

Peak comfort in France

With personal instructors, luxury chalets and a chauffeur service, this takes the skiing experience to new heights, writes **Madeleine Lyons**

THERE'S NOTHING like the ignominy of that first morning's show-and-tell on the ski slopes, a-swayin and a-bobbin indecorously down a gentle gradient to reveal to the instructor the full extent of my on-piste repertoire. Might as well have stuck a Wide Load sticker across my rear.

Well, it had been four years, and I'd only tried it twice before. The embarrassing bit over, the group is broken into advanced, intermediate and for-God's-sake-get-up-off-your-butt levels.

Spared the beginner level, two of us are assigned our French Ski School (ESF) instructor, Carine. And this is where the real luxury of the tailored Highlife package we're here on comes into play: she's ours, all ours, for the duration of our visit. And with this comes an open pass to all the ski lifts and runs across the three peak resorts of Méribel, Courchevel and Val Thorens.

Les Trois Vallées, as the region is known, is an immense playground with some of the best skiing in the world. There is huge choice; the guides say you can ski a different run every day of the year (there are 600km of them). In smaller resorts, you can often be corralled into your comfort zone – blue, red or black runs – and things can begin to look a little bit samy after two days. Les Trois Vallées just rolls on forever, with amazing views at the peaks, and cosy bars and restaurants dotted everywhere.

A BIG GIVEAWAY as to the calibre of this resort was the clutch of paparazzi loitering at the end of the ski lifts at the adjoining super swanky resort of Courchevel, hoping to snap celebrities on skis. Imagine their dismay when they were treated instead to a version of Norman Wisdom on ice as I not-so-nonchalantly swooshed past.

Then there are the poseurs, who haven't a notion of skiing down a run, but will happily travel about by ski lift in their leopard-print suits and Gucci sunglasses to be spotted in all the best eateries and watering holes.

We had lunch at the Hotel Alodis, a surreal and rarefied haven from the cut and thrust of the slopes. We sat outside, where the views are spectacular, and the dessert buffet has to be seen to be believed.

For more hearty bistro fare, Le Pierre Plate is a cosy bustling restaurant at a nose-bleedingly high 2,739m. But don't over-indulge, it can make for a very un-

PERFECT PAMPERING Relaxing at a luxury chalet on a ski holiday. Photograph: Aurelie & Mogan David de Lossy/Cultura



All wrapped up: Madeleine Lyons takes to the ski slopes

comfortable afternoon on the slopes trying to balance dutch courage, a big lunch and limited skills.

Highlife is an Irish-run operation providing chalet packages to Méribel, Morzine and Val d'Isère. The real attraction is that they will tailor every experience. You can take lessons in the morning, and in the afternoon a Highlife guide will take you wherever you fancy on the slopes within – or beyond – your skills range, depending on how brave you're feeling.

The chalets are on the outskirts of Méribel and definitely more than a walk to the slopes and the general action, but there's a 24-hour chauffeur service that will pick you up anywhere in the resort at a few minutes' notice. Particularly handy when you've enjoyed the après ski hospitality of the hopping Rond Point – or the Ronnie as it's better known – a rocking bar with live music that kicks off from around 4pm and closes at 7.30pm.

There is something amazing about 200 ski-boot-clad people stomping in unison to The Proclaimers at 5pm on a Tuesday. An experience not to be missed.

Then it's back to the chalet for a quick sauna and a dip in the hot tub. Revitalised, you can sip your *vin chaud* in front of a roaring log fire while the resident chef cooks up some hearty French fare.

Breakfast is an extravaganza, with our chef Mark outdoing himself on the bacon, eggs, pancakes and omelette front. There's always a freshly baked cake or tart to pull away at when you get in in the afternoon, and all drinks, including wine, are included in the package. If there's anything they've overlooked, just ask.

Another nice touch, if the aches and pains are really beginning to grind, is Pamper Off Piste. Choose from a massage or beauty treatment in your own chalet for about €40 for a 30-minute session to €90 for 90 minutes.

ALL OF THIS luxury now seems a dim and distant relic of another era. This level of service doesn't come cheap, but for those who still need their powder fix – of the underfoot variety – Highlife will do three- and four-day packages.

Fly into Geneva airport, and it's a painless one-hour transfer by mini-coach to your chalet in Morzine. That means two to three full days skiing and, let's face it, for lots of people that can be more than enough for one trip. It also makes the cost more palatable.

When you factor in that all food, drink and transport is taken care of, it's just a matter of finding good value flights, and Highlife will do that and equipment hire.

For families, this is an ideal introduction to skiing: the level of service means you have to worry about very little on the logistics front. The package also includes kids' clubs in the afternoons. For a blissful escape from unending doom and gloom, this is a break worth saving for.

■ Madeleine Lyons was a guest of Highlife

Luxury ... at a price

Getting there

The Highlife season runs from December 5th. Week-long holidays are available from €805 for an adult and €658 for a child under 12. See highlife.ie, 01-6771100 or e-mail: info@highlife.ie.

What's the deal

It's already fully booked for New Year and mid-term breaks, but in a recession-friendly development Highlife is offering free flights for Christmas week departures on December 19th to any Méribel chalet.

For €1,220 per adult and €996 for children under 12,

sit back and have a traditional Christmas served up, complete with a visit from Santa.

Highlife also operates out of Morzine, and with just a one hour transfer from Geneva, a short break option offers a quick fix slopeside: from €499 per person for a three-night break and from €599 each for four nights.

What's covered

Prices include minibuses transfers to and from your chalet, accommodation including saunas, hot tubs and log fires, chef and chalet host, wines and a complimentary bar, Highlife ski guiding, in-resort shuttle.