

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



It's simply breathtaking

Adventure and all-out luxury in the Alps makes a stay at Chalet Pelerin a memorable experience, discovers **Emma Newlands**

Eleven Experience, the travel company behind Chalet Pelerin, high-end lodgings in the village of Le Miroir in France's Tarentaise Valley, takes its name and pushing-the-boundary ethos from classic mockumentary *Spinal Tap*.

"If we need that extra push over the cliff, you know what we do?" enquires band member Nigel Tufnel in the film's classic scene. Turn it up to eleven? "Exactly," he replies.

And such an approach seems to sum up my trip, although with the cliff-push thankfully a metaphorical rather than literal one in the form of maximising luxury and a bid to help guests get a thrill from trying something new in a "life-affirming, deeply personalised" holiday.

With my closest day-to-day encounter with adventure limited to, say, trying a new box set or ready meal, it is therefore with more than a little trepidation that I set off for our glacier hike, across the border in Italy and one of the many outdoor pursuits on the itinerary.

As we head up in the revolving Skyway Monte Bianco cable car, described as a 'marvel of Italian engineering technology', the stunning surrounding Mont Blanc scenery may be elevating rapidly but my nerves are still at a relatively even level. But they really start to get the better of me when we put on our crampons and rope ourselves together to face the kind of scene I've only ever seen in disaster movies where only a few of the group, at best, are alive at the end of expedition.

But once we set off and I see the glacier silently and spectacularly unfold before us, looking like a vast snowy duvet punctuated with the occasional mountain peak poking through, I realise it has been more than worth the effort to overcome my fears. There is something reassuringly hypnotic about the tick-tock sound of our footsteps

I admire the picture-postcard scenery from the comfort of the outdoor Jacuzzi



Chalet Pelerin in Le Miroir, main; the swimming pool, above

crunching through the deep snow, and it feels like we are cheek-by-jowl with the clouds as we look out over the dazzling whiteness contrasted with charcoal-grey and dark green mountain scenery further down the valley.

My anxiety level only picks up again when we head towards a dramatic precipice, but it turns out it is just the midway point of our hike before we turn back – phew! – rather than the vision I have of us lowering each other down. We simply stand at the cliff edge with our amiable, wry and highly knowledgeable guide Jean-Noel who accompanies us on all of the Chalet Pelerin trip's excursions. We take a moment to appreciate the surroundings before turning

back to head for a well-earned lunch at Auberge de la Maison in the picturesque Courmayeur village of Entreve.

Surrounded by verdant, Technicolor floral scenery and sitting in the sunshine in the shadow of Mont Blanc, nicknamed the 'roof of Europe', our recent hike through the chilly peaks seems like a world away. To reward my glacier-scaling efforts I decide to climb a food mountain, tucking into a winning combination of a compact, rich goat's cheese salad with pancetta followed by the lightness of semi-steamed trout with basil-scented bouillon and then pistachio ice cream.

We then return to the chalet, located roughly a couple of hours' drive from Geneva Airport. Both luxurious and homely, on the first floor it has a huge open-plan living area looking out towards the summit of Mont Pourri. There's a fire, plenty of comfy seating in browns, greys and blues, and little touches like local paintings, antique climbing shoes and trophy deer antlers, as well as a large dining table and well-stocked bar.

The ground floor is home to a pool, steam room and sauna, and I take the opportunity to admire the picture-postcard scenery, with the valley's varying shades of green sitting under

a bright blue sky, from the comfort of the outdoor Jacuzzi. I then warm up in my dressing gown by the nearby fire, a welcome blast of heat in the crisp fresh air.

It's then time to check out the bedrooms, which are named after iconic French Alpine mountains and landmarks. I'm in Aiguille Rouge, taking its name from the summit in Sainte Foy, and the top-floor room is suitably decorated with subtle red tones as well as a mirror framed with more deer antlers.

There's an in-house chef who discreetly but expertly prepares our meals. These include on the first night juicy scallops with Parma ham, and dessert of a rich, molten-centred chocolate pudding with berries, and on the second a starter of lobster and cherry tomato skewers followed by handmade pizzas cooked to order in an outdoor woodfired oven and eaten at a table on the patio as we breathe in the rapidly cooling crystal clear air.

The pampering continues the following day with a knot-releasing massage in the cosy media room, which has a TV, vast sofas, board games and games consoles, and which doubles effectively as a treatment room.

It comes after other outdoor pursuits, which include using electric mountain bikes to descend via Villaroger to La Bonneville and join the double track following the Isere river through the forests to Bourg St Maurice. However, along with another member of the group I instead take a relaxing walk through the local village, and we all reconvene for a picnic lunch of cheese, charcuterie and rosé wine by the riverside.

We then set off for an afternoon's white water rafting, covering an 18-kilometre route from Bourg St Maurice to Centron accompanied by guide Remy. It provides an excellent mixture of exhilarating, squeal-inducing sections and the chance to admire the varied scenery along calmer stretches of water, with the quietly lapping waves glinting in the sunlight to look as if the whole river were made of molten silver.

