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TRAVEL

Shivers deep but lavish highs in Méribel's mountains

Skiing lessons in Méribel give Ben Haugh the chills — but the 'Ferrari' of resorts soon warms him right up

Ben Haugh

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Hôtel Le Coucou from the slopes
JEROME GALLAND

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My first tumble comes 15 minutes into the skiing lesson, while attempting to slide down the mildest slope known to man. Everything I was taught moments before evaporates from memory as I inch down the hill, which is about as steep as a supermarket speed bump. The sudden realisation that I can't stop spreads from my brain to every limb, leaving panic and confusion in its wake. Accepting my cold, snowy fate, I dive gracelessly to the ground.



Bear chairs are a feature of the hotel
JEROME GALLAND

"Hamish, always keep your head up and look where you're going, not at your skis," says Nadia, my instructor, in her thick French accent.

"My name is Ben," I say, struggling to my feet like a newborn giraffe.

"Oh, sorry! There's a mix-up on the system. I have you down as Hamish."

I'm in Méribel, a resort town in the Tarentaise Valley of the French Alps, and this is my first ski lesson. This part of the slopes, denoted by its colourful fences and depictions of happy animals dressed in winter clothes — think upmarket crèche, covered in snow — is for novices. The mountains, giant and impressive, loom above as groups of tiny, smug children whizz around below.



"If anyone asks, just say I'm 12 years old," I joke to Nadia.

"This area is actually for under-sixes, Hamish," she says, with a straight face.



One of the private indoor pools
JEROME GALLAND

A little girl slides past us with elegance and performs a perfect stop in front of a giant cartoon duck. "Look at her technique, Hamish. Perfect," says my instructor, her voice brimming with pride.

I spend the morning practising the art of braking — a manoeuvre known as the snowplough turn — on the babiest of baby slopes. The little girl is always one step ahead, sometimes lapping me on her second run before I've finished my first. She is obviously a professional, I tell myself, likely in training for the Under-10s Winter Olympics, if such a thing exists.

All the children wear stylish, branded gear; my Aldi outfit sticks out like a Healy-Rae at a climate-change rally. But Nadia is an excellent teacher and has the patience of a Michel Barnier, tackling my lack of skill in the same unflappable manner the EU negotiator has tackled Brexit. Thanks to her, I progress quickly. "Lean forward, keep the limbs loose, Hamish," she says. "Hamish, relax the mind, don't overthink it."

By the end of the lesson, I have embraced my new identity: I am Hamish, man of the mountain.



The design hand at work here is Pierre Yovanovitch, a renowned French architect and designer whose attention to detail can be seen in every nook and cranny. He even designed 140 bespoke furniture and lighting pieces, and chose “Coucou” as the title.

“It’s a nice name — it sounds nice to say it,” says Yovanovitch, who filled the hotel with “natural colours you would find on the mountain”. The reception area has a domed handpainted fresco featuring owls on branches and a chandelier resembling melting snow. Owls (and cuckoos) are everywhere. “They are an animal that I love,” explains Yovanovitch.

Large contemporary paintings hang above strange but beautiful animalistic furniture crafted by Yovanovitch.

“Some of the artwork belongs to our parents,” says Cohen. “They’re collectors, so some of the paintings were on the wall in our living room, and now they’re here in the hotel.” Yovanovitch adds: “I wanted it to be luxurious but also cool, like someone’s home. That’s why we’ve gone with vintage-style furniture and art on the walls.”

The pair lead us into an opulent smoking room containing a cigar collection and phoneline to the bar. “Just pick it up and they’ll bring whatever you want,” says Cohen. It looks so cosy that I momentarily consider taking up cigars.

A children’s entertainment room is packed with board games, puzzles, art supplies, karaoke, ping-pong and a football table. I feel a pang of jealousy for my childhood self, who mostly holidaysed — happily — in Wicklow camping sites, unaware of the existence of such foreign delights.



Ben, aka ‘Hammil’, was put through his paces by instructor Neda

Rooms are generously sized — mine isn't much smaller than my cottage in Dublin — and most have their own terrace with breathtaking views of the Alps. The hotel also has two independent chalets, connected to the main building by an indoor corridor. Each has four bedrooms, a boot room, a private indoor pool and direct access to the slopes. Costing more than €10,000 a night, though, these are the playgrounds of the super-wealthy.

It's time to eat, and we enjoy the amazing views through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the Beefbar, which focuses on high-quality cuts of beef from France, Scotland and Japan. Dishes range from €19 gyozas to an emperor's cut of teppanyaki-style Kobe beef at €210.

