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LIVING IN FOODIE HEAVEN



→ BEN CLATWORTHY

Méribel: party town, little Britain, and overcrowded. The middle valley of the three, that together become Les 3 Vallées, is a resort with a reputation that has suffered in the past. Méribel benefited when the Russians invaded Courchevel, with the Brit holidaymakers switching valley in their swarms – but it was already packed during the peak weeks. Now it's jam-packed.

The answer, however, is not to eschew the resort we love, but instead opt to stay in nearby Méribel village, an outpost to the main resort, and worlds apart from the hustle and bustle found in the centre of town. From here two chairlifts link to the world's largest ski area, allowing you to head onwards to Courchevel, Les Menuires and Val Thorens, or down to Méribel's centre.

The skiing is impressive (it always has been), thanks to the 600km of slopes that make up the area, 150km of which are found in the Méribel valley. There is plenty of intermediate terrain to be had, whilst those looking for a challenge should head to the newly-opened Couloir Tournier, below the Saulire Express lift.

The resort – in a similar way to nearby Val Thorens – has undergone a recent regeneration, with a handful of major lifts seeing upgrades, new slopes, and new on-mountain restaurants. And the investment is clearly paying off: the resort has won the bid to host the 2015 Alpine World Championships.

But food? "That's Courchevel's crown is it not?" Such was the question posed to me just a few weeks ago by the editor of a national newspaper's travel section. And on paper, the answer is yes – Courchevel boasts the most Michelin-starred restaurants (seven share 11 stars) of any resort – although it's not home to Fish&Pips, a British ski outfit specialising in all things culinary. Not only do they possibly have the coolest company name in the Alps – so-called after Holly Fisher and Philippa Hartley, the company's Directors – but they also serve up scrumptious food in their nine chalets. Six can be found in Méribel, the other three in the equally popular resort of Val d'Isère.

The thought of spending three nights in foodie heaven excited me greatly, and arriving to the most inviting chocolate

cake confirmed that I was in for a treat. A big one.

Already cooking away in the (tiny) kitchen was Lucy Wigglesworth, our chef, who

at just 23 has worked in a Michelin-starred restaurant, and has the skill and dedication of someone well beyond her years.

What followed for the next three nights was an eclectic mix of mouth-watering culinary delights. From the amuse-bouche right through to dessert, Wigglesworth showed how cooking is definitely both an art and a science – serving up five courses of delectable cuisine each evening. Chalets and intricate details are not often found

if you only have a domestic kitchen.

If you can stomach lunch (given the delights awaiting you on your return), the area is home to some delightful – albeit pricey – on-mountain eateries. The Coeur de Cristal (lecoeurdecristal.com) is one of the more upmarket, swish, restaurants in the valley, serving a mix of traditional Alpine food, as well as the predictable slopeside staples – burgers, spaghetti bolognese and steak.

Last season's expansion of La Folie Douce empire to the slopes of Méribel saw the opening of La Fruitière restaurant (lafoliedouce.com/meribel), alongside the notorious terrace après-ski bar. Serving everything from steak tartare to local cheeses – with an emphasis on organic produce – the restaurant is one to visit, but be aware it will leave a dent in your wallet.

My nights of total indulgence and gluttony flew by, complemented by the homely, yet sophisticated feel of the chalet. Méribel village offers something so different to the usual Méribel experience. It's a small place – there is a small shop and one bar – but that's what makes it special. Méribel is bustling, always busy, and (in my opinion) far from relaxing, whereas, by contrast, the village is a tranquil escape from the melee.

Nor can I fault my time with Fish&Pips – the food, hospitality, and chalets are all top-notch. Yes, they are far from the glitziest buildings in the Alps, but that's not what it's about – here, the food is what people come for. And keep coming back for, time and time again.



in the
KNOW

Ben Clatworthy travelled with Fish&Pips (fishandpips.co.uk) who has 7 nights in Méribel from £608pp half-board, excluding flights. British Airways (ba.com) flies from London Heathrow to Geneva from £121 return. Slide Candy (slidecandy.com) offer ski/board, boot and helmet hire from €121 (£102).

Méribel: meribel.net
Les 3 Vallées: les3vallees.com

together, but what Fish&Pips prove is when you take enough time to find the best chefs, the results are first-rate – even