



Paradise peaks: the view from the balcony of Chalet Merlo

Ben Mondy finds sheer luxury in the most famous ski area in France

Alpine perfection

I THINK it was when the third bottle of Laurent Perrier champagne was winched down in an ice bucket from the second-storey kitchen that I finally started to realise what a glorious and memorable mess I'd found myself in.

I was sitting outside in the hot tub of Chalet Merlo, one of the newest and most refined chalets operating in the French Alps. The chalet is in the village of Le Miroir and from my hot and cold bubbly vantage point I could see the glistening glaciers of the famous ski areas of Tignes and Val d'Isere being pricked by a bright moon.

Earlier that day we'd had a breathtaking 20-minute helicopter ride from Geneva airport, soaring over the lake and up through the valleys, skirting past Mont Blanc at eye level and into this, probably the most famous of all of France's ski areas.

The transfer was a doddle, and the idea that you could be so easily and excitingly within minutes of the lifts of Tignes, Val d'Isere, Espace Killy, Les Arcs and the tree skiing of Sainte Foy was incredible.

If that wasn't enough, the seven-course

meal (a starter of courgette cannelloni with ricotta, truffle and pine-nut filling on a pea and mint purée) cooked with flair by the lovely chalet manager Lucy certainly did.

That meal, with each course matched with a different wine and accompanied by impeccable service, was a fair reflection of what Chalet Merlo is all about. Its aim is to provide an upscale Alpine experience that you only



Sleepeasy: all white in a Chalet Merlo bedroom

get in five-star resorts. My moment of realisation in the hot tub was thinking that they had pretty much hit the mark.

The next morning, with a heavy head made lighter by a massage and reflexology, we took a leisurely walk to an isolated medieval French village high in the mountains. Of course in deep winter, the forest's golden browns and reds will be replaced by a thick blanket of white, and trainers by skis or snowboards but the effect will be the same. This is a special part of the French Alps, and I've yet to experience a more pleasurable way of enjoying it than at Chalet Merlo.

WAY TO GO

Seven nights at Chalet Merlo (07793 816930, www.chaletmerlo.eu) from £10,000, based on 12 sharing, half-board with drinks, airport transfers and daily resort transfers. Helicopter transfers from Geneva or Grenoble start at £200pp each way. Air France (08701 424343, www.airfrance.co.uk) flies from London City airport to Geneva three times a day return from £80.90.

It's Tyrol time, as Innsbruck comes in from the cold

BY MATT BARR

INNSBRUCK is one of Austria's Alpine jewels. As capital of the country's Tyrol region, it mixes a strong local identity with a deserved reputation for being cosmopolitan. Baroque and rococo history seeps from every pore, while the nightlife makes it a veritable Studio 54 compared to the Eurodisco hell of most resorts.

And then there are its links to some of Europe's best resorts. The surrounding area is fairly brimming with world-class ski areas, from heavy hitters such as Mayrhofen to lesser-known yet easily accessed gems such as Axamer Lizum. There are at least 25 within an hour's drive.

All of which makes it surprising that the place has never really registered on the radar of the majority of British skiers. Perhaps it's because for most Brits a ski holiday involves basing yourself in a resort and spending your week intimately acquainting yourself with every run and bar. Or perhaps it's down to the dearth of travel options for snow-happy Brits.

For some reason, Innsbruck has been very underserved by UK carriers and operators in recent years compared with a

lavishly serviced hub such as Geneva.

This is set to change this season, thanks to a sudden increase in the number of carriers offering UK flights to the city. Foremost of these is easyJet, which launched routes linking Innsbruck with Gatwick and Bristol earlier this year. easyJet's Geneva route pretty much transformed low-cost ski travel in this country, and it's expected that this service will have a similar impact. Other low-cost carriers have also met the challenge, notably www.jfl2go.com, whose selling point is its lack of hidden charges on flights from Manchester and Gatwick to the city.

The opening of these routes coincides with some exciting new developments in the city. The most interesting is the Zaha Hadid-designed Nordkette railway, which will link Innsbruck to the resorts of Hungerburg, Seegrube and Hafelekar in less than half an hour. With Seegrube also home to one of Europe's most cutting-edge snowboard parks, it means Innsbruck is going to be the perfect place from which to combine a city break with some of the best skiing and snowboarding in Europe.

● www.innsbruck-tourism.at



Gateway to the hills: Innsbruck's Maria-Therisen Strasse

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