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The high life in the French Alps

By Sankha Guha

Geneva. From the plane I can see a black Audi pulling up. As I step out, a liveried chauffeur separates me from the hoi polloi and ushers me down the service steps. I sink into the leather-scented interior of the limo and am driven to the baggage hall. My cases and I are whisked through the most fleeting formalities in a VIP passport control area behind unmarked doors. Then back to the car, which cruises past the main runways to my helicopter.

I am not dreaming, though at some point it crosses my mind that a cosmic swap has occurred. I may have fallen through a black hole and, in another universe, David Beckham or maybe the potentate of a mid-ranking sub-Saharan nation is still waiting for a ride.

The helicopter soars high above the 140m reach of Geneva's landmark fountain, the Jet d'Eau. Spectacular as the fountain is, from up here it is only one small feature vying for attention against the drama of the snow-laden Alps – rising alarmingly fast against our approach.

It is a bright clear day. Mont Blanc appears as a white fang against the deep blue sky as we skip over barbed ridges and dizzy drops making our way south east to Sainte Foy in the lower Tarentaise valley. The 25-minute flight is over all too soon – the helicopter banks around, leaving my stomach in mid-air and sets down in crunching snow by the roadside. Five minutes later I am sipping champagne in the chalet. In the real world, the road transfer from Geneva takes more than three hours.

Chalet Merlo is owned by Marshall Findley, a managing director at the Blackstone Group, the US private equity firm, so a certain level of luxury is a given. It is big (245 sq m) with six double bedrooms and comes with its own sauna, spa and two-storey gym. Egged on by the green-eyed god of envy, I secretly hope that the interior design will be hideous enough for me to pity the owners.

None of it. Somehow the lavish interior manages to be almost understated. Recycled pine is a leitmotif – lending the bedrooms, the bathrooms and even the frame of the huge plasma TV an air of cosy rusticity. The chocolate leather armchairs, the generous Persian

rugs and Ralph Lauren cushions are luxuriously comfortable. Oligarchs and gangsta rappers may not be impressed but they are probably not the target market.

We are off-resort in the tiny hamlet of Le Mirroir near Sainte Foy. If you are after bright lights, the nearest destination is Val d'Isère – more than half an hour's drive – which, despite the chauffeur, can be a pain. But for skiing the location can hardly be bettered.

Sainte Foy's own ski area is petite but highly rated by locals. Fifteen minutes away is Espace Killy with 300km of interconnecting pistes. The 425km industrial strength Paradiski area of Les Arcs/La Plagne is even closer, reached from Villaroger just across the valley. And to add an Italian flavour, the Aosta valley is a short hop over the mountains from La Rosière, about 20 minutes away.

Chris Harrop, head of the construction company that built Chalet Merlo, has offered to be my ski guide. Harrop, a no-nonsense entrepreneur from Bolton, north-west England, arrived in the valley as a ski bum and ended up staying longer than he planned. About 27 years longer. Now his company builds ski chalets for the discerning super-rich.

Though old enough to know better, Harrop is still the kind of alpha-skier who thinks nothing of skinning up a ridge alone by night and descending off-piste down cliff and *couloir* in the ghostly glow of moonlight. Sensing my anxiety en route to Tignes Les Brevières, where we will access the endless connecting runs of the Espace Killy, Harrop amuses himself by telling me stories of skiers he has sent home in plastercasts.

We spend the morning on flattering wide runs as I slowly find my ski legs. Just as I am convinced I am the prince of the piste, it becomes obvious that Harrop is bored. After lunch somewhere near the top of the Daille, he steers into La Vallée Perdue, or "the lost valley". This is a narrow ravine with no space to swing a marmot. We pass a Russian group who, like me, seem to be outside their comfort zone.

Unable to control my speed in the ever-narrowing gully, I follow my leader with a mounting sense of panic. The run comes to an abrupt end in a cave. Here Harrop orders me to take off my skis – which he promptly hurls over some rocks. I am then told to descend through a hole in the mountain on hands and knees. I have a bad moment picturing myself stuck fast like Winnie the Pooh in Rabbit's burrow after too much honey. Once through the hole, we clip the skis back on, breathless and sweaty.

