



**LAVISH:** A hotel suite in L'Equipe, Morzine



**BOOZE WITH REAL BITE:** Marc was flavoured with... snake



**PEAK PRACTICE:** Simon above Chatel with the Dents du Midi



**CHEF'S TABLE:** La Chamade in Morzine brings the kitchen to you

# A not-so-little piste of heaven

**Simon Leek** enjoyed a fun-packed few days' skiing in the French Alps

I have fallen. Again. And hard, too. Not, against all odds, on the slopes themselves, where I somehow kept my balance despite a 20-year absence, but for skiing itself, and for the Portes du Soleil circuit in particular.

If you're in the happy position of knowing you want to ski, and have only to decide where, then these Haute Savoie resorts have plenty to recommend them.

Not least, the sheer scale. The Portes Du Soleil circuit is vast, encompassing no fewer than 12 resorts (10 linked by pistes, and a further two by free bus).

There are more than 400 miles of marked pistes and about 200 lifts in total, over 14 valleys and 400 square miles: it's one of the world's largest linked ski areas.

Resorts start just below the thousand-metre mark and stretch right up to 2,400m, high above the purpose-built resort of Avoriaz, perched on a cliff-top with nary a tree in sight.

With such a vast array of pistes, you'll be unsurprised to know that there's plenty to enjoy whether you're skier or boarder, beginner or expert, family man or lone Alpine fanatic.

My four-day visit to the region began in Les Gets, little more than an hour's drive south from Geneva.

The proximity means you can fly out in the morning and be on the slopes by the afternoon, though my trip began in more leisurely fashion, with an excellent lunch at the airport followed by a little lazing around in the indoor pool, Jacuzzi and sauna at the Hotel Alpina, ideally



**WHITE UP YOUR STREET:** Picturesque Les Gets is little more than an hour's drive out of Geneva

situated just yards from the bottom of the ski lifts in the village centre.

The gentle start gave me the chance to nose around the Mechanical Music Museum, a remarkable collection of working musical automata on three floors. Begun by a private enthusiast, this vast and still-growing Aladdin's Cave of musical curiosities is unique, and has even spawned a regular street festival that draws enthusiasts to the town from all over Europe.

## Cheese-maker

The museum visit was followed by an excellent dinner at La Fruitière des Perrières, a restaurant wedded to traditional Alpine cuisine, but owned and run by Japanese cheese-maker Miti Yamaguchi.

Excellent aperitifs, food, and wine were washed down with locally-produced liqueurs – Genepi, Poire, and Marc. The last of these was not for the faint-hearted having been flavoured with pickled snake!

Thank goodness I packed the Ibuprofen...

Hangover safely fended-off, we hit the slopes for the first time the following morning, beginning with a selection of blue and red runs, and some stunning panoramas of Mont Blanc.

Then it was back down to the village and across to the facing pistes, carving our way down from the highest runs in the resort, before heading across into neighbouring Morzine, where we were to spend our second night.

This was my first experience of skiing in January, and the lack of queues on the pistes was a revelation. If you don't have kids, school-holiday-dodging is the way to go.

It was atypical, though, because the temperatures were unseasonably high, giving an experience more akin to Easter skiing than chilly January.

On the runs back to the resorts the snow became a little slushy and grabby towards the end of the day – somewhat akin to skiing in icing sugar.

On the plus side, of course, I never felt remotely cold, and lunchtime meals outside in the hazy sunshine were simply a joy.

Our hotel in Morzine was L'Equipe, ideally situated at the bottom of the pistes in the heart of the town. The room was stunning, full of lavish touches including colour-changing fairy lights studded into the oak-clad ceiling.

## Horse-drawn carriage

A horse-drawn carriage ride gave us a flavour of the town before an evening meal in the newly-refurbished La Chamade.

The restaurant featured an open kitchen, with a chef's table comprising three sides of a square, high-bar style, around an open-plan cooking area, and a basement given over entirely to a cheese cellar.

The style of cuisine was very different to the previous evening – modern, with lots of small dishes presented plates and slates. Different, but equally delicious. I particularly recommend you try the sugared cress!

Day three was spent up in and beyond Avoriaz, flitting across the French-Swiss border and back again on blues and reds, confused phones periodically buzzing us texts as we unwittingly switched service providers.

We enjoyed fabulous views of the Dents du Midi and Lac Leman – known as Lake Geneva by tourists only! Runs were an enjoyable mix of long, narrow, winding pistes through the forests and sprawling expanses of snow above the treeline, in the hands of our capable guide Eric.

There were far more snowboarders around in Avoriaz, a purpose-built resort perched on cliffs high above Morzine, but whether it was snow park jumps you were looking for, or family-friendly slopes such as the chocolate-firm-sponsored Milka piste in Le Chatel, there was still plenty of skiing to suit all abilities and tastes. But be warned if you're boarding – the Swiss resorts tend to favour drag lifts.

Tired limbs at the end of a very full day's skiing were soothed by

the expert Indian in-house masseurs at our third hotel, Le Macchi in Le Chatel.

I'm not sure how I managed to spend 41 years of my life without having a massage, but I'll be indulging in more from now on. It was the perfect way to unwind.

Dinner on our final night was in Le Vieux Four; a beautiful restaurant housed in the village's first bakery, which opened in 1946. As ever, the food was as delicious as the surroundings.

By the time I'd finished the last morning's skiing, exploring more of the Le Chatel area, I was already plotting my return to the Portes du Soleil. Once every 20 years is no kind of routine at all.

Instead I'm thinking of... March. This year. Because it just so happens the resorts are hosting their fourth annual Rock The Pistes festival from March 26-30.

An event unique to the Portes du Soleil, rock bands play free at mountain venues in different resorts each day. All you need to attend is a lift pass!

And this year there's a distinct English flavour to proceedings, with Babysambles and The Klaxons already confirmed. I just hope the editor's paying attention... I mean, I know the area now, I know the people... I'm the ideal candidate to review it!

## Web fact file

**Flights**  
Fly into Geneva from Gatwick or Stansted. Prices from £49; [easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com), [swiss.com](http://swiss.com) and other assorted carriers

**Accommodation**  
Hotel Alpina, Les Gets: [hotelpalpina.fr](http://hotelpalpina.fr)  
Hotel L'Equipe, Morzine: [hotелеquipe.fr](http://hotелеquipe.fr)  
Hotel Macchi, Le Chatel: [hotelmacchi.com](http://hotelmacchi.com)

**Portes Du Soleil skiing area**  
Visit: <http://en.portesdusoleil.com>  
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