



**HITCH A RIDE:** If you've mastered even the most challenging black runs and need a new snow-based challenge, take your skiing to the next level with off-piste exploration and heli-skiing. Missed the last lift down? Fret not – Eleven can arrange a pick-up in the form of a helicopter.

SKI OFF-PISTE

## BREAKING THE ICE

Tired of shabby chalets, mediocre snow and overcrowded slopes, **DUNCAN MADDEN** seeks out a curated ski experience where the off-piste and partying is turned right up to Eleven

PHOTOGRAPHY (Main) by Mark Jurek (left) & Fenton Photography Co.

**IT'S DARK AS** we slowly wind our way along twisting narrow roads into the Alpine enclave of Le Miroir. Really dark – the kind of inky blackness that seems reserved for mountainous passes fraught with precipitous drops and a looming sense of the unknown.

Above us a random and vast splatter of stars twinkles across the night sky, blending seamlessly with the flickering lights of high-altitude towns, villages and lodges huddled and clinging onto vertiginous mountainsides. In the darkness it's almost impossible to tell them apart from one another.

Sharper eyes than mine are navigating our way, though, and soon our final destination emerges from the dark – a warm and inviting glow amid the snowy landscape.

Chalet Pelerin is a new venture (if not a new building) from Colorado-based 'outdoor experience' group Eleven, located in this famed corner of France. Close to the resort of Sainte-Foy, Pelerin is set in the Tarentaise, within easy distance of Tignes and Val d'Isere in the Espace Killy, and Les Arcs and La Plagne in Paradiski, right on the Italian border. It's an enviable location.

Eleven positions itself as an experience group. Its aim is to match rigorously curated and guided customised outdoor activities and adventures with supreme luxury and finesse – a tailor-made trip to satisfy your every whim.

Chalet Pelerin certainly makes a striking first impression. I'm fortunate enough to be staying in the grandest of the four suites, a huge wood-clad attic space swathed in animal skins, with an open fire crackling busily in the corner and an enormous bathroom. In the morning, I discover my balcony and some spectacular views across the valley to the intricate web of ski lifts and runs that crisscross the smorgasbord of snowy slopes that are spread out before me.

First things first, a visit to the boot room to suit up for the day's skiing. Personalised kit booths give a taste of what's to come – Wagner skis specifically designed for the region, complimentary goggles and avalanche safety backpacks hint at the variety of ski-based adventures that are on offer. While we measure up, locals drop in to shoot the breeze with our guides, swap stories of fresh snow and unriden trails, all the time sipping on Three Daggers, a fruity beer from Eleven's Wiltshire brewery, poured from the boot room's own barrel. It's all very civilised.

With the promise of heli-skiing on hold thanks to the typically changeable Alpine weather, we suit up and head out for a day hunting off-piste perfection. I hesitate a little when I hear the American accents of our



expert guides and wonder how well these guys can really know these mountains and their endless tangles of hidden backcountry runs.

Led by the vociferous, outrageous Alan (ex mayor of famed ski town and Eleven home Crested Butte in Colorado, and infamous for routinely setting himself on fire before competing in local ski races), I'm unsure what to expect. I needn't have worried.

Behind the bluster, loosely traded insults, endless stream of oft-hilarious jokes and permanent veneer of a party about to explode into life, Alan and the Eleven team are the best ski guides I've ever encountered. Their knowledge of the entire Alpine landscape around us is profound, and in no time we're carving clean lines through virgin snow, one eye on the craggy peaks towering above us, the other following Al's unmistakable telemark ski tracks and rat-a-tat-tat laughter.

By lunchtime we're buzzing for more. But the weather isn't in the mood and our disappointment at the lack of helicopter action is palpable. We linger over one bottle of wine too many and emerge wobbly legged to realise we've missed the last ski lifts back down. No problem – a quick call and the Eleven chopper is racing us home. It's not quite how we'd envisaged it, but still – my kind of taxi.

It's a pattern we fall into easily over the week. Long days tracing new lines on different mountains, all the time flitting easily on and off piste – wherever the snow is best.

From La Rosière we ski across the border to La Thuile in Italy. We spend an afternoon ➤

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**SNOW DAY:** Once you've finished traversing deserted slopes and off-piste routes (and have fully exhausted the table-top dancing opportunities at La Folie Douce), retreat to Chalet Pelerin for a spot of civilised – and luxurious – recovery (below)

► in Val D'Isere dancing on tables at legendary mountain-top party La Folie Douce and I suffer first-world problems when the champagne spray freezes inside my goggles and I can't see where I'm going for the final run home.

On our last day and still with no heli-skiing under our belt, Big Al (as I'm now calling him) has a little surprise in store to get the adrenaline pumping. High above Tignes we ride a lift up to the bowls and peaks, and as we crest the final summit are confronted with a huge ski jump with no recognisable landing slope. "Let's have a go on that!" shouts Al as nervous laughter ripples through our group.

He's not joking though, and we don't have to worry about landing – this is ski bungee. Lining up to take the plunge with two bungee

cords attached to my harness, I watch the girl in front of me glide off the ramp and silently plunge into the snowy abyss below. Unnerved as I am, I blow a sigh of relief when she springs back above the lip of the jump and lets out a hearty holler of laughter.

No such restraint from me – the stream of expletives leaving my mouth as I take flight is enough to turn even this whitest of landscapes blue. "I'm flyyyyyyyyyiiiiiiiiing", I wail. "That's not flying; that's falling with style," corrects Alan.

It reflects well upon Eleven and their attitude to 'the experience'. Not once are they deterred by our disappointment at the lack of heli-ski action. Instead, in four days we ski all seven major areas in the region, hike to hidden huts to party, cross borders to dine at the best

restaurants, consume our own body weight in steaks and (amazing) red wines, and I laugh more than I have in as long as I can remember.

My Chalet Pelerin experience is over, but my sadness is tempered when Al passes me a brochure for Deplar Farm – Eleven's super remote Iceland property where heli-skiing on glaciers is the order of the day. "I'll see you there," he smiles. Damn right you will. ■

Duncan spent four nights at Chalet Pelerin (ELEVENEXPERIENCE.COM) with rates starting from €8,800 a night based on eight people staying. Stay includes airport transfers, ski gear, guide service and chalet with outdoor hot tub and in-house chef. For more info email RESERVATIONS@ELEVENEXPERIENCE.COM or call 001 970 349 7761.

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