



SNOW BUSINESS

WILLIAM HEDERMAN LEARNS THE LINGO AND BRUSHES UP ON HIS BOARDING SKILLS AS HE TAKES TO THE SLOPES IN THE ALPINE VILLAGE OF MORZINE

"DROP IN TO THAT HOLE," says my guide. "Then drop out to the left." I nudge my snowboard slowly forward, sizing up the giant bowl of powder snow that sweeps away beneath us and wondering what exactly a hole is and how a person might drop out of it. "I'll be right behind you," he promises, echoing the words of my mother more than 30 years ago as she persuaded me to cycle unaided for the first time.

I shift my weight a couple of inches and I'm off. The board glides silently through the blank white expanse, sending up a steady spray of fine snow. I have snowboarded a few times before, but this is the first time my ability level and the volume of fresh snow have intersected in a way that allows me to get stuck in.

Within seconds, the wind is passing across my face with such force that I realise I'm boarding faster than I ever have. Even with my wrap-around shades, my eyes are watering. I lean back and draw a long, geometric curve in the white canvas, slowing to a gentle stop. I fall back into the snow and let out a whoop of exhilaration and remind myself that snowboarding is definitely one of the most stimulating sports on earth.

While we catch our breath and absorb the spectacular Alpine surroundings, my guide teaches me some snowboarding lingo. We've left the rest of the >

group on the "groomers" (groomed pistes) and have headed "back-country" (off piste) to cut up some "pow pow" (powder snow).

As the afternoon progresses, my confidence grows and I end up catching some air for the first time in my snowboarding career. "Catching air" – a fundamental goal of snowboarders – means putting as much air as you can between the underside of your board and the ground. In other words, jumping.

Boarding – or skiing – with your own mountain guide is just one element in the glorious package that is a luxury catered chalet break. Our chalet was in the French Alpine resort of Morzine, one of the closest ski resorts to Geneva. You can fly out of Dublin with Aer Lingus just before noon, get picked up at Geneva by minibus and enjoy a hot chocolate in the chalet by around 4.30pm local time.

Our chalet came with its own outdoor hot tub with room for six people: gushing water soothes your weary muscles while you gaze through the steam at dusk falling on the mountains. The huge window at the end of the living room presented a stunning panorama of the town and the peaks behind. But for me the highlight was the complementary ski guiding. As a child I had skied in various French resorts in the 1980s, when you were more likely to see a chamoix or a snow fox than another Irish skier. The reps and hosts were invariably English and

the instructors/guides were leather-faced Frenchmen who flirted with the ladies and trotted out jokes you knew they had used on a million tourists before you.

So it was novel, even disconcerting, to be cooked a full Irish breakfast by a young woman from Cork and then taken out onto the slopes by an eager twentysomething snowboarding dude from Dublin. I quickly got used to the idea and enjoyed being escorted around the mountains.

And boy, does Morzine have plenty of mountains to choose from. It is situated in the Portes du Soleil ski area, which

boasts 650 km of runs and links Morzine to 12 other resorts across a rolling series of interconnected valleys in both France and Switzerland. Only relatively experienced skiers will be able to explore every valley in the Portes du Soleil, but its size does mean there's no fear of getting bored with the same runs and the same scenery. Also, Morzine is relatively low (1000m), so if the snow is thin on the ground, Avoriaz beckons from its rocky perch 800 metres higher up.

Our guides filmed our efforts on the slopes and played back the footage in >

the evenings on the chalet's 42-inch television. This kind of service is a mixed blessing: your worst wipe-outs get played over and over for the titillation of the group. Usually you can make an extra effort not to fall on your face when the camcorder appears, but the lads were trying out a new gadget, involving a small lens attached to the ski-hat, for no-hands filming while skiing. You never knew when you were under surveillance.

Even the fittest and most fearless skiers will only spend about six hours on the slopes out of every 24. So the attractions of the resort town itself are as important as the slopes that surround it. Morzine is a 16th-century market town in a dramatic setting on two sides of the gorge carved out by the tumbling waters of the River Dranse. Thanks to exemplary planning laws, the town's traditional building style, using local slate and timber, has persevered, and with it a natural, unfussy charm.

On a more practical note, Morzine is a proper working town with a permanent population of 3,000 and thus has a better range of shops and general services than most resorts. The multi-screen cinema shows plenty of movies in English, or you can sit among locals in the Palais des Sports to cheer on the Morzine Penguins in the French ice hockey league.

When you overdose on fresh air and

general exhilaration, you quickly develop an appetite for more. So it was that I was persuaded to shackle myself to a Frenchman and leap off a ledge high above the town with a lightweight parachute. This is paragliding, and it's just one of scores of non-skiing activities on offer in Morzine, ranging from the high-adrenaline to the sedate.

All in all, I'd find it hard to justify looking elsewhere for my next snowboarding holiday. In fact, I had skied in Morzine a few years earlier, and liked the town so much I came back the following August. Flower-boxes on every window gushed vivid pinks and purples; families of goats wandered along the mountain tracks; sloping meadows of blooming wild flowers took the place of red and black runs.

We hired mountain bikes and were pleasantly surprised to discover that you can avoid any uphill cycling through the cunning use of the few chairlifts that are running in summer (the lift operator helpfully hangs your bike on a specially designed hook at the side of the chair).

