

BACK ON THE FRENCH SLOPES ONCE AGAIN

Hannah Millington looks at new Covid-safe solutions to skiing in Meribel, France

There's good news for Brits itching to take to the slopes - or craving a healthy dose of après-ski - as resorts in France will be accessible again this 2021/22 season. But as with everything else we're experiencing, it will be a bit different this time.

My taster of what the new-normal of traditional chalet holidays will be like begins when I arrive at Geneva Airport, where I'm picked up by our driver Renaud from MV Transport.

He whisks us across the border to the beautifully crisp and mesmerising Meribel, found in the heart of the 3 Valleys in the French Alps - the world's largest ski area. Those wanting to stay in their own protective bubble can of course arrange independent car hire or arrive via ferry, rather than being transported around.

So, what has changed? Apart from the fact I'm travelling in summer - with a lack of snow-capped views replaced by greener terrain - to get a preview, it seems like quite a lot.

I'm among the first to experience how [Ski France](#) (the UK branch of French hotel group, Madame Vacances) has been preparing for the winter season

ahead, with fully vaccinated Brits now permitted to travel to its resorts quarantine free.

It has been busy flipping what we know about ski holidays upside down to accommodate for travellers in the current climate.

We arrive late evening to Chalet Etienne, where we are met not by chalet staff, but by a fully stocked fridge, cool beer, chilled wine, beds neatly made and rooms perfectly organised. Say goodbye to chalet hosts and chefs and hello to their new Contactless Catered Chalets.

While the idea sounds perfectly designed for a pandemic, it was actually conceived long before Covid-19 let loose.

The difficulties of employing English staff in France post Brexit - coupled with the higher cost of employing French staff - meant it was challenging to keep an attractive price-point for the usual chalet experience, Joanna Laforge, co-owner of Ski France and Sales and marketing director, explains as we enjoy our new style of dinner on the first night. Of course, when Covid-19 emerged, meaning people favour 'contact-free', they fully rolled with the concept.

Ski France has more than 50

chalets, which are divided into Classic and Premium across various French Alps resorts. The price difference between the two options is around 10/15%, with a week's stay at our Premium chalet costing from £8,929 for up to 14 people sharing on a Contactless Catered basis.

Despite differences among the resorts in prestige, accommodation and food offerings, both Classic and Premium provide local produce and various ingredients for breakfast, afternoon tea/snack, a three-course dinner and drinks each day, with flexibility in each category. Our extra perks include Champagne on the first night and croissants and coffee delivered every day from the local bakery.

Menus, recipes and easy-to-follow instructions are laid out, with fresh ingredients pre-delivered and pre-stocked in the kitchen. 'HelloFresh' hits the slopes, you could say.

On our first night, the suggested meal is goat's cheese and lardon salad with balsamic dressing, salmon en croute with white wine and dill sauce (plus roast new potatoes and broccoli), summer fruit crumble with crème anglaise and after dinner chocolates. We also enjoy copious amounts of

cheese. As the only vegetarian in the group - not the easiest thing to be in France - I tuck into a veggie cannelloni instead for main.

A local delicatessen currently provides the food, but Ski France plans on having its own central kitchen to better cater for veggie, vegan and gluten free guests, for which there will be different set menu options.

Skis or snowboards will also be reserved at the local hire shop and lift passes will be booked, which will help to avoid queuing and crowded areas.

The 'backstage' chalet crew will only sweep into the chalet - when guests are out enjoying the slopes - halfway through the week to

clean, replenish and re-sock the accommodation. They'll be at the end of the phone, but 'contactless', unless requested otherwise.

Our first proper day starts with breakfast in the chalet, then we're off to experience some bike action in the Alps. Cycling - along with many other activities - is available in both summer and winter seasons for those who want to break up ski days.

We meet our guide Alexandre from MCF bike school for adventures on e-mountain fatbikes. After a firm but fair

taster lesson - practising emergency brakes and keeping very straight legs - we head off into the dreamy Meribel Valley. Some might say 'boost mode' is cheating, but I certainly appreciate how it helps me climb the mountains.

With resorts filled mostly by the domestic market, Alexandre says there has been a shift to "slightly lesser known activities, such as the fatbike, ski trekking, snow shoes...a different way to enjoy the mountain".

Ski France also turned to the French domestic market to offer their chalets for stays last winter, following much uncertainty in mid-March 2020 when ski resorts had to close.

But those visitors might not have been so into the Contactless Catered idea, I'm told, and would

probably have popped to the supermarkets instead.

Back at the chalet I enjoy some downtime in the wooden sauna, before a dip in the - very powerful - Jacuzzi. I also enjoy taking in the views from the balcony of my large en suite room, filled with the triangular chalet rooftops, tall trees and mountain-peaks - all of which I visualise to be entirely shrouded in snow come December 4 when Meribel officially reopens.

My dip into e-transport and "lesser known activities" isn't over quite yet, as next we head for e-skateboarding escapades at Lac de Tueda, a beautiful circular lake surrounded by pine trees. I slowly but surely make my way around the breath-taking scenes, clutching a controller that allows me to add power to my skate. "Bend your knees!" my guide from EM Skate shouts after me as I wobble when trying to maneuver the thing from left to right.

On our last day, we enjoy some fun at Aquamotion, nestled in Courchevel. The aquatic centre is filled with indoor and outdoor pools with mountain views, steam rooms, ice buckets, cold and hot Jacuzzis, a salt pool with neon lights, a surf experience, and most importantly...slides. Whenever we enter a venue or facility, we present our passe sanitaire on the French TousAntiCovid app.

Feeling truly Zen, I snooze as we head next in our mini-van down the valley to Chambéry. Waking up to Ski France's very own 14th century Chateau de Candie doesn't turn out to be the worst experience.

We sample some of the Viognier produced from its very own vineyard, of which it makes 2-3000 bottles of Candie 1891 dry white wine a year. After a very satisfying three-course meal at the chateau's La Cantine, I reach the conclusion that French ski resorts are fairly well-prepared for the season ahead.

HOW TO PLAN YOUR TRIP

A week's stay at Chalet Etienne,

with Ski France, costs from £638 per person (£8,929 total) for 14 people sharing the Premium chalet on a Contactless Catered basis. Visit skifrance-premium.co.uk or call 0203 475 4756.



RIGHT:
Chalet Etienne in
Meribel

Pictures: PA



RIGHT:
The Contactless
Chalet Etienne in
Meribel



The Aquamation
Spa in Meribel



Meribel at night



The Contactless Chalet
Etienne in Meribel