

A full-page photograph of a winter mountain scene. In the foreground, a snow-covered slope leads down to a small, rustic wooden cabin with a snow-laden roof. The cabin is surrounded by evergreen trees. In the background, majestic, snow-capped mountain peaks rise against a clear blue sky. The overall atmosphere is serene and idyllic.

R O M A N C I N G

T H E

S L O P E S

Fine French cuisine, cosy hideaways and spa heaven – could a ski break in Megève be the new weekend retreat we've been waiting for? *Tracy Ramsden* finds out

Two days before my husband and I head off on a ski holiday in the south-eastern French resort of Megève, there is no snow in the Alps. Nothing. Aside from an unseasonably early snowfall in November, not a flake has fallen since. It's now mid-season. Of course, we tell ourselves with faux optimism that we could always hire mountain bikes, or pull on our hiking boots – both popular pursuits in Megève – but the snowboards are already packed and we're determined to use them.

And then it happens. After endless swiping of the snow report app on my phone, the updates roll in: 20cm, 30cm, 50cm overnight. By the time we land in Geneva for a blink-and-it's-over transfer (an unprecedented one-hour drive, making Megève the perfect spot for a fly-by ski weekend), the valleys are a whitewash of fresh powder. The weather gods have delivered.

A traditional French village in the heart of the Mont Blanc massif, the resort was purpose-built in the 20s to rival Switzerland's swanky St Moritz. As we wander the main square, it has retained much of its old-school glamour, despite being overtaken in popularity by hotspots such as Courchevel. Sure, there's a place for budget chalets and piste-side burgers (usually on our week-long ski holidays with 20 friends), but right now three days of boutique hotels and Michelin-starred food seems a good way to get our ski fix. 'Investment weekending', if you will. There are chocolate shops, horse-drawn carriages and, oh look, Hermès!

It's too late to hit the slopes when we arrive, so we hunker down at our first hotel of the trip, Les Fermes de Marie. Built on disused farmland 30 years ago by local hotelier dynasty, the Sibuet, and named after their daughter Marie – who now runs the hotel – it's a feat of wooden sculptural engineering. The dining area sits in the belly of a vast barn construction and there's a huge crackling fire, above which sits a majestic, mounted taxidermy stag. Our suite feels like an enchanted tree house, with huge windows overlooking the snow-covered valley and a bed tucked away upstairs on a low-ceilinged mezzanine level – great if you're 4ft 11in (me), not so much if you're 6ft 1in (him). It's the little touches that impress: organic cleanser left beside the sink before bedtime; the gluten-free pastry table at breakfast; and boot-warmers



at the hotel ski shop, where our newly waxed snowboards and toasty boots welcome us in the morning.

The main lift, Le Chamois, is a ten-minute stroll away and connects with the Rocharbois lift for the higher slopes. It's peak season, but there are no queues or bustle at the lift station. Across the two main ski areas – the Evasion Mont-Blanc (passes from €46.50 per day) and the Portes du Mont-Blanc (passes from €36 per day) – there are over 400km of mixed-ability slopes overlooking the awesome panorama. As a general rule, ski the Le Jaillet side in the morning for quiet, tree-lined runs on freshly bashed pistes, and 360° views of Mont Blanc and Aravis. Then, in the afternoon, follow the sunshine over to Le Mont d'Arbois, which is better for intermediate skiers.

We stop for a *chocolat chaud* at slope-side bistro Les Mandarines – all designer houndstooth armchairs and

cow-hide rugs – and sit on the terrace with our faces in the midday sun and faux-fur rugs over our legs before taking the last run back to Megève village.

As first-day fatigue sets in back at Les Fermes de Marie, we change into fluffy white robes, and head to the in-house Pure Altitude spa. There's a small adults' pool and larger family pool, but the real hidden gem is out on the terrace. Nestled in the snow like a giant nursery rhyme wooden pail is the outdoor hot tub. Sinking into the warm bubbles, we unwind looking across the mountains we explored earlier today.

