

## Travel Ski special

# A chic resort with a certain something...

GLORIOUS sunshine from cloudless blue skies made the icicles glitter like the diamonds on show in exclusive resort shops... but the snow and magnificent scenery, thank goodness, was as free as the champagne-quality mountain air.

Jewellery, opulent furs and more Michelin-starred restaurants than London are a sure sign that an Alpine ski village is not going to be bargain-basement, but that doesn't mean you can't join in and relish les joys of Le Jet Set.

Courchevel 1850 has always had that certain something, the most chic and expensive resort in France and a long-time favourite of well-heeled Parisians – and Brits – who like the finest things in life and are prepared to pay.

You soon find out that there's money... and then there's REAL money, when all the clichés turn out to be true and certain shops don't put price tags on things because their customers don't need to ask – if they want what they see, they just buy it, often in euros changed from roubles.

Enough people do go in, though, to justify the biggest herds of fur coats to be seen outside Chester Zoo and Knowsley Safari Park put together.

And the €70 tip left by the three guys on the next table to us in the splendid Le Tremplin restaurant was a reflection of the excellent meal and wine they had just enjoyed. Not that we splashed out on a jeroboam of Louis Roederer Cristal champagne at a mere €3,500, or even a spot of the Louis XIII Rare Cask cognac at €22,000 a bottle,

but we did have a delicious dinner which didn't break the bank.

You don't need to go star-chasing to eat well, as travel experts Flexiski also showed us just minutes away from the lifts at their newly-refurbished, chalet-style Hotel Saint Louis, with its keen and knowledgeable young staff and spot-on, multi-course menus following pre-dinner canapés and champagne in front of a log fire.

It's also handy if you're not too far away at lunchtime, for you can ski down the flattering Bellecôte run and just walk across the road for a gourmet burger or plat du jour in the sun on the hotel's La Terrasse, before popping back on the snow for the afternoon.

Courchevel 1850 is one of the rarefied places where skiing can be dumped in favour of the 'pre' and 'apres-' by a

good many visitors, but that takes nothing away from the fact that it's at the heart of THE biggest ski area in the world.

The highest of four Savoyarde villages, 'Courch' has amazing skiing and its special cachet marks it out as very different from its siblings lower down, with its direct links to Méribel and on to Val Thorens and the other resorts of the Trois Vallées.

To call the vast area simply 'The Three Valleys' seems an almost throwaway, inadequate name for such a mind-blowing experience you can enjoy on skis or snowboard, with the sheer

scale and beauty of the stunning, high altitude playground difficult to get your head around.

You don't have to be a seasoned expert, fearless young go-getter or an avid black-run collector to share it from end to end, either, because there are runs to massage every ego and reassure the most nervous or fragile that skiing and boarding are the greatest recreations on earth.

Flexiski tailor breaks to suit each individual traveller, organising flights, transfers and accommodation in great resorts for weeks, weekends and odd days in between; and their team offers skiing and boarding to match. I was guided for mile upon indulgent mile on an exploration of runs around Courchevel 1850 and super-friendly Courchevel 1650, with occasional stops for coffee or a vin chaud at superb vantage-point terraces, before swooping

down to Méribel for a late lunch. Despite a lamented lack of snow since Christmas, cover was still good thanks to the sub-zero cold and constant hard work, for the piste-bashers weren't so much bashing every night as massaging, helped by the network of snow-guns.

Some runs were showing distinct signs of wear by midday and patches of ice were becoming exposed to catch out the too-fast unwary, especially as the sun dipped along with the temperature, but nothing could detract from that early morning first-run hiss of skis on cold, frothy, brilliant-white snow.

Legs burning, along with the sun-scorched nose, and it's back to the Saint Louis for a hot soak and a spot of cold fizz.

The Saint Louis can sleep up to 85 people, and if you do have the wherewithal, you too can sample life higher up in its top-floor apartment, where up to 17 guests can relax in luxury.

Flexiski have been organising corporate ski trips for 20 years to top resorts like St Anton, St Moritz and Val d'Isère.

Now where are my Lottery numbers...?