But I'll be sure to return to Morzine in winter for more heart-stopping snowboarding. Perhaps I'll go back in 20 years to see whether the young Irish guides and hosts have turned into leather-faced Frenchmen who flirt and tell stale jokes. □

Fact file

Best skiing/snowboarding: La Tulipe

Take the Renfouilly Express up to the 1850m peak and enjoy the breathtaking views across to Mont Blanc before heading down La Tulipe (red run #47). This wide, sweeping piste is never crowded and there are some nice ridges for getting airborne. Halfway down there's an optional south-facing coffee/hot chocolate stop. Snowboarders should also head to the snow park at Avoriaz to catch some air on the half-pipe.

Best bar in town: Buddha Bar

For skiers coming off the piste and seeking a relaxing après ski drink, this underground bar is true to its name: calm and chilled. Get a table and order one of their metre-high glass columns of beer, complete with tap to pour your own glasses. By late evening the calm has given way to a crowded and chaotic cavern, still the best place to go in town.
Rue du Télépherique du Planey, Morzine 74110
tel: +33 4 50 74 22 79

Best restaurant in town: L'Étale

This bustling restaurant in the centre of Morzine is staffed by a bunch of manic and mischievous, but ultimately charming local men. The selection of food is huge and includes plenty of local dishes. It's popular, so you might want to book ahead.
Rue du Télépherique du Planey, Morzine 74110
tel: +33 4 50 79 09 29

Best restaurant on the mountain: Vaffieu

Vaffieu, in the middle of the Planey ski area, has a great atmosphere, whether you're inside, tucked under the heavy wooden beams, or outside, where you can sit in deck-chairs checking out the passing skiers and the great views. The food is special yet simple: try the tartiflette, a local speciality stuffed with onions, cream, potatoes, bacon and (probably!) too much cheese. Top of the Belvedere chair lift;
tel: +33 4 50 79 09 43

Need to know

Ski Pass

The Portes du Soleil ski pass costs €189 for six days. A ski pass covering the Morzine/Les Gets area costs €141.50 for six days.

Skiing lessons

You can book your own snowboarding/skiing lessons with the Ecole du Ski. Six half-day lessons cost €122.50. Ecole du Ski, 662 avenue de Joux Plane, 74110 Morzine; tel: +33 4 50 79 1813

Flights and Accommodation

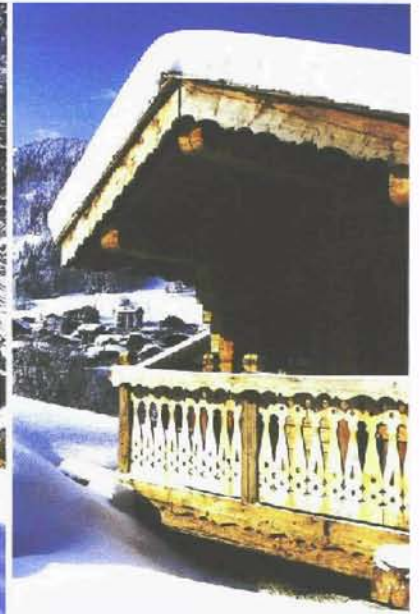
Dublin-based company Highlife Ski & Snowboard offers a week-long stay in a catered chalet from €1117 per adult and €938 per child aged 2-11. Includes return flights with Aer Lingus to Geneva, private transfers, seven nights accommodation with breakfast, six evening meals with wine, Highlife services before, during and after the holiday and all taxes. Highlife, 40 Dame St, Dublin 2; email info@highlife.ie; tel: 01 6771100 or visit highlife.ie

Tourist Information

Morzine Tourist Office can be contacted at morzine-avoriaz.com



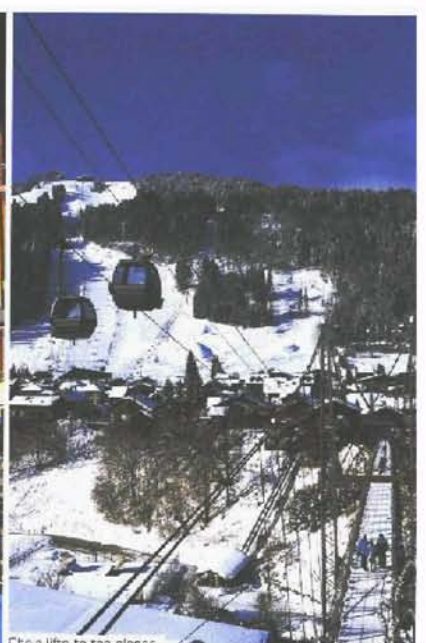
Skinn near the chalets



PARAGLIDING IS JUST ONE OF SCORES OF NON-SKIING ACTIVITIES ON OFFER IN MORZINE, RANGING FROM THE HIGH-ADRENALINE TO THE SEDATE



Morzine town



Chalet to the clouds

OUR CHALET CAME WITH ITS OWN OUTDOOR HOT TUB WITH ROOM FOR SIX PEOPLE: GUSHING WATER SOOTHES YOUR WEARY MUSCLES WHILE YOU GAZE THROUGH THE STEAM AT DUSK FALLING ON THE MOUNTAINS

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