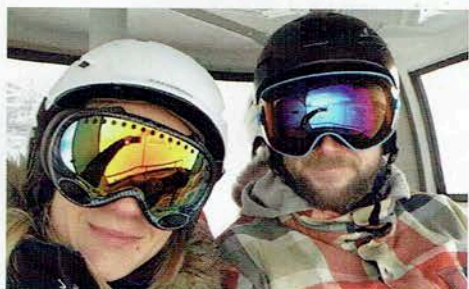
When in France, one should eat well and plentifully. For an unfussy supper, we go for a traditional raclette fondue with thin strips of beef (around €40 for two) and a bottle of vin rouge at L'Alpage. The tiny bistro is simple but stylish, with Scandi-style wood panelling and a cosy open fire. A number of bars are tucked down the winding roads off the main ▶



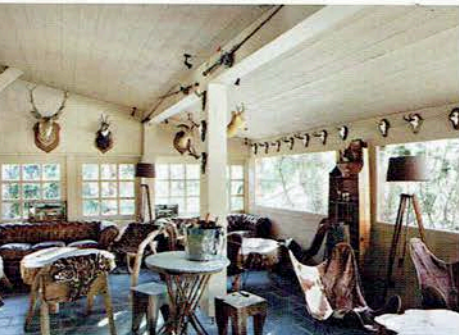
Far left: the picturesque mountains of Mont d'Arbois. Clockwise from top: traditional horse-drawn carriages are Megève's alternative to Uber; skiers test their mettle; Tracy hits the slopes



Clockwise from below left: Tracy and her husband get their ski faces on; inside one of the chic Fermes de Marie suites; the hotel's outdoor hot tub



'We take the gondola to Mont d'Arbois to catch the untouched pistes. It's exhilarating'



Above: A hunting lodge-style bar at Lodge Park. Right: the resort's centre is even prettier at night



square, but we've been told by a local to check out a venue behind a small wooden door in a nondescript building hidden down a side street. Les 5 Rues is Megève's jazz speakeasy and, as we sit on beer barrel stools, locals pour in, shaking off their down jackets to dance to old-school covers from the house band. We order cocktails, dance with new friends and finally leave at 2am.

Next morning, there's nothing like an early run to clear the head, so we take the gondola to Mont d'Arbois to catch the untouched pistes. It's exhilarating, so we hop on lift after lift towards the higher runs, spoilt by all that Megève has to offer. A good mixture of wide, sloping blues and more challenging reds – with plenty of green runs for beginners. By 2pm, there's only one place to head for après-ski – La Folie Douce in the Saint-Gervais/Megève valley. It lives up to its 'Ibiza on ice' reputation. Staff are hip and beautiful, and from 2pm-4pm the terrace turns into a dance floor, as funky house pumps from the huge speakers and a violinist in full-length faux fur plays to the beat. We drink beer in the sunshine, before catching the last lift back to Les Fermes de Marie.

In town, there's a good selection of independent boutiques, such as Blu&Berry, which stocks Isabel Marant, Carven and Céline. And for fashion-fact fans, the original ski pant originated here in Megève. Back in 1930, world skiing champion Emile Allais commissioned a pair of trousers

to be designed that wouldn't slow him down when skiing downhill, and so the 'fuseau' (spindle) was born – a pair of trousers tapered at the ankle and held in place by under-foot elastic.

Our second hotel of the trip is Lodge Park, the younger, hipper cousin of Fermes de Marie. The soundtrack is cool and the bar is decked out like an edgy, 19th-century hunting lodge – gazelle skulls on the walls, velvet chairs with antler legs – and we sit on battered leather sofas sipping bellinis as though we do this every Monday night. The hotel room, one of 49, is accented with dark reds, heritage tartan walls and a mahogany bathroom with Hollywood lights – it's all very this season.

Having found our ski legs, the last day of the trip is spent boarding faster and longer than we ordinarily would, drinking up that fresh, alpine air. For our final night, we go for something special and book dinner at Les Enfants Terribles, the in-house seafood restaurant at five-star Hôtel Mont-Blanc. The chic, low-lit dining room looks like a 50s smoking lounge and original Jean Cocteau artworks adorn the walls. The ice trays outside the main entrance are lined with fresh mussels, lobster, snails and clams, hinting at the banquet to come. I opt for the seafood platter – all of the above, plus oysters – and my husband has the seared beef. We share a bottle of one of the best white wines we've ever tasted, a ten-year-old Chablis, and toast our imminent return to Megève. ■

Way to go Flights to Geneva from the UK start at £37.98 per person with easyJet*. Rooms at Les Fermes de Marie start from £268 per night (fermesdemarie.com). Rooms at Lodge Park start from £260 (lodgepark.com). For more information, visit megeve.com.