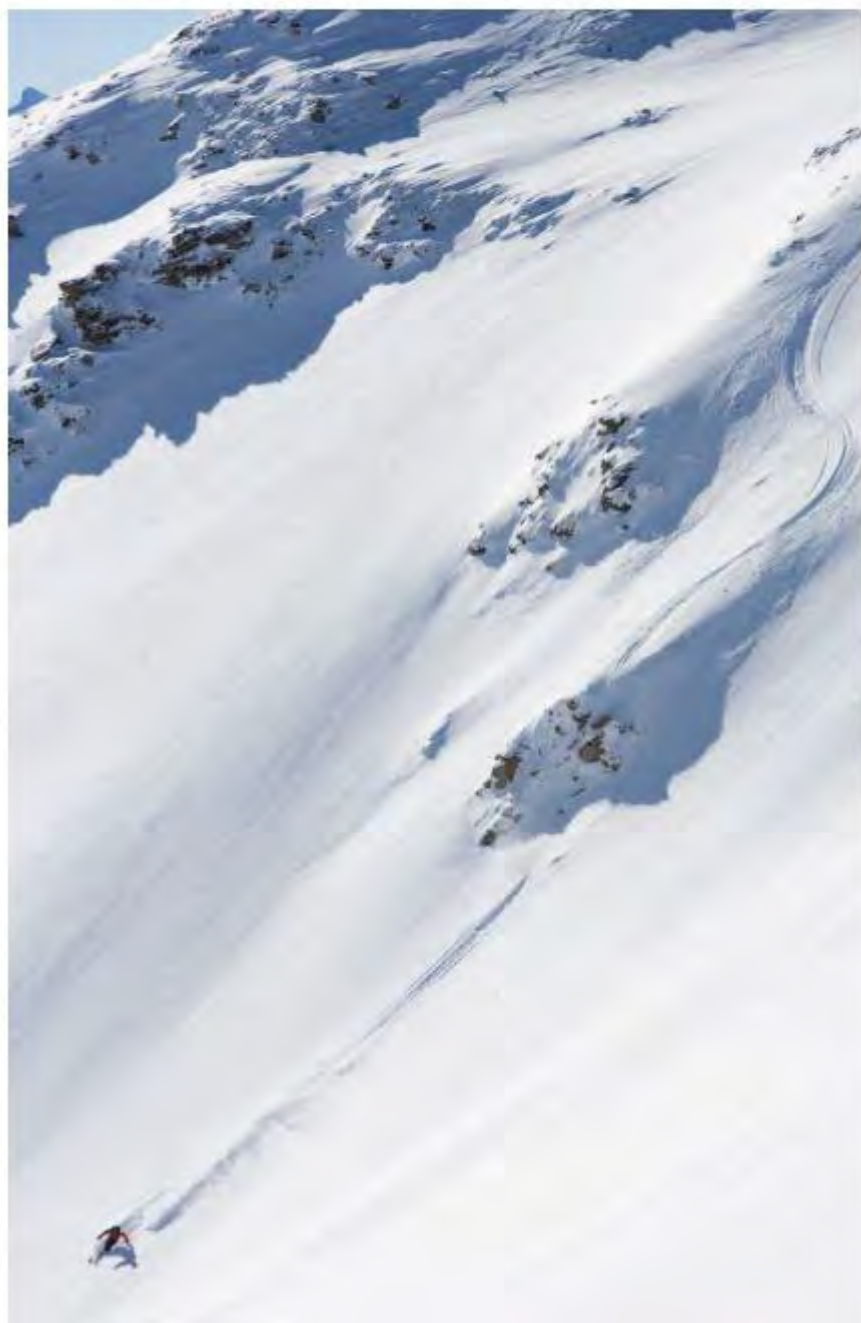


► Luxury ► Ultratravel

## The anti-Val d'Isère: the discreet French ski resort for those who just love to ski



Chalet Merlo is not your average luxury ski chalet. On paper, it doesn't appear to tick the boxes required by discerning skiers. Right by the piste in a famous ski resort? No. Close to the ski lifts? Uh-uh. Within easy reach of shopping, ski hire and nightlife? Absolutely not. But in fact, for anyone keen to make the most of every day on the mountain, it fully fits the bill.

Merlo is on the books of Ste Foy specialist *Première Neige*. Ste Foy is a small French resort accessed by the same road that leads to much more famous Val d'Isère and Tignes. It has only four chairlifts and few restaurants and shops, but its reputation among those who love powder snow, tree skiing and quiet slopes - both on piste and off - is deservedly high. It's a place to go for people who simply want to ski, rather than to be part of a scene.

The six-bedroom authentically Alpine Chalet Merlo is not one of those clustering at the bottom of the Ste Foy slopes, it is in the nearby village of Le Miroir, with an uninterrupted view over the Isère valley. There are no pistes here, but one of Ste Foy's most famous off-piste runs, the Fogliettaz, ends in the village. As does a well-known 2,000m heliskiing run down from Italy. Some of us might say that's a better draw than a blue piste to the door.



Spectacular mountain views from Chalet Merlo

Merlo's view is best enjoyed from its huge balcony or outdoor hot tub, and its outbuildings also house a sauna, a ski storage room with heated boot dryers, a massage and treatment room and a two-storey fitness suite.

