

Evening Standard

# ES



magazine

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**SLIM'S  
PICKINGS**  
HAS CARLOS SLIM  
GOT HIS EYE  
ON LONDON?

**RAINFORESTS  
& BUDDHAS**  
URBAN DAY SPAS  
REINVENTED

# Being Julia

The return of Julia Ormond

MEET PHILIPPE STARCK'S ARTIST DAUGHTER ARA PLUS TESSA JOWELL & CHRISTOPHER LEE

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Julia's own. Hair by Tony Chavez at Frank Reps using Shu Uemura

Art of Hair. Make-up by Kela Wong for GOSH Cosmetics at Urban

Siren Agency. Location: Four Seasons Beverly Hills, Los Angeles

(00 1 310 289 4777; www.fourseasons.com)

## Alpine adventure

Hot tubs, marmots and tartiflette  
in Sainte Foy. See page 38



Miss last week's issue? See the  
highlights at [www.esmagazine.co.uk](http://www.esmagazine.co.uk)

# Chalet girl

The tiny hamlet of Le Miroir recalls a gentler era of ski holidays: green runs, no neon signs and lashings of tartiflette, says **Catherine Ostler**

**W**e arrived in a blizzard and only the next morning, looking out of our bedroom window, did we appreciate the majestic view from our French alpine chalet – of

Sainte Foy below us, the craggy white mountains above us, and the valley ahead leading up to Val d'Isère, 20km away. The Sainte Foy valley is so pretty and compact, with its forests and medieval church spires, it looks like the inside of a snow globe. We wandered upstairs to the main open-plan sitting room for breakfast – a vast full English made by masterchef Fiona, coffee, orange juice plus baskets of croissants – and got a better view still from the floor-to-ceiling windows. We were in an unspoilt alpine village, not a cable car, neon sign or braying English skier in sight – only the bubbling of the hot tub and the odd chirp of birdsong punctuated the soft snowy silence.

Chalet Merlo was built by British-born local Chris Harrop out of reclaimed wood, in Haute-Savoie style (rustic but immensely comfortable and aesthetically pleasing; the American owners have added a comprehensive collection of books and films which means you could spend months inside and never be bored).

The chalets of Sainte Foy and its surrounding villages, inhabited by the smart 'ski-cognoscenti', have a discreet sophistication about them. Chris compared the place to Marrakech and I know what he means: ancient; winding, narrow backstreets house families that have lived there for generations, plus a smattering of film directors and grandees like the Taittinger family. They combine the peace of rural mountain life with a near-perfect location, 15 minutes up the hill from Bourg St Maurice, sitting between the best ski resorts in the French Alps. In the immediate vicinity are the charming but limited wooded slopes of Sainte Foy itself; as the pistes are reasonably gentle and very visible it is ideal for family skiing. Further afield, no more than 30 minutes' drive away, you get to the precipitous and voluminous runs of Val d'Isère, Tignes, La Rosière, Les Arcs, and the resorts they connect to (La Plagne, La Thuile in Italy). By my husband's calculations there are over 800km of accessible piste, which means that during our four-day stay, we probably covered about two per cent of what was available. There was also discussion, but only discussion, of the enormous off-piste opportunities. I noted from the visitors' book that the previous guests had been whisked up by a helicopter, which took off 50m from the chalet, in a matter of a few minutes to Les Arcs 1850.

We had less physically demanding ambitions: the purpose of our skiing was more to remind ourselves →

The view from Chalet Merlo



The hamlet of Le Miroir

how we excel on the gentle green and blue runs (and sit down and sulk on the red and black runs). Our aim was to take in the view, gliding at gentle gradients, with deep intakes of breath and the odd bending of the knees combined with a parallel turn, punctuated by long, enormous multicourse lunches and dinners. La Fruitière, on the slopes of Val d'Isère, dressed up as an alpine milking parlour with fake peeling ceilings, was one such place. I had what looked like a bucket of spaghetti bolognese, but it was very good. Another was Chez Mérie, a hidden, eccentric gem in the dark backstreet of the hamlet of Le Miroir, 100m from our chalet, where we went for dinner one evening. The restaurant is a candlelit family-run chalet, full of cushions, where meat is cooked on the fire in front of you. Best of all was the food in the chalet, cooked for us by the jaw-droppingly talented Fiona (from Glasgow); luckily she only fed us (escalope of veal with a

marsala and sage sauce, parsnip and Jerusalem artichoke gratin, homemade chocolate truffles, you get the picture) for two nights, otherwise we would have got stuck in the doorway and would still be there with the DVD collection for company.

