

HELLO!



Chalet Merlo: living the high life in the French Alps

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The French Alps has always been a favourite with **ski-mad royals**. It was the destination of choice for **Prince William and Kate**, who took their children **Prince George** and **Princess Charlotte** to Courchevel on their **first family ski break** last year. The region boasts luxurious, world-class resorts, making the Alps the go-to holiday hotspot for celebrities and royalty alike.

And for those wanting to make like the stars and experience an exclusive snow-capped mountain stay, we've found just the place...

Located a two-hour drive from Geneva lies the quaint village of Le Miroir, the ideal base for skiers to explore the area and devise their own 'ski safari', hopping from one resort to the next. Sainte Foy, Les Arcs, Tignes, Val d'Isère and La Rosière are all within easy reach, and just across the border is La Thuile in Italy. There's no chance of getting bored, skiing the same runs every day.



Chalet Merlo is based in the quaint village of Le Miroir

For those wanting a taste of the high life, Chalet Merlo in Le Miroir is your answer. The mountain-side property overlooks Sainte Foy resort, and is a short drive away from all six resorts mentioned above. Merlo, run by luxury chalet company Première Neige, is perfect for groups or families as it can be rented out on an exclusive occupancy. And with your very own

chauffeur, private chef, chalet hosts and concierge service, you'll feel like you're getting the royal treatment.

Merlo certainly has that rustic, olde worlde feel to it. The owner is an art collector, hence the colourful collection of paintings studded around the property. The open-plan living and dining room has a cosy lived-in vibe, dotted with big leather armchairs and sofas where you can rest your weary limbs in front of the log fire after a day of skiing. There are books and magazines aplenty to choose from, while the kids can be kept entertained during the evenings with an Xbox, Play Station and over 700 DVDs. Not that you'll want to look at a screen! Each of the six bedrooms, complete with L'Occitane toiletries and Egyptian cotton bed linen, boast a beautiful Alpine view, but the outdoor deck on the top floor has the best panoramic vista of the Tarentaise valley.



The mountain-side property has a rustic, olde worlde feel to it

For the adults, make use of the champagne basket, which can be filled with bubbly and lowered by rope from the top floor balcony to the outdoor hot tub in the garden. Trust me, it doesn't get old! We made use of the eight-person jacuzzi every day, sipping on champagne whilst taking in the fresh mountain air and views. Adjacent to the hot tub is the one-person massage suite; our daily sessions with Massage Me were the cherry on the top of our relaxation time! There's also

a sauna on site, plus a two-storey gym, where yoga classes can be organised by your chalet host.

The bespoke concierge service means your trip will be totally hassle free. Your chalet host can organise lift passes and ski lessons before your arrival; you can expect a delivery of fresh bread and pastries every morning; you can book a helicopter transfer to Geneva airport and more! Nothing was too much trouble for our attentive hosts, from the warm welcome on the first day to the nightly turn-down service.



Enjoy a dip in the outdoor hot tub, overlooking the Tarentaise valley

It's safe to say our daily routine was fit for the royals... Start the morning with a ski in a world-class resort, stop for lunch at an alfresco mountain restaurant, finish the day with a few more runs, relax your muscles with a massage and hot tub session and indulge in some afternoon tea and cake. Our idyllic days were rounded off with three-course dinners made by the chalet's private chef, but not before canapés and a fresh round of champagne. Côte de boeuf, pork belly, leg of lamb - we never went to bed hungry.

Unparalleled service and luxury accommodation aside, Chalet Merlo has another unbeatable draw. Its location means it's only a half-hour drive to more than five resorts, and some of the best Alpine skiing. Getting around is no problem with the chalet's private minibus and chauffeur. You may find yourself returning to your favourite resort each day, or wanting to mix it up with a day each in Sainte Foy, Les Arcs, Tignes, Val d'Isère and La Rosière. And if there are poor snow conditions in France, hop over to La Thuile in Italy.



Settling down for an alfresco lunch in Sainte Foy

We relied on our expert guides, brothers Julien and Matthieu Ottobon, from Evolution2 ski school to take us down the slopes and through off-piste areas only locals would know. Each day was tailored to our needs and our instructors were quick in adapting plans as the weather and snow conditions changed. It was Tignes and Val d'Isère one day, where we took advantage of the newly opened gondola that has heated seats and wifi, and La Rosière and La Thuile another.

The more daring and advanced skiers can find untouched powder by heli-skiing, which is prohibited in France but totally acceptable in Italy. Ski from La Rosière across the border, and

arrange for your helicopter to pick you up in Italy. Our treat on the final day of skiing was a surprise picnic off-piste. Our guide Matthieu stopped us at the most incredible viewpoint where there were no other skiers around, just the stunning backdrop of the snow-capped mountains. He brought out a bottle of wine, cheese, baguette and saucisson from his backpack and then served it all up on his ski - *fantastique!*



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Advanced skiers can hop across the border to Italy to try heli-skiing

Sainte Foy, the charming chocolate-box French resort, is another go-to destination for off-piste skiing. It may not have endless amounts of red runs, but it's certainly first pick for off-piste. And when you've had enough of your ski boots, snowshoeing on the blue runs is another way to get your mountain fix. The small, family-friendly town is hailed the 'jewel in the crown' thanks to its location, nestled between four world-class resorts. While Chalet Merlo in Le Miroir was a haven

of privacy (we hardly saw another soul during our stay), Première Neige's other premium chalet, The Peak, in Sainte Foy is perfect for the ski-in, ski-out set.

The Peak is a stone's throw away from the chair lift - you can see the beginner's practice slope from your bedroom - and also a minute's walk to the ski rental shop. The property is home to eight extremely spacious suites, each with a private balcony, and is best for couples or smaller groups as each room can be rented out individually. More modern in its look, it was just as beautifully decorated and finished as Chalet Merlo. An outdoor hot tub, fluffy robes, Elemis Spa toiletries, an open-plan living room and log fire, a gym and a spa with massage suite, steam room and sauna - all the same luxuries were there.



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The stunning Alpine views never get boring

After a few days of fresh mountain air, stunning Alpine vistas, exhilarating off-piste runs and luxurious, Instagram-worthy chalets, I defy you not to catch the ski bug with Première Neige.

Première Neige (www.premiere-neige.com) offers Chalet Merlo (up to 12 guests) from £8,525 per week including dedicated chalet staff/chef on a half board basis. Ski and Snowshoe rental available from SkiSet in Sainte Foy (www.skiset.com).