

Ski holidays for beginners

Thursday, 17, Feb 2011 02:59

Standing on one leg is normally an easy task, but doing so while wearing a pair of skis and slipping down a mountain slope for the first time is not so much. Why was my ski instructor making me do this? I'd only taken my first steps onto a ski slope the day before. Surely I should be learning to master skiing on two skis before I try one? No chance. He was putting me through my paces.

Les Menuires in the French Alps was going to be victim to my first-ever skiing experience. As the minibus weaved its way from Geneva airport, through the winding roads of the mountains, it dawned on me of what I was about to embark on. I'm not sure if the minibus's sudden turns were the reason I was shaking, or my nerves had got the better of me, but the other passengers horror stories sure weren't helping.

Skiing had always been one of those sports completely out of reach for me, but something I had always dreamed of doing. So when the opportunity came up, I jumped at it. Sliding down a little hill with a couple of planks strapped onto my feet can't be that hard.

Who was I kidding? Sat at the foot of the slopes over lunch, skier after skier was speeding their way down the mountain face effortlessly. There was no way I was going to be able to do this in

one weekend. But boy was I going to try.

The conditions couldn't have been better for my first day on the slopes. The sky was clear, the snow looked soft and having been booked in with a one-to-one instructor for the day, I was as confident as I could be.

With every new challenge the first step is the baby steps. Luckily, Les Menuires seemed to be perfectly designed to cater for beginners like me. After balancing myself on the carpet lift - a conveyor belt that extremely slowly takes you to the top of the beginner slope - I was ready to take my first descent.

"Are you sure you haven't been skiing before", my instructor asked. Well other than a disastrous attempt at a dry ski slope, which had ended with me in a heap at the bottom of the run with a cut pair of jeans and a bloody knee, I had never even touched a pair of skis.

After spending a while practicing the art of controlling my speed with the use of the 'snow-plow' on the little slopes, it was time to advance to the big 'grown-up' runs.

One thing about the Alps, is that you don't have to be a skier to enjoy the amazing views. On one side of the valley, views across to Mont Blanc are spectacular and really show the intensity and complex mountain range around the resort.

We made our way up to the La Chambre side of the valley where my instructor suddenly realised that he had brought his wrong ski mask and needed to pop back to the bottom to get them. So I firmly seated myself looking down into the valley and took in the amazing views of the resort. Despite the numbers of skiers whizzing past me, it felt like I was the only person there. The views were stunning, the silence, with the occasional slosh of skis slicing the snow, was something I don't get to experience too often.

Before too long, we were back on the slopes and putting my morning skill lessons to the test. Progress was slow, but by the end of the day I had managed to get onto parallel skiing on the Green runs. For those who don't know, as I didn't before the weekend, the slopes are colour coded as to their difficulty. Green is the easiest and then blue, red and the slopes for expert skiers, black.

But as I found out, Les Menuires isn't all about the ski, the area seems to be packed with good restaurants, one of which being the two Michelin starred restaurant, La Bouitte. Nestled just outside the village of Saint Martin de Belleville, the small wooden chalet, run by local father and son team Renè and Maxime Meilleur, did more than wet the appetite.

I like the finer things in life, but never been a massive fan of fancy food. I've always found it pretentious and over priced for an appetiser which will leave you feeling hungry in a matter of a couple of hours. But how I was wrong.

We sat down to a taster menu, with a series of courses showing off the passion involved in the restaurants dishes. The flavours were intense, yet delicate and simple. The service was efficient and friendly. And the atmosphere was relaxed and one you could spend the whole evening enjoying each others company.

After a delightful evening, it was time to head back to our accommodation. We were staying at the Chalet Hotel Isatis at the base of the slope. The hotel consists of a number of suites, all made to look like little wooden chalets, creating a warm and cozy atmosphere to relax in after a day on the slopes.

The following morning I rose to find our balcony covered deep in snow and the skies were dishing it out. Looking across the valley with fresh snow was a great site and what a reward for my last morning on the snow.

We took to the slopes early to get in as much skiing as possible. After yesterday I was feeling so much more confident on my feet and was able to really enjoy the sights and experience of skiing rather than focusing on what my feet were or weren't doing. Les Menuires was certainly an ideal place to learn to ski and I can't wait for my next trip out to the Alps.

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