As it was, we went back to the airport via another nice restaurant in a hotel in Sainte Foy called Le Monal, where I made the mistake of ordering a delicious but sense-deadening tartiflette from which I took about two days to recover. We then waddled around Annecy (having been threatened with French exchanges there for most of my teen years, I'd somehow assumed it was horrible). However, with its arcades, canals and quirky shops, Annecy was an unexpectedly delightful stopover on the way back to Geneva. Sainte Foy is a wonderful, relaxing place to go skiing for a long weekend. But much better to have gone for a week. ■

## OUR AIM WAS TO TAKE IN THE VIEW, GLIDING AT GENTLE GRADIENTS

### NEED TO KNOW CHALET MERLO

**DECOR** Accommodating up to 12 people in six ensuite bedrooms, the look is traditional alpine, with open fires, lots of wood and exposed stone, and more wood. Leather sofas, Ralph Lauren cushions, Oriental carpets, wooden furniture and original artworks complete the look. Even the flatscreen television is in a wooden frame.

**ROOMS** The bedrooms all have balconies with wonderful views over the mountains. The look is simple but the details are

luxurious: Egyptian cotton linens, cashmere blankets, Kelly Hoppen bathrobes and Caudalie toiletries in the bathrooms.

**FOOD** Merlo is fully staffed, including a chef. Après-ski, expect cocktails in the hot tub, canapés on the verandah and a full dinner with wine chosen by your sommelier. Dinner menus are flexible – from a light meal to a full four-course blow-out. **TREATS** There is a two-floor gym, an outdoor hot tub, a sauna and a massage chalet, as well as a home cinema. Private yoga



and Pilates lessons can be arranged and held in the chalet.

**TARIFF** Based on 12 people sharing during the winter season, prices per week start from £6,300 and go up to £16,400. Weekend and short breaks are available during low season. Prices include half-board with wine and champagne, airport transfers by road and daily resort transfers.

**CONTACT** 0845 324 3521; [www.chaletmerlo.eu](http://www.chaletmerlo.eu)



### OUT AND ABOUT IN SAINTE FOY

#### GETTING THERE

The Snow Train runs overnight from St Pancras to Bourg St Maurice (with a change in Paris), arriving in the early morning. The airports at Lyon, Geneva and Grenoble are all around two-and-a-half hours' drive away, but Chalet Merlo also has access to a helicopter pad – transfers from Geneva or Grenoble start at €2,000 for up to five people.

#### WHERE TO STAY

**Hôtel Les Suites du Montana** in Les Almes ([www.vmontana.com](http://www.vmontana.com)) is a chalet-style hotel built from alpine stone with ski-in, ski-out access to the slopes. It is just 200m from the resort centre. Guests can unwind with a massage and relax in the pool or sauna. A chalet alternative is **Chalet Yellowstone** in Sainte Foy ([www.luxuryskichalets.eu](http://www.luxuryskichalets.eu)), which sleeps up to 12 guests and is a three-minute walk from the resort and even closer to the nursery slope. Guests can access the pistes of Val d'Isère, Tignes, La Rosière and Les Arcs using the private chauffeur.

#### WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

A variety of local restaurants are within easy reach of the chalet: **Chez Mérie** (00 33 4 79 06 90 16) is within walking distance and offers rustic charm; **Le Monal** is a five-minute drive away and offers good lunchtime and evening food and a wine cellar ([www.le-monat.com](http://www.le-monat.com)). On-mountain restaurants vary considerably in price, ambience and décor. **La Fruitière** in the Bellevard sector of Val d'Isère is worth a visit, as is **Le Signal** in the northern Fornet sector. Restaurants in Sainte Foy and La Rosière/La Thuile are generally cheaper.

#### WHAT TO DO

The chalet is in the hamlet of Le Miroir between the resorts of **Val d'Isère, Tignes, Sainte Foy, La Rosière** (from which you can ski to the Italian resort of **La Thuile** for a great pasta lunch) and **Les Arcs** (which links to **La Plagne** and the Paradiski ski area). Sainte Foy offers lots of tree skiing and there are a couple of off-piste routes that end up at the back door of the chalet. Other activities include snow-shoeing, ice skating, dog sledding and snowmobiling.

#### CELEB SPOTTING

Kylie Minogue (right) and Jeremy Paxman (far right).