There is even the option at one point to jump from a Roman bridge

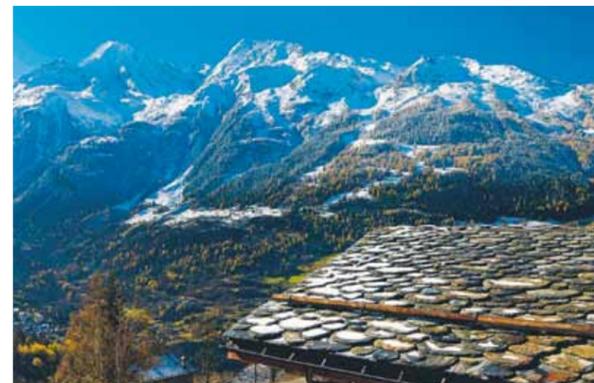
or lower jutting cliffside spot into the water for those who want to take the *Spinal Tap* ethos literally.

Our last collective experience of the great outdoors comes on our final night, in the more relaxing form of al fresco drinks and canapés in a secluded valley up the road from the chalet as the sun sets. We then retire to the adjacent Alpage, a private mountain hut that's been refurbished to ultra cosy effect. After tucking into cheese fondue, rich with the distinct tang of garlic and white wine, we enjoy dinner of pink-centred steak with salad and dauphinoise potatoes, later encouraged to get some fresh air outside only to be delighted with a surprise, impressive fireworks display.

It's consequently on a high note that we head back to the chalet, which would be great for, say, two or three families (children would love it – there's a kids' bedroom with bunk beds and en-suite, plus a further two bunks in the media room) or a big group of friends. Eleven also has several other properties around the world with their own distinct character, including in its native Colorado as well as Iceland, the Netherlands and the Bahamas, and more look set to follow.

On the final morning I pack my things and although I leave with a heavy heart and likely heavier frame generally, I feel invigorated by a unique experience and the thrill of pampering, peaks and homemade pizza still at the forefront of my mind. A more active me is on its way, and Arthur's Seat isn't going to know what's hit it... ■

Rates at Chalet Pelerin start from £574 (plus local taxes) per person per night based on a private buy out rate of Chalet Pelerin for ten people sharing on a full experience basis. Price includes private concierge, full guide service, all gear for activities, lift passes, in-house meals, all house alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, daily housekeeping and airport transfers to and from Geneva (0208 102 9800, www.elevenexperience.com). The summer season runs from 15 June-15 September.



Views from the chalet towards Mont Pourri

STAYCATION



Let the house

Carphin House is ideal for a family get-together or murder mystery weekend, finds Gaby Soutar

There was no staff entrance when Carphin House was first built," says our host. "So the maid had to climb out of here".

She gestures to the sash window at the end of the long kitchen, with its farmhouse table and cream Aga.

Oh the joys of drudgery in the 18th century.

We raise our mugs to the poor maid, who would also have had to deal with the service bells in this room.

A "br-iii-n-g!" could come from almost anywhere.

There are nine bedrooms (seven doubles, all ensuite, and two twins), three reception rooms and a dining room. The mansion also boasts various laundry rooms and outhouses and 15 acres of land, though those areas are mercifully bell free.

At least she would've kept fit, while everyone else played charades and nursed their gout.

Originally owned by the Carnegie family, this self-catering property at the bottom of Norman's Law, in Luthrie, Fife, is now being let as a venue for large parties and weddings. (Just nearby, their nuptial friendly Loghouse will be opening next summer, with a ceremony space, bar, kitchen, stage and room for 180 guests).

Our party of nine are practically rattling around in it. It's as if we had the keys to our own hotel.

And, although it is very grand, it's relaxed too. When we first arrive, we start to remove our shoes and are told not to worry. "This is your home for the weekend". That's a relief when you have four children in tow, who go on to have the best and lengthiest games of hide and seek they've ever experienced.

There's also an uncontrived feel to the space.

In the smart dining room there are portraits of the families who stayed here – the Carnegies maybe, or perhaps the latter occupants, the Wemyss family – and original, though well loved, furniture.

While, in the living room you'll also find a piano, a sound system with ancient CDs, and a cupboard that contains an accumulation of treasures like Victorian hand-cut jigsaw puzzles, old Georgian pennies and sewing kits. In here, we tell ghost stories by the open fire, and wind up those with fragile constitutions by ringing the service bells while they're in the kitchen. (Not recommended if anyone in your party has a heart condition). With such an atmosphere, it's no wonder they've been holding Murder Mystery weekends (see details for next dates).



party begin

From the house, it's about 30 minutes to St Andrews and just a 15 minute drive to Cupar.

We swithered between a visit to St Andrews Aquarium or Cupar's Scottish Deer Centre.

In the end, Bambi trumped fish. There are Nose to Nose sessions at this place, where you can go behind the fences and feed a resident deer, alongside a talk from the knowledgeable rangers. Or you can just wander alongside the fields to see the 14 types of deer, from axis to pere david, sika, fallow and red.

