

If you want to keep the costs of your skiing holiday low, an all-inclusive option is the best way to go, says **Siobhan Cronin**



**T**HE trouble with skiing for most people is the huge effort it takes to just get as far as the slopes. Once you get there and start moving, it's all, literally, downhill after that. But if you are on a basic package holiday, you are really expected to do all the dirty work first — from picking up the ski gear, to minding it for the week, and worst of all, lugging it around the place, from the ski shop or hotel to the slopes and back every evening. It's enough to make you want to pay someone to do it for you.

Which is exactly why three young men from Dublin set up Highlife a few years back. College mates Simon Egan, Alan Moynihan and David Hogan got together and decided to take the pain out of skiing for Irish holidaymakers.

They pooled their business, IT and marketing backgrounds and decided to establish a ski holiday company that left nothing to chance so that people could simply enjoy the experience without any of the pain.

Their all-in packages, excluding flights, mean that frugal families can end up saving money in the long run, as the most expensive part of the holiday is usually the add-on costs like meals out, transfers and the inevitable pampering after a day on the slopes.

With Highlife, from the minute you arrive in the airport, their largely Irish team are there to take your bags, and direct you to your luxury transport to the resort — our mini-van even had its own DVD player. While we arrived in a traffic-choked Lyon after an unexpected and very heavy snowfall, we happily munched our way through the complimentary sandwiches, sipping the complimentary drinks, and watching *Slumdog Millionaire* as we weaved our way up into the stunning Alps.

On arrival at Chalet Carine in Meribel, we were greeted by our very own chef, Mark Duggan, and our host Aoife Leavy. Resort manager James Scally popped by later for a meet-and-greet in a very informal atmosphere as we sipped our drinks in front of a roaring fire, with a hot tub bubbling outside and the downstairs sauna



**WOODEN IT BE NICE:** Right, Chalet Carine in the Alpine ski resort of Meribel, pictured opposite. The chalet has its own chef with a cosy interior and an external hot tub, above.

# Snow business

awaiting its first guests. We were shown to the cosy rooms in our chalet. After a hearty meal, we slept soundly in anticipation of our first visit to the slopes.

The next morning Aoife organised the minibus to pick us up and bring us to the ski shop where we handed in our vouchers in return for our gear, all pre-booked by the Highlife team and within minutes, with boots on, skis and sticks loaded up by our driver, we were being transported over to the slopes for our first lesson.

This service is especially useful if you have small children who normally complain about heavy boots and skis — inevitably resulting in you carrying their equipment as well as your own.

Meribel is in the centre of the jewel of the French Alps' crown — les Trois Vallées (the Three Valleys). That makes it an ideal location for exploring, and for getting maximum value for money from your ski pass. You could spend several months here, doing a different run each day, and never covering the same ground twice — as many of the Highlife team liked to tell us — though they seemed happy to test this theory to the limit on their afternoons off.

Instructors from the ESF ski school are probably the most visible on the slopes. With several hundred working across the Three Valleys, it's hard to miss the distinctive red suited and very stylish skiers.

Our instructor, Corrine, said she was a city girl whose parents had instilled their love of skiing in her from an early age, and she had been instantly hooked. Though my technique was poor and I was initially nervous of the unfamiliar terrain, Corrine had myself and my colleague graduating from blues to red slopes within hours.

Each day we arranged to meet the rest of our group at a different restaurant on the slope and with over 600km of runs to choose from, there was no shortage of new venues.

This was the third time I had taken lessons with an ESF instructor and their laid back approach to teaching always manages to make you feel like you are simply accompanying them on a guided tour of their cherished mountains, rather than be-

ing their student. Each time Corrine stopped to allow us catch our breath, we realised she was making gentle little comments about our posture or technique and our skiing was actually slowly improving, despite our best efforts to thwart hers.

I had certainly come a long way since my last outing on the French slopes when I started to put my skis on back-to-front to loud guffaws from my otherwise quite reserved French instructor Philippe who, it turned out, was a former Olympic skiing coach.

I was determined not to let the Irish side down this time, but I needn't have worried. The ESF instructors are very familiar with the Highlife guests and have grown quite fond of them, especially with our reputation for dragging them off for some very active après ski in the many buzzing bars of Meribel.

Our favourite 'local' was the Rond Point, half way down the mountain, which had a brilliant covers band playing

every evening as the adrenaline-junkies danced around them in loosened ski boots until closing time at a very respectable 7pm.

Then it was time to ring the chauffeurs for the pick-up (Highlife offer a free chauffeur service in all their resorts) and head back to the chalet just in time for a sauna or hot tub while our chef was preparing another delicious meal.