David Graham

### FACTFILE

The Saint Louis offers doorstep skiing for 3 nights midweek from £480 per person, and 3 night weekends from £590 each; half board with canapés and pre-dinner drinks, based on two sharing. Return flights from Manchester with Swiss and car hire. Flexiski tel 020 8939 0864; flexiski.com

**'Not that we splashed out on a jeroboam of Louis Roederer Cristal champagne at a mere €3,500'**



## Hot and cold

Charlotte Cox uncovers a little-known corner of t



WELL GROOMED The slopes at Courchevel are as well turned out as the visitors, and there's goof skiing for all

IT'S all about the ice, ice baby. Magnificent snowy slopes, a 5,000 year old frozen man and chilling out in an igloo listening to music played on instruments

chipped out of ice – Italy's South Tyrol gives the kind of winter experience that makes you feel decidedly warm. Merano, a pretty little town nestling in the in Italian Dolomites at the junction of the rivers Passer and Adige, is still inexplicably under-visited by British skiers.

With a mountain range recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the biggest ski area in the world it is a hidden treasure, at least among England's slope seekers. Not so for those who live closer – Austrian Empress Elizabeth, Sissi to her friends, was among the first to realise Merano's hol-

iday and health potential in 1837.

There are more than 300 days of sun in Merano, but every season there are enough regular dumps of snow to open at the end of November and close after Easter.

Snowboarding at Merano 2000, part of the Ortler Ski Arena, is awesome; views are stunning with sun-speckled snowcaps for as far as the goggled eye can see.

Or go further afield to Val Senales/Schnals and board up for lunch at the Rifugio Bellavista-hut where your ferocious slope-induced appetite will be sated by pasta, Knödel (dumplings) and speck (cold cuts) – delicacies of the region.

Even when it rains and the snow is a no-go there's still plenty to do and when I was there the storm clouds led me to the man of my dreams.

Long dark hair, blue eyes, well-preserved despite his 45 years, there's only one problem with my man Otzi – he's been dead for 5,300 years. Despite his shortcomings (he's only 5ft 2ins) he's still one of the best preserved examples of Neolithic man in the world.

His remains were found frozen under a glacier in the Val Senales/Schnatstal Valley in 1991 and now he lies in nearby Bolzano's Museum of Archaeology, cradled in a damp chamber (think big fridge) with a viewing window through which all his sinewy splendour is visible. A complimentary exhibition shows all his tools and clothing.

An amazing spectacle although you can't help but wonder how Otzi would have felt about it all. But give him a pair of shades, a board and week's lift pass and he'd be black slop-



» **BEST OF BOTH WORLDS** The outdoor pools at the Terme Merano spa is a great way to unwind

# in the mountains

The Tyrol valley in Italy that offers more than just great skiing

ing it with the best of 'em.

Bolzano itself, half an hour away by car or train and South Tyrol's capital, is a great town, a finely-tuned hybrid of Italy and Austria with a medieval centre.

South Tyrol used to belong to Austria until 1919 and the region is an eclectic mix of Mediterranean and Tyrolean.

Get the best view from the Museion, the Museum for Modern and Contemporary Art.

And then there's the apres-ski.

Try a visit to the Terme Merano. The spa enjoyed a facelift of its own in 2005 and is, courtesy of star South Tyrolean architect Matteo Thun, an impressive glass hothouse and a haven of relaxation with 25 indoor and outdoor pools, saunas and a swathe of spa treatments.

Give the South Tyrolean hay

bath a go and be rolled in alpine straw and lowered below floor level. Great for boosting the immune system, if a tad scratchy at first. Then take an outdoor dip in the heated pools and look up as dusk wraps snugly around the mountains.

For dinner, the Kallmunz is based in a 16th century castle and is a surreal but sensational experience of Italian food mixed with Asian flavours from chef Luigi Ottaviano and served by genial Japanese staff.

The sushi starter was a delicate, tasteful first number followed by the rich, delicious ravioli with a grand finale of mouth-watering desserts worthy of a standing ovation.

And for a cheaper – but equally tasty – treat the Pizzeria Bruschetta offers huge plates of luscious pasta and lobster served by a staff who ooze convivial chatter, banter and jokes.

A cocktail or five in the hotel Aurora's Sketch bar is the ideal way to wind down after a hard day's spa-ing. Cue the Aurora's stylistic but cosy rooms, each different but with the defining 'apple' theme, a nod to the region's proud place as Europe's most prolific apple growing region.

Get a room with a view over the River Passer, and a backdrop of picturesque, colourful old buildings.

