

Skiing French Style

Holidaying in **les Alpes Françaises** means more than perfect powder – allow yourself to be seduced...

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RESTAURANT - PUB
La Ferme de Roberty

.....WORDS RACHAEL OAKES-ASH



Clockwise from left: aerial view of Val d'Isère; skiing in Courchevel; fine food and wine.



The Swiss slopes are immaculate (one would not expect anything less) and the Italian slopes guarantee a good coffee (if you're prepared to wait for it). But it's the French slopes that have my vote. The French are crazy and no more so than in the Alpine regions where the oxygen is thin. I love my food, my wine and my credit card, and as a single, 30-something woman craving some attention, the French Alps are a natural choice. Where else can you dine on Michelin-starred *foie gras*, sip Sancerre, max out on Louis Vuitton and flirt like a teenager with suave French men? And all of this during your lunch break from the pistes.

It's heaven for my alter ego, Mary Millionaire, who usually comes out to play after one too many bubbles – though, in France, she prefers to be called Marie. She makes an immediate appearance on my first day when I meet Aldo, my French-Italian mountain guide. Aldo has an Olivier Martinez smile and "I-know-you-want-me" aloofness.

The trouble is, he knows right: I do. I'm hooked and we have yet to leave my hotel in the French Alp resort of Tignes, where he meets me for my first day on the pistes. The altitude has got to me and I consider going back to bed and taking Aldo with me, but that

would be too much of a cliché for even me to bear.

Instead, we head for the hills, Alps to be precise – all 3,500 metres of them – where I quickly learn that the motto of your average French ski instructor is "*Regardez-moi*".

When skiing in the French Alps, remember, it's all about how your instructor looks when he skis down the slopes. I'm new to all of this – a year ago, I thought powder came in Chanel packaging with a matching applicator. A recent sojourn in the New Zealand southern ranges set me straight and gave me the taste I'm now cultivating.

I try to inform Aldo that I am a mere southern-hemisphere novice, but I suspect he doesn't speak English, for he throws me down a black run first up. Where my skiing comes from, green is the new black, but "*je suis novice*" sounds mysteriously like "I am nervous", which are one and the same.

Like most French ski instructors, Aldo is obsessed with his shadow and how it looks on the slopes in the sun. He neglects to watch me, which is just as well, for I am gagging with fear. Despite his self-obsession, he knows what he is doing as I make it down without falling and breaking a leg, and we head to the bar for a celebratory *panaché* (the French

version of a shandy) or five. I must have enjoyed it because I booked him again for the next day.

The European Alps are the highest mountain range in Europe, covering more than 200,000 square kilometres across Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Italy and France. In many resorts you can ski from one country to another for lunch and back again in time for dinner. The vertical drops, length of runs and access to off-piste skiing are a big factor for many skiers but, for *moi*, it's all about the atmosphere.

The Alpine resorts of Tignes and Val d'Isère sit on either side of Le Grande Motte, a 3,656 metre glacier, providing year-round skiing. Combined, the two resorts provide over 300 kilometres of runs over 10,000 hectares. This is called the Espace Killy, named after the French Olympic champion and where I do my first French skiing (not like an Olympic champion).

A 20 minute drive from Tignes, or a *schuss* over the slopes, sits Val d'Isère. Home to trustafarians on breaks from finishing school, it's all wood and stone and open fires with bowls of steaming chocolate come breakfast time. This is a pure "adults only" town, with fine dining at Chalet du Cret, schnapps at the Danish Le Petit Danois and dancing at



For decades, the intimate, isolated alpine farming village of Val d'Isère has been home to one of the world's best-known ski resorts – and offers far more than just exceptional snow.

Dick's T-bar. The exclusive chalet-style accommodation so favoured by the Europeans means most skiers in France dine in for home-style cuisine and entertainment, provided by chalet girls on working holidays.

There is a distinct feel everyone knows each other on the French ski fields, an inner circle within the inner circle of those who ski. British bankers with plummy accents slap each other's backs in the lift queue, and Swiss matrons air kiss in the cafés.

Marie's right in her element in France. The currency looks different so the money can't be hers, can it? So she spends it like it's someone else's, purchasing the latest Christian Dior skiwear in fire-engine red. Picture Siberian goose-feather down jacket lined with fox fur for the downhill, and a Christian Dior ski skirt (that would make even Paris Hilton blush) for the après. She thinks nothing of the \$3,500 price tag. This is France after all and one must support the local designers.

Any lingering retail guilt is sloughed off at the spa. Hammam steam rooms were made for this climate and the world's best products come from this region. There's nothing like a bit of Carita, Thalgo and La Mer to soothe away snow burn. Marie heads to The Beauty Farm at Les Fermes de Marie, a spa within a hotel village near Megève for an exclusive Edelweiss treatment only found in the French Alps.

That's the beauty of skiing in France, with a flick of the *coiffure* you can be Catherine Deneuve in *Belle du Jour* or Audrey Hepburn in Megève in *Charade*. With backdrops to make Peter Jackson envious, the French Alps are true cinematic fantasy. Just ask Marie.

FACT FILE

Where to ski in France

Stick to the Alps. The Pyrenees, Central Massif and Jura mountain ranges don't reach the same heady heights.

Courchevel is for serious shoppers, a see-and-be-seen resort for those of platinum or black Amex status.

Meribel is a picture-perfect ski town from days of old.

Chamonix has Mont Blanc and the Valley Blanche glacial ski run that will test your desire to live. It also has Europe's highest number of double diamonds, and I'm not talking jewels.

Megève straddles Mont Blanc with Chamonix. More intimate in nature, it's the choice for quiet money.

Val d'Isère combines all of the above.

Tignes is for serious skiers who prefer down-to-earth hospitality over style, and think the piste is something to get off.

How to get there

Your first taste of France begins when you sink into your Air France L'Espace Première seat. In-flight meals have been created by celebrated Parisian chef Guy Martin, you sleep on full-length (two-metre) beds, and a code share between Air France and Qantas means 34 flights weekly to Australian destinations, via Singapore. www.airfrance.com

You can access most French ski resorts by TGV, the high-speed train from Paris. Alternatively, live like a Rothschild and chopper in from Geneva.

Where to eat

If you only dine in one Michelin restaurant in the Alps, make it La Ferme de Mon Pere in Megève (you can also stay here). Marc Veyrat is the only man to have won three stars for his two restaurants. Its rustic environment features a farmyard beneath the restaurant glass floor. Exquisite. www.marc-veyrat.com

Where to stay

Club Med is perfect whether you are travelling alone or with a friend. This French resort chain has gone upmarket with Jacques Garcia-designed chalet-style accommodation. Their all-inclusive policies will keep you living like a king but spending like a pauper. We love that. Find them in Val d'Isère, Tignes, and Courchevel. For an added treat, book into the exclusive Cinque Monde spa in Chamonix. www.clubmed.com
Toll free 1800 258 263

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