The menu also has world food for sharing, such as ceviche with raspberries and truffle oil, and crunchy Kobe beef tacos with crusty corn pastry and smoked guacamole. Everything is delicious, though the vegetarians at the table are not spoiled for choice.

Biancaneve, the hotel's other restaurant, focuses on fine dining Italian cuisine and has more options for the meat-free diner (mains from €29). In the interests of professionalism, I try to sample as many cocktails (at €20 a pop) as possible. After careful deliberation, I declare the Exotique Spritz, made with Aperol, mandarin cordial, lychee, prosecco and sparkling water, to be the winner — before stumbling to bed.

Next morning any hangover is banished by the cool air and mountain views . The slopes are graded by colour — green for learners, blue for beginners, red for intermediate, black for the insane — and after a quick jaunt up the chairlift, minutes from my room, we are at the peak of my first green slope. It looks steep, but I'm feeling confident. I adopt a Zen mindset that the Karate Kid would be proud of and focus on my training: head up, body loose, lean forward. I control my speed with the snowplough and a criss-cross route down the mountain.

"That's perfect, Hamish!" shouts Nadia. "You're doing great!"



A distinctive plate from Biancaneve
JEROME GALLAND

It's hard not to be distracted by the view. As I glide down the slopes, it suddenly hits me that I'm skiing, and I understand why people get addicted to it.

"Look, it's Elsa," says Nadia, pointing to our right. The course is dotted with giant figures of Anna, Kristoff and Olaf the snowman from the Disney hit Frozen. Cartoon ducks are a thing of the past — I'm in the big league now — but the tone of concern in Nadia's voice cuts through my cocky merriment. "Be careful of this next section. It's quite steep, so you need to control your speed," she warns.

Sure enough, this hill is the steepest yet, and I reach new and uncomfortable speeds. I perform my best snowplough, pushing out my ankles and turning the skis in, but it's powerless to halt my descent. The Frozen characters whizz past in a blur, appearing to relish my ever-increasing velocity. The world is a hazy side-plot in the story of my terror.

I consider diving into the ground, but the end of the hill rushes into sight and the slope starts to even out. I hold my nerve, snowplough again and come to a stop — this time still upright.

"Are you OK? I could tell you weren't in control there," Nadia says.

"Can we do it again?" I ask.



Wholesome hearty fare at Basbar
JEROME GALLAND

I spend my final morning in the Tata Harper spa, which has two heated pools — one indoor, the other outside — separated by a window. There's also a sauna, a steam room and a fitness area. While sipping refreshing cucumber water, like the fancy mountain man I am, I peruse the treatment menu: it features a detox body wrap, an oxygenating leg treatment, and an "intense sculpting facial". I opt for a simple deep-tissue massage (€150 for a 50-minute treatment).

As the masseuse works her way through muscles woken by the slopes from years of dormancy, I reflect on the weekend. Learning to ski in this luxurious place is a bit like having a Ferrari as your first car.

As the Enya-esque music comes to a gentle crescendo, and a minty aroma wafts across the room, I question whether I deserve all of this opulence and pampering. I decide that Ben doesn't, but Hamish does. You probably do, too.

Ben Haugh was a guest of Maisons Pariente Hôtel Le Coucou in Meribel, where double rooms cost from €440, B&B; suites start at from €900, B&B; family suites are from €2,000, B&B and four-bedroom private chalets start at €10,000, B&B.
jecoucoumeribel.com



The Meribel Valley view
JEROME GALLAND

The brief

Getting there

Fly from Dublin to Geneva with Aer Lingus, Lufthansa, Swiss Air or British Airways from about €100 return. Méribel is roughly a two-hour drive from Geneva airport.

Ski passes

There are two options: the Méribel Valley ski pass, which is more suited to beginners, or the Three Valleys ski pass, which covers a much larger area. A six-day pass for the Three Valleys costs €312 for an adult, €249.60 for a child, or €249.60 per person for a family of four. A one-day pass for Méribel Valley or the Three Valleys costs €53 and €63 respectively. skipass-meribel.com/en

Ski lessons

Ecole du Ski offers group skiing lessons for up to six people from €420 per day. esf-uk.co.uk

Equipment rental

Ski gear can be hired from Hôtel Le Coucou at daily rates: skis and poles €30; ski boots €21; helmets €9; snowboards €30; sleds €0, and snowboard boots €22.