My vegetarianism proved no challenge to him, and he produced delicious dishes ranging from goats' cheese tartlets to Thai vegetable curry and crème brûlée. The meat-eaters loved Mark's supreme of chicken with gratin potatoes and a Thai peppercorn sauce.

Wines are selected by the team and there is always plenty of beer and soft drinks chilling on the icy patio for the guests to dip into during the week.

By the end of our trip, we were genuinely sad to leave, having felt we had actually made friends with the Highlife staff. Meribel was my third Highlife holiday and one of the reasons I keep going back is because that unique camaraderie is what makes the company stand out from the rest.

Highlife was established almost at the height of the boom in Ireland and catered very much for families who could afford to splash out a bit on a special holiday. These days Simon Egan and the team are very aware that money is not as plentiful as it was.

As a result, people really need to get value for money. This is why their all-inclusive package is so popular with Irish holidaymakers. So many ski resorts have overpriced restaurants and sub-standard accommodation, so it's nice to know that you get what you pay for, including almost all your meals (Highlife will provide you with snacks to sustain you during the day if you want to save your appetite until the evening meal), and that there will be no hidden extras.

They also operate a payment plan so you can book in advance and pay your holiday off in the months prior to going, whenever you have any spare cash.

## gettingthere

- The Highlife season runs from December 5, 2010 and week-long holidays are available from €805 for an adult and €658 for a child under-12.
- Prices include minibus transfers to and from your chalet, accommodation with high standard facilities including saunas, hot tubs and log fires, your own chef, good wines and a complimentary bar, Highlife ski guiding, and your own chalet host.
- A fully bonded travel agent, Highlife will also organise your flights from any point of departure and source the lowest airfares.
- For full details on Highlife's range of ski chalet holidays in France visit [www.highlife.ie](http://www.highlife.ie) or call 01 6771100 or email: [info@highlife.ie](mailto:info@highlife.ie).

**briefcase**  
Barry Coughlan

## Focus on ski holidays

**S**KI instructors from Austria will be present at the Ski Club of Ireland in Kiltarnan next weekend (Saturday and Sunday) to introduce the ever popular sport which thousands of Irish people enjoy each year.

Numbers travelling to ski holiday destinations are growing and this initiative has been organised by Irish travel firm Topflight in conjunction with the Ski Club of Ireland and Great Outdoors.

The instructors are from the Wilder Kaiser Ski School in St Johann in Tirol and the event coincides with the launch of Topflight's Winter Ski Brochure.

There will be six classes each day for adults and children (over seven) at a cost of €15 an hour — that includes the fitting and hire of skis, boots and sticks. Details from the Ski Club of Ireland on 01 2955658.

■ **PARTICIPANTS** are being sought to take part in a 26 kilometre Mountain Moon Challenge on Saturday, November 20, along the Wicklow Way from Crone Wood to Glendalough.

The Glen of Imaal Mountain Rescue Team and FOG (Friends of the Glen) are hosting the Challenge to help raise funds towards the building of a new Base for the Glen team — one of Ireland's busiest Mountain Rescue teams. This will be the first Mountain Rescue base to be located on the east coast of Ireland.

Formed in 1983, the Glen of Imaal Mountain Rescue Team is a 100% voluntary service that, on average, responds to at least one incident a week across the Wicklow mountains. Further information available at [www.wmr.ie](http://www.wmr.ie)

■ **LOVERS** of the seaside will be descending on Tramore for the third annual Tramore Oceanic Surf and Sea Festival from September 23 to 26 to join in one of the many free events and workshops featuring on the festival programme.

Free Irish Wildlife Trust Seaweed Workshops, Eco Walks, Seafood Foraging, Green Energy and a Coastal Eco Workshop with Coastwatch Ireland all feature on the programme.

The festival programme also features a Farmer's and Country Market Extravaganza on the promenade, half price surf hire and lessons from all four surf schools, dry sailing tuition, rock-painting with the Middle Earth Venture Scouts, face-painting, a non-electric picnic and a classic Volkswagen car display.

A full programme of activities can be viewed on [www.oceanics.ie](http://www.oceanics.ie) or on Facebook. Special accommodation rates can be found on [www.tramoretourism.net](http://www.tramoretourism.net)

■ **THE Thomson Summer Collection 2011** has just been launched by Falcon Travel, featuring quality holidays designed primarily with couples and adults in mind and focusing on four and five star hotels in Egypt, Majorca, Algarve, Lanzarote, Cyprus, Costa Dorada, Corfu and Crete.

Lead-in prices start at €479 for a week half board, or €529 inclusive. To find out more call 1850 453545, contact any local travel agent or Falcon Shop.