



Come on, you can do it! Remember what it says on your bottom!” urged my instructor as I inched forward on my skis for the first time in my life. He was referring to the logo on my jacket proudly declaring “No Fear”. The slogan was meant to sit across the small of my back. The problem was, I’d borrowed the jacket from a taller friend, leaving it unfortunately positioned across my *derrière* and drawing more attention than it needed to a place I was constantly landing on. No fear? Actually, there was quite a bit, as Patrick Lecomte of Méribel’s Magic ski school (magic-meribel.com) was to discover.

Still, his expert guidance soon had the beginners in my group (a mixed bunch of first-timers) gaining confidence on a nursery slope whose spring job was as a golf course.

Sports and I had parted company in the early 1990s, and even those who love me dearly would be pushed to praise my coordination. To me, snow is best left for Christmas cards and Hugh Grant movies. Put the two together and what you have is a skiing holiday – probably not what I was intended for. No wonder I’ve resisted them so far, worrying that you had to be young, fit and rich to join in.

Having kept away for all these years, I couldn’t hide any more when faced with a sports-mad husband who’s such an

BLANC SLATE

Is it ever too late to learn skiing from scratch? Reluctant pupil Robina Dam heads to Méribel to take her first (cautious) steps on the slopes



TO ME, SNOW IS BEST LEFT FOR CHRISTMAS CARDS AND HUGH GRANT MOVIES

enthusiastic skier that breaking his collarbone a few years back on a black run didn't deter him from returning. Now we were accompanied by a toddler who, at 18 months, was just that bit too wee to start ski school, though Magic's classes for the little ones were taking place on a slope next to ours. The classes (you can book your child into either ►



• Main: Méribel's nursery slopes.
• Above: Beginners of all ages



La Chaudanne ski hub



Chalet snacks



Suited and booted



Parc Olympique

French or English lessons) are kept short to stop them getting tired and Magic's instructors are as supportive as they are skilled. The children, dressed in padded all-in-one ski suits, looked adorable, not to mention fearless. Lucky them.

Méribel Village in France's Three Valleys is a rare find among ski resorts: beautiful, atmospheric and offering everything that you'd need at all different levels. After an hour's drive from Chambéry Airport (Geneva is about two hours), we arrived at a cosy property owned by Fish & Pips (fishandpips.co.uk), a competitively priced British chalet company with a following among those who are crazy about skiing and/or food.

Managing director Holly Fisher, who did her rounds of the six properties in Méribel (they also have one in Val d'Isère) explained: "This isn't where you come for luxuries, as we try to keep our chalets as accessible as possible. So we don't have big properties, but our locations mean keen skiers can literally take the slopes back home, and we have made our food a real draw."

In our chalet, Le Christophe, we lucked out big time as our chef-and-host team, a friendly

young couple called Jessica and Chris, came from a restaurant background. The attention they lavished on their canapés was symbolic of how every meal was started from scratch with the best ingredients, whether it was homemade sushi or slow-roasted pork. It was all the more impressive as the kitchen was so compact it looked as though you couldn't swing a catfish, let alone a cat, inside. Besides their beautifully presented four-course dinners, all matched with a great selection of wines, Jessica was brilliant with the baby (they cook separate high teas for children), and the mother's fears were put to bed by Chris's recommendation of a bottle of Cremant, a French sparkling wine, for my husband and I.

And that's when the trip turned a corner for me. Suddenly, it seemed as though there was so much more to experience in Méribel. Straight after ski class, I was busy with massages at the Parc Olympique (+33 479 00 59 96 25), which boasts gorgeous views of La Chaudanne from the relaxation area, where there are complimentary herbal teas for after your treatment. Fish & Pips can also organise massages in your chalet with the superb Jane Farraday, an Englishwoman ►

**STRAIGHT
AFTER SKI
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AT THE PARC
OLYMPIQUE**



• Above: après-ski can be enjoyed by non-skiers too.
• Right: tobogganing is always another option

who has worked with sports stars and celebrities, but she gets really busy so put in your request early. You're so chilled that you may just fall asleep straight after, even if you had plans to go to the Lodge du Village, a favourite local pub (lodgeduvillage.com). "We'll be there for the night," said Chris. "Bring your sisters." Excuse me? Turns out it's the local band.

The Parc Olympique has an ice rink that pulls in the families, but when you want to spend time apart, T4 Nanny (t4nanny.com) comes to the rescue. Organised by an English-speaking company, the qualified nannies (with checked references) are a godsend in this region, making it possible to enjoy both the "family" and the "holiday". Kim was the first to babysit my son, and she did a fabulous job. She and her colleagues take the small ones sledging and make snowmen with the older kids, freeing you up for shopping, walking and après-ski. Méribel Village has a party vibe every night in season, which is great for the younger crowd, but more mature visitors can still dip in and out, thanks to the free shuttle service between Méribel Village and La Chaudanne, where the ski lifts, meeting points, shops and bars all are.

When it came to the end of my stay, my host Chris gave a cheeky grin as we were leaving the chalet. "Do you think you'll be coming back to Méribel to ski?" he asked. Frankly, I'll be so busy having massages, going ice skating and enjoying lots of beautiful meals that I won't have time to buy a ski pass, I told him. But I will be back – no fear.



THE NANNIES TAKE THE SMALL ONES SLEDGING AND MAKE SNOWMEN WITH THE OLDER KIDS

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

THE KIT

- First-timers on the slopes should use the mantra "beg, borrow or steal". One girl at my ski school told me she'd bought her ski pants, jacket, goggles, gloves and hat all for less than £100 at TK Maxx. That's a steal. I went one better, borrowing all my exterior clothing from friends. Just plan ahead so that you're not travelling at the same time.
- One old-timer's advice was to ask for hiking socks rather than ski socks – they're just as thick but without the, er, hiked-up prices. Check out the sales for knock-down prices on good-quality thermals, which you'd want to keep anyway.
- Skis and boots can be hired in advance at Slide Candy (slidecandy.com), which offers a delivery and fitting service, reasonably priced, at your chalet on the day you arrive.

THE APRES-SKI KIT

- Choose winter-holiday clothes that you can layer (jerseys are good) to see you through lunchtimes in outdoor cafes, drinking in packed bars and dinners in cosy restaurants or homely chalets.
- Designer Vanessa Knox (vanessaknox.com), for example, does great chunky turtleneck sweaters (right), which you can wear all winter, both in the resorts and back home.
- Uniqlo's Heattech range of fitted long-sleeve vests are inexpensive and come in lots of bright colours.



THE MAKE-UP BAG

- Just like your body, your face needs lots of layers. Take a moisturiser that's thicker than usual – altitude causes dryness, plus you have the effects of the wind and sun. Slather on Clinique's Moisture Surge (left), which you can stock up on during your flight (Jet2.com has a special offer on p108), then finish off with sunscreen.



- For children, high-level sunscreen is essential. Nivea Sun Kids (right) goes up to SPF50 (nivea.co.uk), and for little ones with sensitive skin, try Green People's Organic Children's Sun Lotion SPF25 in the fragrance-free version (greenpeople.co.uk).



PHOTOS: RICHARD BLEWITT

CHAMBERY/GENEVA

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