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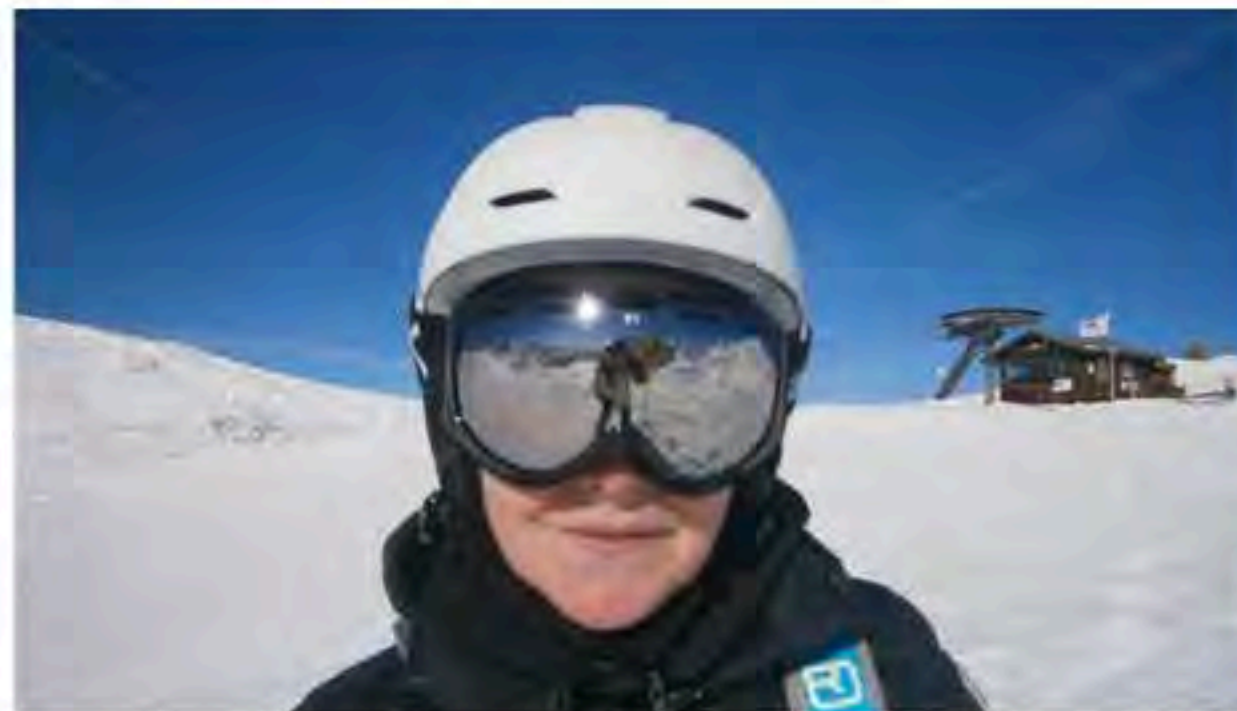
Cheese, sourdough and giant
redwoods delight Neil Sowerby

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The French Alps' Best Kept Ski Secret

Gill Martin loves the laidback feel of little Sainte Foy

Written by Gill Martin. Published on Friday, February 7th.



ON the veranda, as the mercury dips to below freezing, we indulge in the ultimate luxury: sipping bubbly in a foaming hot-tub with a view of the brooding mountains in the dusk. Muscles relax, snow falls softly, all is well with the world.

*'There were none of the elbow-jabbing queues
that plague larger, busier resorts'*

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This is the world of a ski chalet in the French Alps or, to be precise the world according to **Chalet La Marquise** in the tiny village of Sainte Foy in the Tarentaise Valley of the Savoy region.



La Marquise in the snow; below, its cosy living room



Chi-chi chalet living in **Sainte Foy** is the way to go for skiers and boarders who want style rather than bling, cosy rather than glitzy and uncrowded rather than teeming. You won't find the caviar bars, diamond and designer shops, the thumping après ski of big, trendy, pricey resorts... but you will find the majesty and magic of the French Alps in this little village.

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One of the selling points of a Sainte Foy chalet holiday is experiencing leisurely life in a real French village, rather than the frenetic pace of nearby Val D'Isere. You can enjoy extreme skiing and extremely yummy cuisine at less extreme prices. The ski pass this season costs 156.50 euros for six days, 5.5 euros for a beer and most hearty lunch dishes around 15 euros.



View from the balcony at La Marquise

Another draw is the sumptuous chalet of La Marquise – all rustic timber, sheepskin, white leather chairs and a stylish floating fireplace with crackling logs. Comfort collides with style. Squishy sofas meet statement light fittings. Swish bathrooms with a sauna and steam room in the basement. There's wi-fi or board games.

There's cold and colder running champagne with the canapés – duck and soft cheese, sweet chilli dip – before gourmet dinners of coconut, coriander and ginger soup, succulent duck breasts, mushroom risotto, lemon posset with fruit compote, local wines and gooey cheeses.

After coffee, petit fours, a digestif of génépi – a herbal liqueur produced by steeping aromatic flower heads in strong alcohol – how can you drag yourself off to the bar when there's a game of Articulate to be played in front of a flickering fire?

To wake to a sweeping view of the peaks, obliterated by mist and cloud for the first two days before revealing itself with a burst of brilliant sunshine and blue skies, was enough to have you bounding from the duvet.

