

Fancy having a personal chef cook you dinner after a hard day on the slopes? Paul Cullen travels to Val d'Isère for a top-notch chalet break

CHALETS AIN'T WHAT they used to be. I think as the hot tub bubbles up once more and the pleasing effect of an earlier back massage makes itself felt.

There was I, expecting bunk beds, cuckoo clocks, thin mattresses and even thinner gruel in my French ski chalet and instead I'm being waited on hand and foot in a place where time doesn't matter.

Except dinner time, that is, when Adam, our resident chef, cooks up a three-course marvel each evening that more than keeps pace with my post-piste appetite. There's sweet potato, coconut and coriander soup on the first day, followed by rack of lamb, and a spot-on panna cotta to finish. The next day we're served beetroot, walnut and rocket salad followed by duck and then a white-chocolate mousse. You get the idea; and I haven't mentioned the French cheese plates, the considered selection of local wines, the high teas with home-made cakes and the "you ask for it, we'll make it" performance that is breakfast.

Kate, a young Dubliner taking some time out before starting her legal training, is Adam's assistant and our host, but don't call her a chalet girl; that's changed too.

All in all, then, hardly a hardship tour here in our chalet in Val d'Isère provided by Highlife, a small Irish tour operator specialising in chalet holidays for skiers. Set up by three enterprising IT types who realised one day they'd rather be doing something else and spotted a gap in the market for chalet holidays, the company has expanded its bespoke offerings since it started, in 2002.

In addition to its accommodation in Morzine and Meribel, the company is now renting chalets in Val d'Isère, a resort long frequented by the Brits but less familiar to Irish ski enthusiasts.

Aficionados of the old *Ski Sunday* programme on BBC will remember Val d'Isère as the venue for many a top downhill race, and the vast skiing arena has maintained its reputation as one of the leading resorts in the alpine world. The Winter Olympics came here in 1992, and next year's world championships take place above the village.

A Mecca for skiers since the 1930s, Val d'Isère and its neighbour Tignes offer pistes for all levels of ability, but it's probably not the best place for beginners because of the steepness of descents into the valley floor. On the other hand, if you've learned a bit in your years of skiing and want to take things further by going off-piste, this may be just the place for you.

I have skied on and off over the years, and while never having had any tuition, I have developed my own, er, vernacular, all arms and legs lying about the place for balance. I was delighted, therefore, to learn that Highlife had booked some instructors for us each morning, thereby giving me a chance to iron out a few idiosyncrasies on the slopes.

Amigo, our designated shepherd on the slopes, was your regulation hunky instructor – do they come any other way? – and was entertainingly disparaging about the French, the Brits, other skiers, other instructors – everyone, in fact, except the Austrians and the Dutch. Amigo, needless to say, was half Austrian, half Dutch.

If Amigo had a pet aversion, it was to the word "sorry", and so we were forbidden to apologise for our slips, falls and general gaucheness on the slopes. Not an easy challenge for a bunch of Irish novices, but, in truth, modern carver skis are far easier to handle than their longer, heavier predecessors. In no time we were weaving our way expertly through the powder snow,



Go there

Paul Cullen was a guest of Highlife (01-6771100, www.highlife.ie). Flights were to Lyons with minibus connections provided by Highlife. The transfer takes about three hours. Prices start at €967 per week for an adult, which includes Aer Lingus flights, private transfers, chalet (with ski detox facilities) and food and wine. The price for April in the chalet in which we stayed is €1,307 per adult and €1,080 for a child.



changing direction with the merest shift in weight distribution. In the afternoons the Highlife staff arrived to bring us on guided ski sessions across the resort.

I had worried about going to Val d'Isère in early April, but my concerns about skiing so late in the season were unfounded. The resort sits at an altitude of 1,850m, and some of the ski lifts operate above 3,000m, so snow tends to last longer here than in the western Alps, where the resorts are generally at a lower altitude.

We enjoyed fantastic snow, the only problem being that it continued to fall while we were there. So no sunbats, then, and it was quite a challenge to move in the near white-out conditions we experienced in the worst of the weather. In contrast, the advantages of holidaying at this time of the year were obvious: longer days, warmer temperatures and an absence of queues at the ski lifts.

The resort has its share of 1960s architectural disasters, but the Highlife chalet was located

ed in Le Fornet, a traditional village at the tasteful upper end of Val d'Isère.

A walk to the village took a stiff 40 minutes, but a free shuttle bus runs up and down the valley until 2am each day. In addition, the company's minibuses were on hand to drop us off at the lifts in the mornings and pick us up at the end of our day's exertions.

Val d'Isère is a lively resort, not especially pretty but well supplied with shops, bars and restaurants. Prices aren't cheap by French standards; you could pay up to €20 for a basic lunch meal, such as lasagne. The prices reflect the clientele that comes here, including, in our week, hordes of monied Brits.

It's also a celebrity haunt, by all accounts, and we were told regularly that Hugh Grant and Bono come here often. It was with relief that I got to the end of the week without meeting them, separately or together. (I fell to wondering whether Bono uses special sunglasses for skiing or whether he just makes do with the usual old pair.)

Amigo, not surprisingly, wasn't a fan of the celebs either, and he was withering about the Folie Douce restaurant on the

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Lap of luxury: Highlife's Chalet Morelle in Val d'Isère has a hot tub for your apres-ski pleasure

slopes, which turns into an open air club each afternoon, complete with booming speaker, chill-out sofas and the obligatory house music. Full of giggling women stripping down to their underclothes, he snorted, an we shook our heads in agreement – before asking him to bring us over for a look. Sad to report that it was snowing when we arrived and we never got the chance to be properly appalled. I did check it out on YouTube but you'll have to go there yourself to be truly shocked.