All this is a 15-minute drive from Ste Foy - or about three minutes by helicopter. Val d'Isère is 20 minutes drive or a five-minute flight; La Rosière and Les Arcs are equally easy to reach.

And therein lies much of the attraction of a week here. The Première Neige service includes chauffeur-driven minivans to take guests to wherever conditions are best. This takes advantage of the fact that a six-day Ste Foy lift pass entitles holders to reduced priced one-day passes in close-by resorts.

Première Neige's concierge service is also on hand to arrange extras such as instructors or mountain guides, ski equipment from SkiSet in Ste Foy, heliskiing, heli-transfers, yoga sessions, massages and spa treatments.



Heliskiing at Ste Foy CREDIT: PREMIERE NEIGE

During my stay in late March this year, snow conditions were variable. On day one, a sudden drop in temperature and fresh snowfall made Ste Foy's quiet slopes the ideal destination, and we spent a heavenly morning carving tracks into untouched snow.

The next day, the guide Première Neige had arranged, Julien Ottobon of ski school Evolution 2, arrived at Merlo to discuss our heliski plans over an early breakfast. To our disappointment, he postponed the trip - temperatures were up again, and that plus rising wind and an ominous bank of cloud hovering over the French/Italian border put paid to any flight. But the day was far from ruined.



Instead we rocketed down the high slopes of Val d'Isère and Tignes, which stayed in good condition for most of the day, thanks to colder temperatures at altitude. For lunch Première Neige had booked our group a sought-after outdoor table at the gourmet, piste-side Fruitière restaurant above Val d'Isère. Here, over steak tartare and rosé, we had ringside seats for the party-starting après-ski show at the next-door Folie Douce, then attacked a few more slushy pistes before our lift home.

Each evening, freshly baked cakes awaited, whipped up by chef Olly, generally followed by a soak in the hot tub enjoying champagne served by chalet hosts Ryan and Mel. This was also prime time for a massage arranged with the travelling therapists of Massage Me - their rejuvenating 45-minute Mega Legs massage is highly recommended - before showering for dinner.



Accommodation at Chalet Merlo

Bedrooms at Merlo are not as spacious as those found in some upmarket chalets, but beds are sink-into comfortable, storage plentiful, showers powerful and linen and towels top quality. They also have the same spectacular view as hot tub and balcony.

More champagne and a parade of canapés preceded dinner. Première Neige's "chalet board" package is typical of that provided by UK tour operators across the Alps - breakfast, afternoon tea and dinner with wine on six nights out of seven - but the level of cuisine a cut above. Elegantly presented goats cheese and beetroot tart starter, and cote de boeuf cooked perfectly bloody and served with triple-cooked chips, were highlights of the menu on my visit. For the staff's one night off, it's a good idea to ask the concierge well ahead for a booking at the only restaurant in Le Miroir, Chez Mérie, which also happens to be one of the best in the broader area.



Solitude in Ste Foy CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

After skiing, hot tub, massage and dinner, it was hard to find energy to choose from the extensive library of films and games, or even to admire the chalet owners' eclectic art collection. A chauffeured drive to the bars of Val d'Isère, while offered, was never on my wish list.

Perhaps the hardest task of the evening was to fill in, after a four-course dinner, a hot-breakfast order for the following morning. But when a prompt 8.30am departure is planned, having avocado with poached eggs and a side of mushrooms served almost as soon as you arrive at table is a bonus.

On our final day, luck was in - the conditions were just right for heliskiing. We set off to La Rosière after breakfast, then skied across the border to its linked neighbour, La Thuile in Italy, where heliskiing is permitted, unlike in France.

Following Julien across the pistes, and then gently off piste to the Italian border, we made our way to the helipad. He packed our skis ready to be loaded, and we waited, crouching, with hearts pounding to the beat of the heli's rotors as it came in to land in a fierce flurry of flying snow.



Chalet Merlo guests have the opportunity to enjoy heliskiing as part of their Ste Foy stay CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

Five minutes or so later, after a thrilling sweep over the peaks, we fell into silence before the majesty of Mont Blanc and a white apron of pristine snow. At first it was hard under our skis but, warmed by the sun, softened as we descended into the wilderness. And when finally, after a long traverse looking for the best place to turn downhill, Julien gave the go-ahead, the snow was soft and creamy, and we cruised big wide arcs over the rolling landscape to our pick-up point, and another thrilling heli ride back to the border.

Back on the pistes, Julien produced a celebratory bottle of wine from his backpack complemented by local Beaufort cheese, and the day continued with a final lunch in Italy, with big smiles splitting all our faces. There is little to beat the feeling of being in the right place at the right time to catch the best snow. And we'd managed it every day.

*Première Neige (0131 510 2525) offers Chalet Merlo from £10,000 per week chalet board based on 12 guests, including dedicated chalet staff, chef and chauffeur. Price may be reduced for smaller groups. Short breaks available.*

*An example heliski day in La Rosière/La Thuile costs €425 per person based on four people in the group, including one heli drop and pickup, guide and lift passes. A transfer helicopter between Chalet Merlo and Ste Foy costs €240 for up to five people.*

*For more on what to expect in the property, read our complete Chalet Merlo review*