



WHERE TO STAY

Where to stay for a... Special occasion

From the Alpine peaks to the picturesque French waterways, we have found the perfect places for a big celebration or a cosy getaway

BIG PLACES...

▲► CHALET MERLO, Savoie

If skiing can be compared to a first love – the thrill of the chase, the dizzying highs and heart-jolting lows – then Chalet Merlo is the seductive mistress. Teetering on the edge of a snow-clad Alpine hillside in Savoie's Tarentaise Valley, the lodge has enough timber-framed charm to lure the most devoted skiers from the slopes. With its personal chef and staff, rich interiors and to-die-for views, the mountain hideaway has all the right ingredients for a wickedly good group stay.

Skiing is indeed the last thing on the agenda for me and my merry band of

six, an hour after arriving and already buried deep in fur throws and plumped pillows on chocolate-leather sofas. We are in the capacious sitting room, being lulled by a crackling log fire and the aromas of a cheese-heavy *tartiflette* wafting from the kitchen. The sun's warmth pours through the wall-to-ceiling windows, which reveal a stage-set backdrop of jagged white mountains and a cloudless azure sky.

The chalet is in the hamlet of Le Miroir, which feels secluded but has some of France's finest ski resorts at its

fingertips: the glaciers of Tignes, the renowned runs of Val d'Isère and the quaint little resort of Sainte-Foy-Tarentaise are all less than 20 minutes' drive away. With Les Arcs and La Rosière also close by, the chalet chauffeur is on-hand to shuttle us to whichever resort we please.

In fact, we are spoiled by a troop of staff set on indulging our every whim. After lunch, we take it in turns to cross the snow-fleeced garden to the massage hut. Next stop is the gym where a yoga session limbers up those muscles needed for Alpine exploits. There is time for a quick blast in the sauna before dinner.

The open-plan design of the chalet lends itself perfectly to an evening of genteel carousing. In the sitting room,

now atmospherically lit by candles and lamps, we clink champagne flutes and nibble on canapés before taking our seats at the long, elegantly set dining table. A four-course banquet awaits: delicate Thai beef salad, melt-in-the-mouth roast duck, hearty *tarte Tartin* and copious amounts of local cheese and wine.

The evening's finale is a dream; splashing around in the outdoor hot tub under the dazzling stars. Giddy from the bubbles, both cold and warm, we chatter boisterously while clouds of steam escape into the ice-cold air and drift toward the silhouetted mountains. Only when drinks are drained and fingers are wrinkly do we admit it's probably bedtime.

Six en-suite bedrooms are spread across the ground and lower floors. Their soft cotton linens, heavy cashmere blankets and sublime mountain views help to ease any heavy heads next morning. Next door to me is a children's room, complete with rustic timber-framed bunk-beds, that would go down a storm with any young visitors.

Salopette-suited and ski-booted, we spend an exhilarating morning gliding through the powdery pistes of Sainte-Foy. With most visitors busy crowding the nearby super-resorts, we are left with clear runs, quiet lifts and a laid-back,



local feel that makes skiing a delight. The adrenalin-seekers among the group are quick to career off-piste, leaving the rest of us to ease into our knee-bends and carve wide turns along the gentle, pine tree-flanked green and blue runs. By the end of the afternoon, I have fully regained my ski legs and feel energised by the rarefied air and the ripples of excitement as we conquer new and more challenging ground.

We are welcomed back to Merlo with tea and home-made cakes. By the time we reach the hot tub, a bottle on ice is waiting on the side. Our evening slips by in much the same vein as the previous one: a haze of dining, fine wine and

camaraderie. Only this time we've earned it after a hard day on the slopes.

At leaving time, we lament that we barely more than glanced at the stacked bookshelves or found time to dive into the vast DVD collection. Our timetable of skiing and self-indulgence had taken centre stage, transforming a group trip into a sensational celebration.

Zoë McIntyre

Le Miroir, 73640 Sainte-Foy-Tarentaise
Tel: (Fr) 4 79 06 48 74

www.chaletmerlo.eu
A week at Chalet Merlo costs from €7,350, based on 12 people sharing, and includes half-board with all drinks, airport and resort transfers. ►►



PHOTOGRAPHS: HOLLY JUNAK; MARK JUNAK; FRANCIS AMIAND