

Group

The gang's all here

If hell is other people, a group ski trip must be purgatory for a miserable old misanthrope like **Ed Grenby**. Worse still, it's with some of his best mates...



'The greatest thing,' said my old friend Pope (as he tried to push me out of the chairlift into the ravine) 'about skiing with close pals...' (here he grabbed my poles and threw them down the hill) '... is that

you're with people you know and love and trust.' (A compacted snowball smacked me full in the face.)

It was hard to argue with him, and not just because I had a mouth full of white stuff. Although I instinctively felt I wasn't supposed to be getting duffed up so comprehensively, I simply couldn't be sure, as I'd never been on a group skiing holiday before. I'd avoided them, in fact, like unpadded gondola gantries. For me, a one-weekend-a-year skier, it's always been a question of maximising minutes spent on the slopes, and I couldn't face the faff factor of marshalling 10 people, 20 skis and all the different 'sorry could everyone wait while I go for a wee' biorhythms. But this year, a drink-driven conversation about 'how nice it would be' became one of those 'well we really should' plans that you never expect actually to crystallise – then, quick as you could say 'economies of scale', someone had actually gone ahead and booked a chalet in Méribel.

It was a good choice of resort. Sat smug in the middle of the Three Valleys – the world's largest ski area, as every pass proudly reminds you – the place was clearly going to be big enough for the curmudgeons among us to pretend we weren't on a group trip at all (and with only a minimum of 'accidentally' missed meet-up mobile calls). For the more sociable, however, the piste map was a splendid spaghetti of overlapping red and blue squiggles, crisscrossing and

paralleling so often that our gang's veterans could enjoy themselves within a snowball's throw of the virgin slopes.

True, there's not much black on the map, but sweeping summit-to-chalet reds are enough to tire even the most iron-thighed; and on the valley's eastern slopes, the snowscape is so winningly dotted with wholesome-smelling conifer and frozen lakes that it would be hard to be bored.

At the end of day two, smiles were as wide as a beginner's turns. Friendships (and, more remarkably, marriages) had survived the challenge of travelling, skiing and even sleeping together ('economies of scale', it turns out, is French for 'some singles will have to share a room').

Then we discovered the hot tub and the fragile peace was shattered. Now, some of our party had known each other for two decades, and some for just two sentences (or is it just one sentence if you say 'Um, sorry, but I think you're standing on my ski' twice?), which led to some interesting Jacuzzi-protocol questions.

Having crashed into Rob at the bottom of an icy red run earlier that day, when Sally went for an *après-ski* soak, she couldn't really look him in the eye and tell him off for breaking her 'swimsuits in the hot tub' rule – but, given his utter nakedness, she couldn't look him anywhere else either. At dinner that night, a piece of paper headed 'hot tub (w)etiquette' was handed round. The next night (God knows what had happened in between), it was supplemented with one labelled 'heavy petiquette'.

Tensions turn out to be soluble in decent wine, though, and our chalet was well stocked. The company we'd booked with, Fish & Pips, is fervently five-star (and five-course) as far as food and drink are concerned, but reins prices in with a more four-star take on the rest of the package. Our unpromisingly student-looking chef had actually been plucked from one of

London's finest restaurants, and he had me at canapés on the first night – gushingly juicy scallops, seared crisp on the outside, but marshmallow soft in the mouth.

Meanwhile, the skiing continued as gloriously as it had begun. The natural levelling-out of learning curves meant our

beginners were starting to catch up with the group's intermediate plateau-ers, whose technique hadn't improved since the late '90s. And Al had discovered a free Three Valleys iPhone app that claimed to measure your speed, so the best/stupidest of the group were able to amuse themselves and terrorise everyone else by trying to break the 75kph barrier.

By midway through the week, we could more or less ski together, a broad phalanx strung across the piste like blockbuster superheroes swaggering into town, or a clothesline strewn with ill-matching fluoro dorkwear flapping gracelessly in the wind, depending on whether you asked us or anyone else. Either way, I was pretty sure we were having the most fun on the mountain.

'The greatest thing about skiing with close pals,' I told Pope, as I retrieved my poles and skied off without him, 'is that you can just go off and leave them whenever you feel like it.' ■

GO INDEPENDENT

The nearest airport is Chambéry, 75 minutes away. Geneva is three hours away. Transfers



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are £42 return from Chambéry (00 33 4 79 683296, www.mobisavoie.fr) and £112 return from Geneva (00 33 4 79 683296, www.alpski-bus.com). **EasyJet** (0843 104 5000, www.ba.com) flies to Geneva from 12 UK airports, including Gatwick, from £78 return with one piece of luggage. Or try **Jet2** (0871 226 1737, www.jet2.com) for flights to Chambéry. **Eurostar** (0843 218 6186, www.eurostar.com) runs direct trains from London to Moutiers, 25 minutes from Méribel, from £189 return.

WHERE TO STAY

Fish & Pips (0845 474 1054, www.fishandpips.co.uk; doubles from £620pp, half board, for one week) has chalets in Méribel and Val d'Isère. Or try **Erna Low** (0844 879 2903, www.ernalow.co.uk) for self-catering chalets in the Alps.

