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# A real pinch me moment!

Feeling like a giant red lobster, our writer experienced sensory isolation float therapy that left her calm, reconnected with nature... and helpless with laughter

BY  
**CATHERINE  
MURPHY**

**S**TANDING on the edge of Lac de l'Ouillette in Val d'Isere, I look like a giant red lobster. A trapped giant red lobster.

I'm covered from head to toe in a dry suit with a hood so tight it feels like it's squeezing my brain and built-in over-sized claw gloves that make it impossible to scratch when I get an itch. Having transformed from human to crustacean in a little igloo by the side of the lake, I shuffle towards a 5sq m ice hole carved in the lake and lower myself into the water.

For the next 30 minutes, I simply float amid chunks of ice, staring at blue sky above and experiencing a sensory isolation float therapy that hails from Finland. I don't need to go under the water and I don't feel cold.

The idea, brought to Val d'Isere by ski and adventure company Evolution 2, is to

become calm and reconnect with nature and that aim works — I feel completely relaxed afterwards. The experience is also safe as the ice hole has been carved out by a certified dive instructor who oversees the session.

But the over-riding sensation is one of hilarity. There's much laughter as I observe myself bobbing then flailing about when the session ends and the instructor has to drag my helpless lobster shape out of the water — not to mention observing the rest of my group in similar positions.

An hour-long session with 30 minutes in the icy water costs €50 per person with a maximum of six per group. Night time sessions cost €65 per person and apart from the relaxation involved, the true value of the experience lies in the fact that months later, I still laugh out loud when I see the photographs from that day.

I'm staying in Val d'Isere with Ski France, a family-owned company that offers hotel, chalet and self-catering accommodation in over 50 destinations around the world. The company has

developed the idea of contactless catering or catered chalets 2.0, a new version of the beloved ski holiday.

The difference with contactless chalets is that there is no staff serving up breakfast, afternoon tea and evening meals. Instead, guests arrive to a fully-prepared chalet complete with firewood, and a fridge stocked with food, wine and beer.

Guests can customise their chalet holiday, choosing from a menu of dishes prepared in a centralised kitchen. Fresh bread, croissants and pain au chocolat are delivered each morning and three-course evening meals come with cooking instructions. Dishes are high quality and there is minimum preparation involved.

Guests can also opt to take the chalet without catering, order an a la carte option with a more diverse food offering or have a private chef come in to cook. There's a ski concierge service and flexibility with arrival and check out dates.

I check into Chalet Inuit, part of Ski France's Premium collection. Tucked away above the main resort — eas-

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ily accessible using the complimentary driver service — it's a gorgeous chalet with a modern feel, created using traditional materials.

The chalet sleeps up to 12 people and downstairs, there's a jacuzzi and sauna. I'm treated to champagne and canapes in a cosy setting before enjoying a three-course evening meal with duck as a main course.

Meanwhile, other members of my group have checked into the nearby Chalet Davos. It boasts a master bedroom with four-poster bed and free-standing bath, cinema room and balcony jacuzzi.

Halfway through the week, Ski France staff clean the chalet, refresh bedrooms and re-stock the fridge. There is no mark-up on groceries or drinks, and staff are at the end of a phone line if guests need help.

Because there are no set meal times, this style of holiday offers independence — we can opt to have an early meal if we fancy going to Val d'Isere for the evening or a late supper if apres ski goes on longer than expected.

We can order as much or as little food as we like and choose to eat out in the resort on some nights. We do this midway through our

visit with a trip to 1787 restaurant, which serves up traditional Alpine dishes, followed by drinks at La Baraque, where live music and dance antics provide lots of fun and laughter.

But the bottom line is that guests who opt for contactless catering prepare and clean up after each meal. A top tip would be to share the food preparation equally among the group rather than leaving one or two people to do it each day.

While I love hanging out in chalet Inuit, there is much to do in Val d'Isere. Linked with Tignes to offer 300km of pistes and endless off-piste

**options in the Espace Killy** ski area, Val d'Isere is a cosmopolitan resort offering high-altitude north-facing slopes and a long season — it's great for both early and late season holidays.

The resort may be going more high-end — it now boasts eight five-star hotels — but beginner skiers can avail of a €38 pass offering access to 12 slopes. This is a great option for novices who don't need access to the entire ski area and means they don't have to fork out €324 for a six-day lift pass.

Some 42 per cent of Val d'Isere's winter guests are British so it's quite normal to hear English spoken in bars and restaurants rather than French. Irish skiers and snowboarders also love the resort's lively nightlife and its ski terrain, from Le Face de Bellevarde World Cup downhill course to Le Fornet area for tree-lined runs on snowy days.

One of my favourite things to do in this area is take the Aiguille Percee chair lift up to ski past the 'eye of the needle', a beautiful rock formation in Tignes Le Lac. It was made famous when Roger Moore skied through it in Bond movie *A View To A Kill*. It provides great photo opportunities and is surrounded by intermediate-friendly blue and red slopes.

It's not all about skiing and floating lobsters in the lake. Val d'Isere has a Famille Plus label so there are plenty of child-friendly activities from mini electric skidooing to Village Perdu with its suspended walkways and treehouses. There's also yoga for children (ages 4-12).

For my final activity, I take a cross-country ski and biathlon course with former French biathlon national team athlete Lena Arnaud from the Mountain Ski Academy, which uses a small team of elite athletes as instructors for a range of activities.

The weather is bad so we practise XC ski technique on

a short circuit and practise shooting skills with pellet guns. I'm a mediocre shot but learning something new and having a mini biathlon competition proves to be great fun and totally relaxing — highly recommended for families or groups.

One other major feature of a Val d'Isere winter holiday is eating out and there are a couple of places on the mountain that you might reserve for special days or holiday splurges. We eat at Gigi restaurant at the Refuge de Solaise (2,551m) where the outdoor terrace is enlivened with a DJ and performer who serenades diners. The sun is shining, the scene is boujie and I love it. The prices are definitely boujie — I eat a pasta dish with tomato and basil, it's delicious and costs €27.

Another mountain must-visit is to the original Folie Douce, which now boasts a high-end Italian eaterie, La Cucucina. You can expect to blow the cobwebs off your wallet here — pizzas cost from €29 while my dish of ink squid linguine and lobster cost €50. But the reward is a dramatic design-led eaterie complete with 4m-high horse sculpture, massive bay windows for great views and a long central table on which la Folie's legendary cabaret performers sing and dance.

Kick back, get in party mode and enjoy it as a classic Val d'Isere holiday experience.

## TRAVEL FACTS

Catherine Murphy was a guest of Ski France, *ski france.co.uk*. Contactless catered chalets are split between premium and classic levels, and keep an eye out for offers — it's currently offering free ski and board hire with classic bookings. Chalet Inuit costs from around €1,500 per week for up to 12 people on a contactless catered basis

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(excluding flights). Val d'Isère is reached from Geneva, Lyon and Grenoble airports with private transfers arranged through Ski France. For biathlon info, go to [tmskiacademy.com](http://tmskiacademy.com), from €20 for a 20-minute taster session. For ice floating information, visit [evolution2.com](http://evolution2.com). For further info about the resort, see [valdisere.com](http://valdisere.com).





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**Mountain life:**  
**Clockwise from**  
**top left:**  
**Catherine**  
**learning to**  
**shoot; Float**  
**therapy in the**  
**lake; One of the**  
**chalets; and**  
**inside a Davos**  
**chalet**