There are signs telling visitors not to feed the hormonal stags, but the hinds and fawns act like they're at an all-you-can-eat buffet, and we indulge them with handfuls of the munchy

The children have the best and lengthiest games of hide and seek ever

pellets (£1 a bag).

Their pair of brown bears – one of whom was rescued from a European circus, and the other, Loki, her cub – are both currently in hibernation.

However, other less sleepy animals can be found at their education hut, where we got to hold a corn snake, check out the giant African Land Snail (doing nothing much but sitting in its own mucus), and the kids' brains were boggled by the fragile exoskeleton of a tarantula.

Clockwise from main: view of Carphin House and the grounds in Luthrie, Fife; the living room; one of the nine bedrooms

Back outside, and other warm-blooded creatures include their pack of wolves, as well as an enclosure featuring tufty-eared lynx, who trot up as if happy to see us, but make a loud huffing sound when they realise we don't have any food.

My faves were probably the Asian Small-Clawed Otters. We spot one at feeding time, snatching fish out of the keeper's hands with dextrous paws.

There's also a wildcat. We look everywhere for him, but he must be camouflaged amongst the branches.

Good hide and seek, kitty. You're never going to beat the games we've had at Carphin House, but you gave it your very best try. ■

A stay at Carphin House (Luthrie, Cupar, Fife) starts at £675 a night for exclusive use, call 0791 771 7782 or see www.carphinhouse.com
The Murder Mystery Weekends include a two-night stay at Carphin House, character briefings from the Blue Murder Events team (who will be on hand at the house) and a three-course dinner from Ally Reid from Tartan Stag Catering. Available to book for 11-13 May and 18-20 May, a minimum of 12 people, from £185pp. The Scottish Deer Centre, Cupar, £8.50 adults, £5.70 children (under threes are free), 01337 810 391, www.tsd.co.uk

48 HOURS IN

Isle of Wight

Friday, midday
 Catch the ferry to Cowes and check into Villa Rothsay (www.villa-rothsay.co.uk, doubles from £98), a quirky boutique hotel with a kilted soldier statue to welcome guests.

12:30pm
 Walk along the pebble beach that eases into the centre of the famous yachting hub of Cowes.

2:30pm
 Enjoy boat fresh seafood at Murray's (www.murrays.co). The set menu is excellent value.

3pm
 Delve into this remarkable isle's history at Osborne House (www.english-heritage.org.uk). You can tour this palatial abode admiring the world class art, as well as visiting the deathbed of Queen Victoria.

7pm
 Before dining like a monarch at North House (www.northhousecowes.co.uk) enjoy a Mermaid Gin, which hails from the island's own distillery. On the menu are local seafood and chunky steaks, best washed down with their own label house wines.

Saturday, 10am
 Notoriously grumpy poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson shunned visitors at his lavish Farringford House (www.farringford.co.uk), but you can visit now as it's just re-opened as part of the Victoria's Island Trail.

Midday
 Dine on site in their simple restaurant, which overlooks Tennyson's old walled garden.

BARGAIN BREAKS

All aboard
 Planet Cruise is offering a nine night German Waterways cruise onboard Fred Olsen's 710-room Balmoral ship from just £1,067pp (full board) sailing from Rosyth on 31 May. This includes an overnight onboard in Bremerhaven and Hamburg, a cruise along the Elbe River and a stop off in Berlin. **Call 0808 278 8504 or see www.planetcruise.co.uk**

Sun and fun in Benidorm
 Prices start from £353pp for a seven night holiday in Benidorm on Spain's Costa Blanca with Travel Republic. This includes accommodation at the four star Deloix Aqua Center Hotel,



1pm
 Pop into Tapnell Farm (www.tapnellfarmpark.com). Kids love the charms of the bountiful playground.

3pm
 Drive on to view the famous Needles, a series of three striking rock stacks that soar from the waters. A visitor centre is on hand as are crumbling Second World War fortifications.

7pm
 Thompson's Restaurant (www.robertthompson.co.uk) in Newport is worth the trip down the River Medina thanks to its superb Michelin Bib Gourmand cuisine.

Sunday, 9am
 Visit the remarkable former home and gallery of seminal photographer Victorian Julia Margaret Cameron, Dimbola Lodge (www.dimbola.co.uk). ■

Robin McKelvie

Return Flybe (www.flybe.com) flights from Edinburgh to Southampton start at around £91.98. Red Funnel (www.redfunnel.co.uk) catamarans whisk you over to Cowes in just 25 minutes.

which is in one of the quieter parts of the town, and return flights from Edinburgh departing on 4 May. **Call 020 8974 7200 or see www.travelrepublic.co.uk**

Western spirit in Denver

Discover Denver, capital of Colorado, and the Rocky Mountains during an autumn visit with Netflights, which is offering an eight day self-drive tour of the city and region staying at three or four star hotels on a room-only basis. Prices start from £1,299pp including flights from Glasgow with United Airlines and seven days' car hire. Based on selected dates in September. Book by 14 April. **See www.netflights.com**