But the glacier cherry that topped the trip was surely the ice music concert.

After skiing to a giant igloo at Val Senales/Schnals, we were treated to a haunting musical performance from Sisel Waltad (harp), terje Insungset (ice horn, iceophon and icepercussion) and Lena Nymark whose clear, crystal voice blended the perfect mix for the last day of our winter treat.

Although you get the feeling it's being re-packaged for a wider audience (less than 2 per cent of visitors currently come from the UK), Merano is a classy, vibrant and beautiful destination.

And it definitely won't leave you cold.

## FACTFILE

Visit South Tyrol ([suedtirol.info](http://suedtirol.info)) and stay at the Hotel Aurora ([hotelaurora.bz](http://hotelaurora.bz)) with double rooms from £72 per person per night, based on two sharing, including bed and breakfast and a free three-hour visit per guest to Terme Merano spa ([termemerano.it](http://termemerano.it)) worth £11. Fly to Verona from Manchester with Lufthansa ([lufthansa.com](http://lufthansa.com)) from £152 return or with British Airways ([ba.com](http://ba.com)) from £163 (fares including taxes and charges).

## Take the chalet way and show no fear

I AM here in Avoriaz, several hundred metres by lift above my chalet down in Morzine, and just an hour's drive away from Geneva airport.

My childhood dream of learning how to ski is finally coming true – albeit 30 or so years later than I might have hoped. My French instructor, Daniel Tavernier of the Morzine ski school, is coaxing me down a nursery slope as if I were a frightened child taking its first bicycle ride.

I'm in the 'snow plough' position; my legs pointed inwards, so that the skis will stop me if I pick up too much speed.

As my control of the skis improves, my confidence grows. Soon I'm ready to begin turning and I head to a blue slope with my pals to see if I can handle the relative severity in its steep section.

Within three days I've gained enough experience to realise that a week or two of practice would be enough to gain the required attributes for even more fun. With the accumulation of technique comes a diminution of fear. Fact is I'm hooked and locked into a never-ending cycle of runs down the slopes, gaining – to my mind at least – more style and flair with each descent.

The fact that I'm spending so much time looking ahead down the slope is a bit of a shame as I'm surrounded by some of the most magnificent landscape views I've ever set eyes on.

A circle of peaks rings this pretty collection of slopes, ski lifts and cafés. Daniel describes the potential available through the lifts around the whole Portes Du Soleil. I'd been vaguely aware of it through my mountain biking hobby but now the true scale and grandeur of this portion of the Rhone-Alps region became apparent.

From our location here in Avoriaz are accessible by lift, amongst others, the Swiss ski resorts of Champéry Torgon, and Les Crosets, as well as resorts on the French side such as Chatel and Les Gets.

Soon it's time for lunch at one of Avoriaz's Alpine cafes. Today it's wood oven pizza and tomorrow it will be a perfect lamb



**CONFIDENCE** Ski lessons are a must for beginners if the slopes are to be enjoyed

tagine. Hot chocolate with cognac rounds off each day's travails.

Never having set foot in a pair of skis I was slightly anxious about the arrangements but the people at the TG Ski's Amis chalet in Morzine organised everything for me.

The convenience leaves us free to enjoy a glass of wine and enjoy the enthralling view from the chalet's bay windows.

Hosting duties are taken care by a dedicated team of seasonaires. On a night out along Morzine's streets I joined a few of them down at the legendary Bar Robinson which serves just one beer – Mutzig. Three glasses later the aches and pains of my days on the pistes were no more. Our group mooches slowly to the restaurant L'Etale where we gorge ourselves on fondue, and meats grilled on a raclette. The service is perfect and there's a pleasing variety of Scotch whisky to serve as a digestif.

The chalet way of ski holiday making is something everyone should try and for those who are new to skiing it provides everything needed to make life as easy as possible.

Andy Cronshaw

## FACTFILE

Andy Cronshaw travelled to Geneva from Manchester with EasyJet ([Easyjet.com](http://Easyjet.com)). He stayed with tgski ([tgski.co.uk](http://tgski.co.uk)) 01452 731 000, which organised transfers, accommodation, ski hire and lessons. See the website for special offers.



» **EPIC SURROUNDINGS** Try to take in the views as you concentrate on hurtling down the mountains