntary basis, and in between he teaches the likes of me to go from zero to hero in three days!

It was quite a baptism of fire for poor Phillippe when myself and Joan arrived on the slopes on Day One. The normally sombre Frenchman was reduced to hysterics as he observed me trying to put my skis on back to front before he stopped me and,

between guffaws, said: "Well, I've never seen that before!"

It was an indication of more to come. On the second day I skied right past him as he shouted 'Stop! Stop! Stop!' For some reason, I just forgot how to, until I found an uphill bit to counter my haste and when my patient instructor finally caught up with me, he said: "We were going to stop at that bar for coffee," (pointing back up the hill I had covered in 0.2 seconds) "but we will go to the next one instead!"

My already red face glowed with embarrassment as Phillippe shrugged that French 'Oeuf!' at me and raised his ample eyebrows. >>>

>>> But by Day Three, even Phillippe was beaming at the incredible progress of his two little Irish girls as we skied happily along red and blue slopes following our big colourful leader like jolly little chicks who had just found their balance for the first time.

REMEMBERING HOW TO APRÈS-SKI

OF COURSE the skiing itself is just one element of a ski holiday. Regularly at pains to convert my friends and family who have not yet caught the bug, I wax lyrical about the après-ski (basically the post-piste pints and craic in the local).

There is something so special about having a few hot ports or a

bottle of beer, dressed head to toe in snugly fleece-lined pants, in busy lodge-type bars with snow all around and the sun high in the sky.

Sometimes I think it's the perfect mix of warm sun and Christmas-like landscape that really brings out the kid in me. And with the wealthy Irish demanding higher standards every time we leave our shores for a well-earned break, one ski company has got it all sussed.

Highlife, set up by a group of college buddies (Alan Moynihan, David Hogan and Simon Egan), is geared towards the Irish skier or snowboarder who wants all the fun of the slopes without any of the hassle of getting there and back. Alan explained that with a small but expanding network of ski chalets, the emphasis is on quality, not quantity. Our stunning lodge, Carine, caters for a maximum of 10 guests.

Think large oak furniture and fittings, think a massive log fire, think stunning views all around and what makes the Highlife trip a real treat: think hot tub outside and Swedish sauna downstairs.

A veteran ski buddy's advice to avail of the tub every evening proved invaluable, as it was the first ski holiday I spent without any next-day stiffness.

GOOD FOOD MAKES FOR EXTRA 'PADDING'

HIGHLIFE CHALETs, which are sourced annually by the management team, (only Meribel's best chalets make the classy brochure) also include DVDs, CDs, sundecks, satellite TV, but best of all they have their own chef and housekeeper, who live off-site but always seem to appear just when you need them! Our stylish home even included a helipad for a grand entrance or off-piste skiing trips!

On arrival at Geneva airport, the resort manager is there to meet and greet, and because this is a relatively small operation, you will become great buddies with all the Highlife team by the time you leave.

The staff also provide a very welcome taxi service in their distinctive Highlife minivans - to and from the slopes, taking most of the pain out of carrying the heavy ski gear. And they were certainly very enthusiastically greeted at the end of a few 'extended' après-ski evenings!

You may also want to strike up a particular friendship with the chef - who in our case was Ronan - a Ballymaloe-trained Corkman, and who dished up the most amazing meat and vegetarian dishes every night.

The food is one of Highlife's big selling points, so be prepared to gain a few pounds if you opt to stay in for dinner at night, and avail of the stunning desserts and the well-chosen beer and wine options.

Of course, you will probably lose the added 'padding' on the slopes the next day, so what better excuse to indulge your senses? **W**





A NATURAL HIGH: The Meribel area has slopes to suit all levels, and the après-ski in the Highlife chalets is the perfect reward for all your hard work. While you soak in the hot tub, personal chefs prepare sumptuous evening meals