A power-packed breakfast – anything from fresh fruits, pain au chocolat and croissants to Scottish porridge oats and a full 'English' fry-up – keeps the keenest powder hound in carbs till lunch up the mountain at La Maison à Colonges or Les Brevettes, where locals are

still talking about ex-England rugby player/Strictly Come dancing contestant Austin Healey practising his body surfing from the rafters.

After a full day's skiing afternoon tea is the most welcome touch – especially when an Irish member of our group announces her birthday. Chef Louise magics up an iced carrot cake in the shape of a shamrock, candles and all. No wonder the ski and boot experts who bring our equipment coordinate their visits with teatime to share our confections of coffee and walnut or lemon drizzle.



That Shamrock cake

There seems no end to the comforts provided at the Chalet La Marquise. A knickers fairy rescued my washed undies from the bathroom radiator to fold them ever so neatly on my bed.

And when my aching body was crying out for TLC Lauren the masseuse provided a soothing massage with hot stones, easing knots in neck, shoulders, back, thighs and calves, so that I was fit to ski another day on un-crowded north-west facing slopes where the snow was well-groomed.



Tackling the chocolate mountain

On chalet chef's night off we forced ourselves to explore the area... and discovered Chez Merie in the nearby hamlet of Le Miroir, a charming restaurant run by two doughty sisters who set up business decades ago when skiers marooned by an avalanche needed feeding.

A huge shoulder of lamb and a hefty cut of beef were cooking on the fire. This was not a place for vegetarians, although the winter vegetables were a treat and the mountain of chocolate dessert a challenge we embraced.

Skiing throws up its own challenges. One of the appeals of Sainte Foy – a high, snow-sure resort at 1550m, rising to 2620m – is tree skiing. The art of skiing off-piste through the trees is seeing the spaces. Unfortunately, I see only the trunks, so kept to safer routes.

Pretty descents along tracks lined with towering larches, their boughs frosted and bowed with snow, were a delight. While I stuck to steepish red runs and wide, gentle blues, other braver souls hit the most challenging black runs and a bowl of off-piste and ungroomed runs. Wherever we went there were none of the elbow-jabbing queues that plague larger, busier resorts.



Kids have ski fun

Our two beginner/novices made good progress under the tender tutelage of instructors and guides. (My instructor suggested I straighten my stance to imitate a man peeing but not wanting to wet his boots.)

The novice was confident enough to tackle a long descent of blue runs but not quite up to a nocturnal treat: skiing down the mountain by flaming torchlight, whooping in the darkness, our path lit by flickering lights and the powerful beams of a following snow vehicle, shadowing us to make sure we all arrived safely. Joining in the fun was Konrad Bartelski, the first and only British male downhill racer to stand on a World Cup podium.

The veteran skiing guru is in love with Sainte Foye. "This is how skiing should be and not as it is," he says.

Skiers and boarders who have discovered Sainte Foye implore: "Don't tell people about this hidden gem or it won't be hidden any more." Sorry, folks, your secret is out.

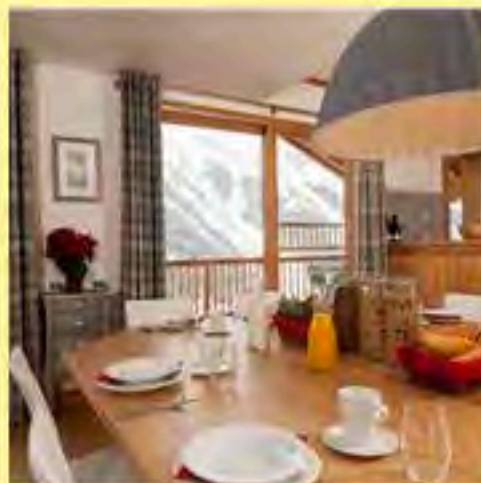


Frosted trees; below moon over the mountains



Fact file

Gill Martin was a guest of **Premiere Neige** (tel: 0131 510 2525; www.premiere-neige.com) and stayed in Sainte Foy at La Marquise which sleeps 16 in six double/twin rooms and one four-bed bunk room. It is priced from £905pp fully catered (air fares and transfers not included). Other Premiere Neige catered chalets are priced from £745pp per week.



Premiere Neige has a crèche and kids club for newborns to 10-year-olds run by experienced, first aid trained nannies and open to guests every day from 8.30am to 5pm.

La Marquise offers a host of relaxing Elemis spa treatments and therapies in the comfort of a separate private treatment room. These range from massages and wraps to facials and manicures.

La Maison à Colonges — william.tirouflet@orange.fr, +33 4 79 06 94 80

Chez Merie — chezmerie@hotmail.fr, +33 4 79 06 90 16

Les Brevettes — difficult to find but worth the effort for simple fare

Rental Republic – online ski and snowboard hire with free delivery and in-chalet fitting. <http://rentalrepublic.co.uk>

Getting there

By air

Manchester to Grenoble with **Monarch** or **Jet2** (2hrs 30 transfer)

Manchester to Chambéry with **Jet2** (1hr 45mins transfer)

Manchester to Geneva with **easyJet** or **Jet2** (2hrs 30mins transfer)

By train

Direct from London, to Bourg-Saint-Maurice by **Eurostar Direct Ski**, which runs between 20 December 2013 and 12 April 2014. (20mins transfer).