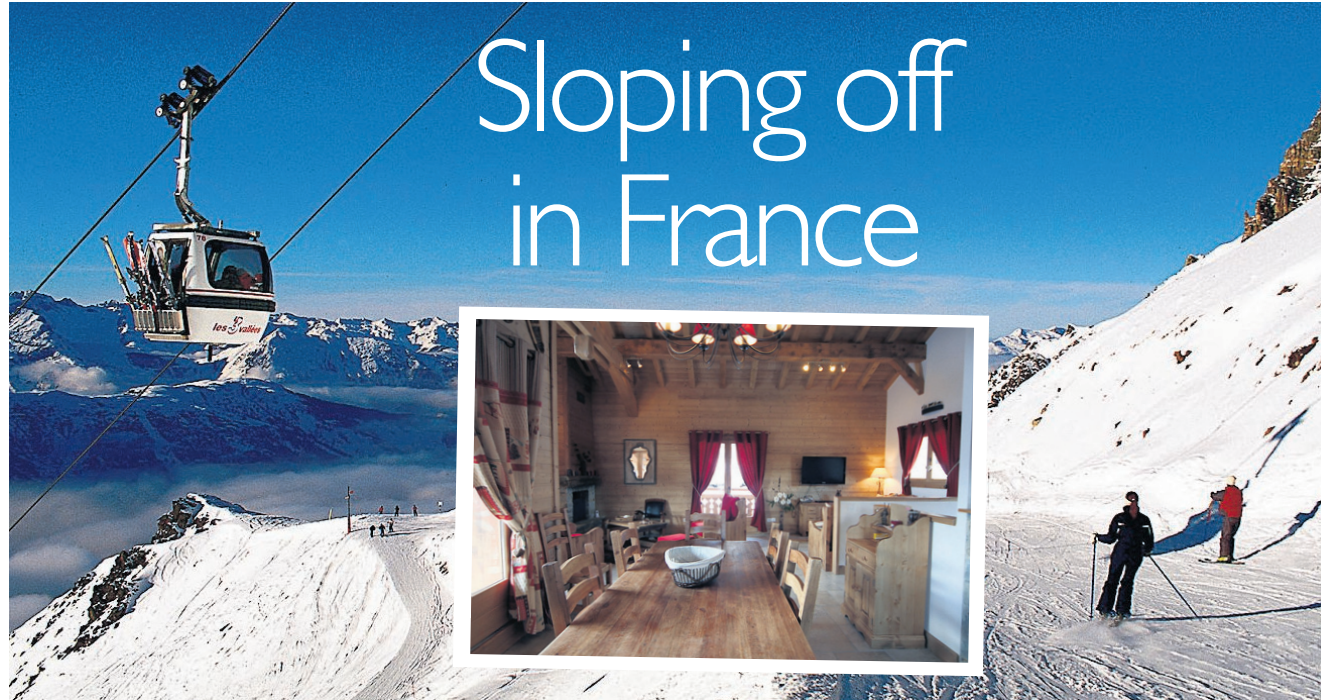


Travel

Sloping off in France



RELAXING on a terrace, looking out on a vista of Alpine perfection, it's a world away from the daily struggle against the elements back in the UK, writes **ROB BELLIS**.

A day earlier my friend and I had trudged through grimy slush to Chester railway station to catch a train to London and to St Pancras International where, under those famous Victorian arches, I boarded the Eurostar Ski Train service bound for Les 3 Vallées.

In a matter of hours we arrived in the French town of Moutiers, where we were met by an English driver who would take me up to my home for the next week – the Chalet Sylvie in Courchevel.

Famed for its unparalleled skiing, fine-dining and shopping, Courchevel has, for many years, been THE European ski destination for the rich and famous. The driver informed us that, along with countless Russian billionaires, the Beckhams have a retreat there and the day before Lewis Hamilton had left having spent a month in the area.

Sylvie, run by specialist operator Ski Power, is located in 1550, one of three main resorts in the Courchevel valley, along with 1650 and 1850.

On our arrival we were welcomed by my young hosts, Ian and Sophie, who showed me to my room – simple but very comfortable and with a good size ensuite – to prepare for dinner.

Showered and changed, we met our fellow guests in the lounge, where there was also a chap from a ski hire company

who was measuring us all for skis and boots (all of which would appear in the boot room overnight and be taken away again at the end of the week).

Beginning with champagne and canapes, dinner consisted of no less than five delicious courses, accompanied by some very nice wine.

A spiced pumpkin soup was followed by Provençal style slow-braised steak with Dauphinoise potatoes and vegetables, pots of chocolate and cheese and port to finish – there's certainly no dan-

ger of going hungry in a Ski Power chalet.

I awoke the next morning, well rested and, after a good breakfast, ready to hit the slopes.

In the boot room I found that my kit was actually brand new. I donned my boots, hoisted my skis over my shoulder and stepped out into bright sunshine for the short walk to the telecabine where we were to meet our complimentary ski host.

Brian, an early retired police officer turned Ski Power manager and our host for the day, proved

to be an exceedingly nice fellow who knew the piste like the back of his hand.

Arriving back at the chalet a little after 4pm, I hopped in the sauna to ease the aching legs before a welcome shower and a little afternoon tea.

A game of cards and a discussion of the day's action was followed by champagne, wine and another excellent five courses.

Once the cheese was polished off, it was decided that we would explore the nightlife in 1550.

The resort is quiet compared to

those further up the mountain but there are a couple of good bars.

For the last few days of our trip I and one of the other guests decided to get some refresher lessons with Magic Ski School.

Ski Power is not a huge company and because of this, they offer an extraordinary level of service

Fine weather, a fantastic resort, great skiing, seriously good food served in the comfort of our chalet, and the personal touches – in particular a host to show us around the slopes – made for a truly exceptional holiday.

TRAVEL FACTS

Rob stayed at Ski Power's brand new luxury chalet in Courchevel 1550, Chalet Sylvie (built in 2009). A week's stay throughout the rest of the season costs from just £349 per person. Based on two sharing, price includes, seven nights' catered chalet accommodation (daily breakfast and afternoon tea plus a five-course evening meal six days a week). Flights and transfers extra. To book call Ski Power on 01737 30 60 29 or visit

www.skipower.co.uk
Ski lessons provided by Magic www.magicfr.com. Eurostar offers two highly popular direct services a week direct to the French Alps with each stopping at Moutiers, Aime la Plagne and Bourg St Maurice offering easy access to the resorts of Courchevel, Meribel, Tignes, La Plagne and Les Arcs.

Fares are competitive with standard class returns starting at just £149 whilst Leisure Select

passengers can enjoy a full meal service, drinks and roomier accommodation from only £229.

Tickets are available from www.eurostar.com or 08432 186 186.