


La belle et la bête

DEEP IN THE HEART OF THE FRENCH ALPS IS A PLACE WHERE SNOW IS LIGHTER THAN HEAVEN AND HORSES RUN FREE. COURCHEVEL IS REASSESSING THE CONCEPT OF THE LUXURY SKI HOLIDAY



Meet Jean Noël Usannaz, ski instructor extraordinaire. Rising at dawn, he pulls back a set of velvet curtains to a world outside that seems so perfect it cannot exist. But it does. It is a world sculpted from glistening ivory peaks, waltzing snowflakes and blue and white rainbows. It looks like it has been conjured up by the fairytale writer Madame de Villeneuve, who penned *Beauty and the Beast*. Welcome to Courchevel 1850; a place for beautiful people with multiple offshore bank accounts. It is heaven on earth but with a stricter door policy.

Pulling on his winter boots, Jean Noël beckons to the effervescent morning sun, which silently blushes in return, wraps a knotted silk handkerchief around his neck, and steps out into the chilled December street. Snowflakes spin above his head creating a dusted halo – but he is no angel. Past the pearly gates of wooden Savoyarde chalets, Jean Noël takes a quick intake of ice-glazed Alpine air and he's off. He makes his way to la boulangerie for a basket of warm French baguettes, tucks it under his arm, and crunches to le fromagerie next door; a trail of crushed footprints blooming underfoot. The food is for me, however. Jean Noël eats avalanches for breakfast.

Icicles begin to drip softly in the sunshine from the wooden rafters into an antique barrel beside the frosted shop window. Coming out armed with a selection of antipasti meats and cheeses, he sighs. “*C'est magnifique au jour d'hui. Non?*” “How much do you want for your life?” I reply. He laughs; he won't accept dollars, euros or pounds. He just wants fresh powder snow, a morning sunrise and a clear blue sky everyday. “Is that not enough?” he replies. He is right; it is a beautiful day and I feel like it's my first day in the world. 

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It all began back in the mid 1940s, when Laurent Chappis received a letter. The town planner had been asked by the Savoie regional council, because of its economic needs, to quite simply “create a ski resort”.

His search – via an Austrian Prisoner of War camp – took him to the heart of the Tarentaise and to a small village in the St Bon district, where he met an enthusiastic council. Apparently not even fascism or an ongoing world war could stop people everywhere from wanting a decent holiday.

More than 60 years later, the Savoie region is more a land of princes rather than pioneers. Distanced from the trials of modern life, and with a little more *joie de vivre* than Butlins, Courchevel 1850 is a place where the men who make dreams go on holiday when they need some time off. The streets are paved with 60 luxury hotels. Ostentatious mega-chalets flex their biceps and Michelin-starred restaurants blow raspberries at neighbouring resorts. But the village can afford to: the Hôtel de Charme les Airelles, for one, even has a 5,900-square-foot premier suite and its very own snow cave – whatever that’s for.

One might find George Clooney propping up Le White Bar, and in the corner of La Chabichou restaurant sits the King of Morocco with King Juan Carlos of Spain and the Aga Khan. Prince William and Harry wave from the Verdons bubble lift and Victoria and David Beckham rush past for a late lunch at Le Chalet De Pierres with Giorgio Armani and Elton John. Even the lady with the iron fist Margaret Thatcher regularly comes to town. If the great kings and commanders of France had known what a playground for the rich and powerful the resort town would become, then perhaps the curly wig wearing Kings, dukes of Savoy and Napoleon himself may not have given it up so easily, silly fools.



I am staying at Cheval Blanc (the White Horse), the most luxurious hotel in the French Alps, a haven for millionaires and models, art works and the richest man in the whole of France, Bernard Arnault. This is a home designed for those of exquisite taste; where the only eggs on display are made by Faberge and the cash comes straight from the wallet of a Swiss banker. Designer names jump out at every turn: there are photographs by Karl Lagerfeld, Missoni rugs, crates of Voss water, buffon hair by John Nollett (Monica Bellucci’s personal favourite), design by Sybille DeMargerie, a priceless Andreas Gurrzhi photograph mounted behind the reception and everywhere there is *art de la vie Français*. There are diptychs, triptychs and beautiful tableaux. The property even has its own 10 foot high silver horse, Le Cheval de Troie; it’s very own Eiffel Tower.

First conceived as a mountain-top palace, it is an exceptional refuge; a natural necessity when flirting with the summits. It is perched like a chateau from a French fairytale. “If something isn’t as luxurious as Mr Arnault can imagine then he doesn’t want it,” says the hotel director Philippe Gourgaud. With a Savile Row suit and a crisp black neck-tie, he is the best dressed man to tread the rues of nearby Moutiers or Annecy since Alain Delon.

In case Arnault’s name is not familiar, his company LMNV is the world’s largest luxury group and he owns Louis Vuitton, Dom Perignon, Givency and Dior. With a net worth of US\$26 billion, he is also the 14th richest person on the planet. “He is the only person in the French Alps that is bringing culture and luxury into it,” Philippe continues. “Mr Arnault keeps the fourth and fifth floor for himself and special guests. It’s the most beautiful apartment in Courchevel, if not the world.” Last year, the Prince of Qatar booked it for a week. He ended up staying for four.

