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Fla. company makes Alpine ski trips special

The Boston Globe

By Anne Z. Cooke, Globe Correspondent | January 16, 2005

MRIBEL, France -- When all is said and done, the promised land is neither in the blue states of California, Vermont, and Illinois, nor the red states of Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah.

For recreational skiers of all colors, the holy grail is the Alps, the knobby backbone of Europe, where snowy peaks and ragged spires tower over colossal valleys and the trails seem to run forever.

"How far do you think we skied today?" asked Stephane Turc, our ski guide and instructor at Courchevel, as we skied back to the hotel. "I'll bet you can't guess."

Twenty miles, or more, I figured, if the growing ache in my left knee was any clue. From the ride to the Saulire summit, to the descent into Mribel, to the next valley and the next, it was a glorious but very long trek before we finally started back.

"Non, non, non," said Turc, grinning. "Seventy kilometers [43 miles] at least. Ze finest skiing in ze Alps."

And the most. There are 28,000 contiguous skiable acres in the Trois Valles region, about five times more than the biggest US resort. But what gets my ballot is that it costs about the same to ski in France, Switzerland, Austria, or Italy as it does in North America. Don't believe me? Try skiing the way the British do.

Inveterate buyers of package trips to just about everywhere, Britons are famous for pioneering affordable one-week ski "holidays." The idea is to pick your destination, then find a tour operator who buys in bulk and bundles everything into one price. Making it happen is as easy as writing a check and packing your woolies.

The most popular package is one that includes air fare, airport taxes, trip insurance, a shuttle to and from the airport, a comfortable hotel on or near the slopes, and two meals a day -- "half board," as it's known. The best part of the package is the ambience, says Simon Kelton, with the Ski Club of Great Britain.

"Yes, you'll ski," said Kelton. "But this is a holiday. You're there to eat well, to meet other people, to socialize at the bar. You relax, you bring the family, you take in the sights."

After doing some digging on the Internet, we decided to focus on Mribel, in the Three Valleys, outside the town of Albertville, which hosted the 1992 Winter Olympics. We called Alpine Adventures in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., for help.

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Alpine Adventures, started less than 10 years ago by Richelle Blanken, former US Ski Team member, and her brother, Rick Reichsfeld, specializes in ski trips to the Alps. Despite the slowdown in overseas travel that followed Sept. 11, Alpine has tripled its sales, in part because the company hires reservation agents who ski. [Continued...](#)

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Page 2 of 2 -- "Most of our staff come from the ski industry -- resort employees, former ski instructors, snowboarders, people like that," said spokeswoman Martina Reichsfeld. "They've visited the hotels and the resorts we represent. What we're selling is knowledge and service."

If you look at a trail map of Mribel and its neighbors, you'll see that the Three Valleys, connected by a network of gondolas and lifts, are pitched north to south and divided by parallel mountain ridges.

Mribel is in the middle valley, tony Courchevel is eastward, and Val Thorens and Les Menuires are to the west. You might think people have always skied here, but the resorts were built specifically for recreational skiers on holiday.

The hotels and lodges, climbing the hillsides beside the slopes, look like traditional chalets, each with chestnut-brown siding, sun-facing balconies, and gingerbread trim, though the newer hotels are built of well-disguised cement.

The ski slopes, too, were planned for holiday visitors; death drops are in plentiful supply, but here they are often found beside alternate, and easier, ways to the bottom.

Though we originally asked Alpine Adventures for their lowest prices, we soon realized that some features were worth the extra cost. Alpine's cheapest Mribel package, for example, was about \$999 per person, but was limited to the basics: air fare from East Coast airports, bus transfers, trip cancellation insurance, seven nights in a comfortable but ordinary three-star hotel, ski lockers, and breakfast.

There was no sauna, swimming pool, or ski rental shop, and no daily dinner in the hotel restaurant, a feature that sounds frivolous, but enhances the sense of belonging to a very cozy club. After skiing all day, then soaking in a hot tub, it's so much nicer to meet your fellow guests at the aprs-ski bar, and then dine "at home" with friends than it is to call a cab and head back out into the cold.

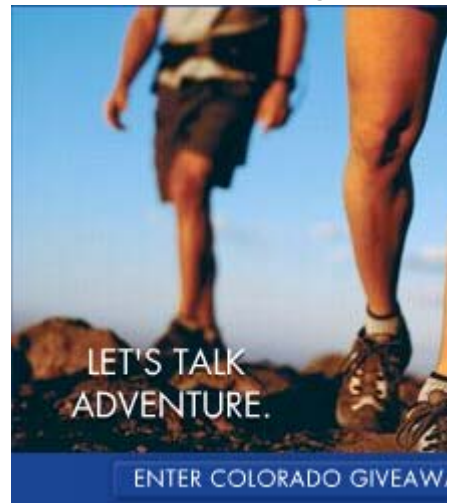
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Seven nights there, with daily breakfast and dinner and air fare from the East Coast, was \$1,229 per person. This choice became as affordable as six days in Snowmass, Colo., in a comparable condo for four, with lift tickets but no air fare.

We went a little further, however. Remembering that our birthdays had passed without fanfare, we treated ourselves to a gift of seven nights at the Allodis Hotel, a hospitable 44-room chalet, 200 yards above the base of the Plan de l'Homme triple chair. Though the Allodis easily could qualify as a four-star hotel, owner Francoise Forni has not applied for a four-star rating: She says she prefers things just as they are.

What did the price -- about \$2,100 per person -- buy? All the basics, plus two gourmet meals daily prepared by a trained French chef. That meant a leisurely breakfast of hot and cold cereal, fruit, meat, cheese, and eggs; and four-course dinners that included wine, in a formal dining room. The Allodis also had an elevator, a pool, hot tub, a ski rental shop, ski lockers 10 feet from the slopes, a small but attractive double room with a phone and television, and an inviting ground-floor lounge with comfortable sofas, an oversized fireplace, and a fully-stocked bar.

Another factor keeps the prices high. The Allodis is a long-time favorite with repeat customers -- many of them British -- for whom family holidays in Mribel are an annual tradition. So the hotel is always full. Since the Forni family makes annual improvements (last year it was flat-screen televisions) and guarantees first-class service, they see no reason for discounts.

Lift tickets are almost never included in ski packages, another European custom. Fortunately, however, they are usually less expensive than at North American resorts, averaging about \$35 per day. You can buy them when you arrive.

You'll also want to spend a day with a professional guide (a licensed ski instructor), which will set you back about \$280. But a guide can make all the difference between a good trip and a great trip. He -- or she -- will be your friend, your interpreter, your leader, your personal introduction to the Alps, and your ticket to adventure. All 40 miles and more.

Anne Z. Cooke is a freelance writer in California. ■

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