I then point myself downwards and round a blind corner. A rat-a-tat succession of hillocks hits me and I am soon hopelessly out of control. The only way to slow down is to ram myself into the rock wall. As emergency stops go, it is very successful. Wedged between a rock and a lot of hard ice, I try to stand up but this requires the skills of a contortionist. Just up the gully, the equally rattled Russians are audible. The likelihood

of their skis branding my chest seems imminent. Where is that helicopter when you really need it?

I make my escape, just.

There are numerous consolations at the chalet for a bruised body and ego. Despite the fresh humiliations of each ski day, returning to champagne and home-baked cakes has a mystical restorative effect. Almost needless to say, the palatial gym remains unvisited, though the sauna gets good use.

For sheer feelgood indulgence, however, nothing matches the magical touch of the local masseuse, Charlotte Saint Jean. Originally from London, she has escaped from a career in advertising to bring yoga and ayurveda to the Alps. Though she has never been to India, her technique is utterly confident. Hot oil is poured on and soon I can feel my spine untwisting and my boot-cramped calf muscles yielding. Charlotte finishes with a deep scalp pummeling but apologises for going easy on the oil – “I can’t splash hot oil all over the chalet”. No matter – my neurons are fizzing with bubbles of happiness as I float up the stairs.

I feel renewed and ready for my next ski assignment – a conquest of Italy. First though, my new guide, Pierre Lorr, and I have to contend with the vagaries of the lift pass system in the valley. Holders of the Espace Killy pass – which costs an adult skier between €209 (£163) for six days and €385 (£300) for 14 days – have to pay a €45 (£35) supplement to get on at La Rosière. The bureaucracy is also pretty quaint. Skiers must produce actual receipts (the pass itself is not enough), which are then taken away to be photocopied painstakingly while grumbling queues build up.

On the chair lift about halfway up, we catch sight of ominous spindrift – fine crystallised snow blown by the wind – rising from the ridges between us and Italy. A vicious blast of icy wind hits me and tiny crystals embed themselves in my face – it is like being whipped by a thousand pinpoint furies. A border may seem like an arbitrary line on a map but up here it is a raw *force majeure*.

We clear the ridge and begin a glorious descent. The clouds are playing peek-a-boo around the summit of Mont Blanc. Immediately Italy asserts itself in many not-so-subtle ways. We schuss down the Piccolo San Bernardo in search of lunch, passing skiers who seem to be more vocal, whose outfits are more garish and whose sunglasses are larger. At the Rifugio Lo Riondet, we are served spicy sausages and steaming polenta.

Later, from the ski resort of La Thuile – which, despite its French-sounding name, is on the Italian side of the border – we rush to catch the last lifts back to France. The weather has softened, visibility is excellent and the sunlight is playing on the mountains. Lorr

seems to be on first-name terms with most of the peaks. Skiing back into France we are looking down the Valle d'Aosta deep along the spine of the Alps. Mont Blanc dominates the foreground, the impressive bulk of Grandes Jorasses is a casual wave to the left and far away in the distance the outline of the Matterhorn is unmistakable.

It is an epiphany. I am, of course, on holiday, but I am not ready to surrender this impossible glamorous moment. Anything seems possible. So Mr Beckham, if you are still waiting to switch back from a parallel galaxy ... forgive me. I like it here.

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Details

Sankha Guha was a guest of Chalet Merlo. Prices for weekend breaks are from £6,300 to £9,800. Weekly prices from £8,480 to £16,400 during the winter, based on 12 people sharing, half-board with all drinks, airport transfers (road) and daily resort transfers. Helicopter transfers from Geneva or Grenoble start at £200 a person each way. For more information and bookings, tel: +44 (0)845-324 3521 (UK) for reservations or tel: +33 (0)6-87 47 19 19 (France) for in-resort inquiries, www.chaletmerlo.eu

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