On top of the mountain, on a brand new pair of 170cm Salomon Tornados, I feel like I am at the centre of a hurricane. The wind is at my back, at my front, wind is blowing tears into my eyes and a trail of wind is blowing clouds of snow in my wake. At this moment, I am invincible. There aren’t many skiing days on the season calendar when one can still be rewarded with fresh four foot deep untracked powder days after the last snowfall. Looking back at the 500 metre



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vertical descent we have just conquered, Jean Noël grins like a Parisian clown. “Two perfect signatures,” he beams, while pointing at our curving imprints.

We are deep in the croissant-shaped Courchevel valley, which forms part of Le Trois Vallées (the three valleys), the largest ski area on earth; it is four times bigger than the distance between Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

It is so exquisite that Courchevel even has

its own unique brand of luxurious fake snow for the lower, barer slopes. The locals call it cultured snow, and it is produced with no artificial additives; just water and air.

Evergreens droop past chalet balconies onto the pisté below as we ski past. They are burdened with ice cream fresh snow, which clings to the pine needles for fear of being trampled by passing skiers. Above us, the 3,051 metre Aiguille De Fruit and 2,952 metre Mont Du Vallon share the empty sky. Down in the valley below, there is a faint whisper of vapour. “It is the loneliest cloud in the sky,” says Jean Noël.

From out of the trees, two wild black mares run across the slopes in front of us, as if on cue. Their muscular legs make light work of the deep snow, their billowing manes shading their eyes from the sun. They gallop across the empty plain like matchstick horses sketched on a blank notepad. A bewildered Jean Noël shrugs his shoulders and cackles like Inspector Clouseau as he skis effortlessly past me. “This is Courchevel,” he shouts. “C’est normale!”



Back at Cheval Blanc, the fire has been stacked and stoked, smoking jackets are being aired and Edouard Delavaux, director of Le 1947, the on-site restaurant, is welcoming in guests with a royal bow that droops low enough for his Gallic nose to tickle the polished floor. The menu dégustation, which has been designed by three star Michelin Chef Yannick Alléno, is graceful yet ready to put me in a vice. Lobster consommé coral cappuccino; sautéed duck foie gras with macaroni gratin and truffle juice; pan-fried sea scallops on pumpkin pieces with grey shallots and chestnut; stuffed ravioli with artichoke cream, melted rocket, parmesan cheese and white truffle shavings; and Beaufort melba, pear Williams and delicate spicy jelly. Thank heavens there are no after dinner mints.

Anna Kournikova at the table next to me – at least I think it's her – has ordered a black truffle the size of my head. In true gastronomique style, she is having it grated onto a fried egg by a sommelier who wears silk white gloves. After crow-barring myself out of my velvet dining throne, I can feel gravity running away in terror at the bulge of my stomach; even breathing in hard won't keep it at bay.

Upstairs, the corridors are lined with sepia prints recalling the 1930s and 1940s, when skis were made of nothing more than wood and string. Seeing the colour fading from the world, I immerse myself in an igloo of fur, velvet and

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taffeta in the bedroom. Outside, the moon is like a snowball pressed together with warm leather gloves. I can hear a horse – a cheval blanc perhaps – neighing in a courtyard somewhere far below.

Meet Natalie Faure. Her curly brown hair bounces like Brigitte Bardot. Although she is from the local tourist office, she would be just as comfortable strutting on a Parisian catwalk. I meet her in Restaurant Le Genepi for *déjeuner* the next afternoon. It is run by Thierry Mugnier, one of France's most talented up and coming chefs. As we dine on fruit de la mer and fresh Annecy lake trout, she points out what makes the village distinctive for its elite clientele. "Courchevel keeps the best company," she says. Its partners are Moët and Chandon and Mercedes Benz after all. Lacroix has even launched a signature Courchevel pair of skis, of which only 10 pairs have been made. The price tag of EUR 50,000 will not put off any Marilyn, Sophia or Grace that's for sure.

On the streets, there are hot air balloon breakfasts and heated pavements to prevent slips on the ice-caked side-streets. On a neighbouring corner sits Il Vino, a restaurant concept that has made it down from Paris and the second home of the best sommelier in the world, Enrico Bernardo. It is an intriguing idea where more than money is needed to secure a reservation. Diners are allowed to choose freely from the *carte de vin* (wine list) but it is the restaurateur himself who chooses the food

to compliment the wine. It is subversive, creative and very, very French.

Then there is the altiport; a perilous 1,722 foot uphill runway carved out of the mountains and the only altitude airport in Europe. "There are more than 7,000 helicopter and private jet movements during each season," she explains. Used in the James Bond film *Golden Eye*, the landing strip welcomes the jet set and finishes with an abrupt vertical drop. It seems that nothing is too dangerous for celebrities wanting to hit the heights of society. And finally there is the forthcoming Snow Arena Polo World Cup, the highest snow polo competition in the world, which will be held at the end of January. Perhaps that may explain all the horses.

It appears that in these valleys, everything has a superlative or accolade. And why not? Luxury is an interesting concept in these heady times, and in a place like Courchevel 1850, luxury has lost its price tag. If one even needs to ask the price then perhaps it is time to go elsewhere. Next year, people will be skiing on diamonds. ❖

WORDS Mike MacEacheran