GO PACKAGED

VIP Ski (0844 557 3119, www.vip-chalets.com) has a week in a chalet from £899pp, half board, with flights and transfers. Or try **Mark Warner** (0844 273 2516, www.markwarner.co.uk).

FURTHER INFORMATION

Méribel Tourist Office (www.meribel.net).

THE NEXT NIGHT (GOD KNOWS WHAT HAD HAPPENED), A NOTE WAS HANDED ROUND: 'HEAVY PETIQUETTE'



Dr Snow says... Group-trip feedback from Sean Newsom, ski travel editor for *The Sunday Times*



● 'Ed, I'm jealous! The best holiday on the planet is a ski trip with friends – a heady mix of adrenaline, bonhomie and wide-eyed wonder at snowy scenery. And you're spot-on about Méribel being perfect for a mixed-ability group – especially when you take the whole of the Three Valleys into account.'

● 'So many mid-level skiers never improve. Why? They stop taking lessons! Yes, we know you want to hang out with your mates, but next time, why not club together and book two private instructors for

a day or two, splitting the group by ability? In Méribel, I've had great days with Marmalade (www.ski-marmalade.com) and New Generation (www.skinewgen.com). With Marmalade, two three-hour mornings of tuition would set a group of four back just over £100 each.'

● 'Need a break from skiing with your friends (or maybe you're much better/worse than them)? You've picked the right resort for it, because Méribel, along with 34 other resorts, has a rep from **Ski Club of Great Britain** (www.skiclub.co.uk),

They offer ski hosting – free! – for members, and even first-timers can try a one-day taster. They'll take you out on the slopes for a day with same-level skiers.'

● 'Fish & Pips deserves its reputation for good food, but if you're on a budget, try self-catering. Much cheaper than catered, and just as fun with the right people. **Ski Collection** (0844 576 0175, www.skicollection.co.uk) has a five-bedroom self-catering chalet from £125pp/week, based on eight sharing.'

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FOUR MORE GROUP RESORTS

Sauze d'Oulx, Italy

The birthplace of Italian skiing, dating back to 1899, Sauze d'Oulx has long had a reputation as something of a party town, and, although it's quieter than it used to be, there's still a lively atmosphere that groups will enjoy. The slopes are stunning, too. Part of the Milky Way ski area, it's linked by lift to nearly 600 individual pistes, with excellent, long circuits available to even modest intermediates, dipping across the border into Montgenèvre, France. Experts will have fun off-piste, among the larch woods of the lower slopes or up on the higher powder bowls. *Neilson (0845 070 3460, www.neilson.co.uk) has seven nights at the Chalet le Valentin from £549pp, half board, based on a group of 17, including flights from Gatwick to Turin and transfers.*



Ischgl, Austria

High in the Paznaun valley, Ischgl is a rosy-cheeked, pigtailed farming village with a decidedly grown-up après scene, from go-go dancers to Tyrolean techno-oompah bars, and from chic nightclubs to pubs so friendly, you'll struggle to get up in the morning – except that, with skiing this good, no *Glühwein* hangover will hold you back. It's linked to more than 230km of pistes, with a stunning terrain park and boarding, as well as one of Europe's best snow records, so there's something here for everyone – perfect for mixed-ability groups. Best group laugh? Ischgl's floodlit toboggan run. Don't miss it. *Inghams (01483 791111, www.ingham.co.uk) has seven nights at the four-star Hotel Brigitte from £1,129pp, half board, including Gatwick-Innsbruck flights and transfers.*



Alpe d'Huez, France

First things first: Alpe d'Huez sure ain't pretty. Yes, it's one of the oldest ski resorts in France, but that doesn't mean timber chalets and cowbells. It means '60s high-rises and Muzak. What we love about it, though, is its skiing, nightlife and prices – the holy trinity of group trips. The hub of France's fifth-largest ski area, an hour east of Grenoble, Alpe d'Huez is lift-linked to more than 200km of pistes, and with a top station at nearly 3,350m, it has some of the longest descents in the world, including an iconic 16km black. With 300 days of sun a year, it's also in our Tanners' Top 10. As for après, the scene is full-on, with a youthful crowd drawn by cheep beer and friendly bars. *Ski Solutions (020 7471 7700, www.skisolutions.com) has seven nights at Chalet Naomi from £668pp, half board, based on a group of eight, including Gatwick-Grenoble flights and transfers.*



Chamonix, France

Less a resort than a bustling, buzzing town that just happens to find itself at the foot of Mont Blanc, Chamonix has stacks going for it away from the slopes – brilliant for groups where some want time away from skiing. Not that the skiing here isn't outrageously good: with a mix of slopes for all abilities, Chamonix also has some of the best off-piste in Europe. As for nightlife, that essential group-holiday ingredient, Chamonix is littered with clubs and bars, restaurants and cafes, meaning everything from fast food to gastro feasts. *Powder Byrne (020 8246 5300, www.powderbyrne.com) has seven nights at the ski-in, ski-out Chalet Maison Jaune from £1,359pp, half board, based on a group of 10. Price includes pre-dinner drinks and canapés, wine, flights from Heathrow to Geneva and transfers.*



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