



ON THIN ICE

Olympian *Victoria Pendleton* puts away her bike and tests her mettle on Savoie's off-piste slopes

BOOK IT

Season ends 30 April 2021. Double rooms start at £902 per night; chalets start at approx. £4,597 per night, based on ten guests. Prices include pre-planning, private concierge, activities, gear, ski lift, chef-prepared meals and house drinks. elevenexperience.com

I am chatting to my good friend Jade as we sit toasty warm in the bubbling hot tub on the terrace of our chalet, sipping cocktails while soaking up epic views of Mont Pourri. (This was, of course, before the Covid pandemic hit.) Jade and I have been friends for over ten years, ever since I was an elite athlete and she was a physio who worked across the road. We don't get to spend much time together now and life is busy, so indulging in quality over quantity is essential these days.

The first thing that strikes me at Eleven Experience's Le Chalet Pelerin in the tiny hamlet of Le Miroir, France, near the Italian border, is the incredible attention to detail (the aforementioned cocktail had been expertly made and put in my hands by the chalet's own mixologist). This experiential travel company has established itself as an adaptable, personal and discreet company, combining fluid, off-the-grid adventures with best-in-class service. They choose the most stunning areas for a variety of pursuits across the globe and provide pitch-perfect accommodation to go with it.

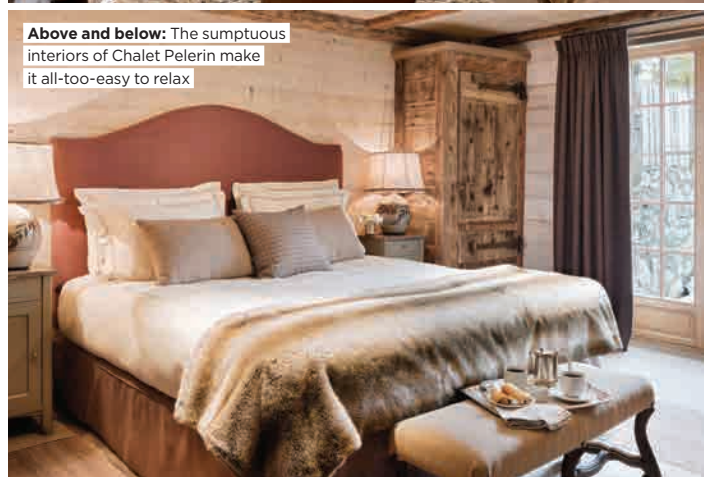
We are in Savoie to try our hand at ice climbing – we Olympians like to test our mettle – but sadly the conditions are not right. The ice



Exploring Savoie with snowshoes



Above and below: The sumptuous interiors of Chalet Pelerin make it all-too-easy to relax



is just not icy enough. However, we'll be pumping adrenaline with off-piste skiing, ski touring and snowshoeing (inevitably followed by more hot tub action, I'm hoping).

Guests are paired with a host and guide who remain with the party from start to finish, which is comforting in its consistency and allows you the chance to reach – and more likely surpass – your desired level of challenge.

Despite the lodge having shared communal areas (you can rent it out exclusively, too), there are plenty of places to relax, whether it's lying on a sheepskin rug, soothing aching muscles in the Finnish sauna or steam room pool, taking a few laps in the freshwater pool or gulping gallons of fresh air on the outdoor terrace with its firepit and hot tub (cocktail required).

The family sharing the lodge with us during the trip are no strangers to the place. They tell us it's their third visit, and they couldn't be more enthusiastic about this bolthole in the French Alps. As two busy professionals, the parents explain they have limited time to get away as a family and require a level of service they can rely on to deliver everything they need. With two children and a variety of abilities between the four of them, the ski school and guide have coordinated a schedule that allows them time to explore the slopes as individuals and then regroup at various intervals as a family.

Being partial to a few adrenaline-pumping activities myself, I've become aware that adventure and luxury don't usually come hand in hand. I've lost count of the nights I've spent roughing

it in a chilly wooden hut on a mountaineering expedition, but after this trip I'll no longer assume I have to endure freezing feet and bad food to get that buzz.

Our guide takes us along off-piste and off-the-beaten-track routes, so we get to see the very best of the gorgeous landscape and can enjoy the pristine conditions without even looking at a map or app (and without the resort crowds). There are delights in store: we not only squeeze every run we can into the day but also physically squeeze through a tiny snow hole into a ravine that becomes our secret, high-jinks, rollercoaster ski track.

On the second day we take the chance to do some ski touring, and are provided with the different equipment we need and instructions on how to apply ski skins in order to climb. After some sweeping and relaxed off-piste carving, we work hard to regain elevation and are rewarded with fresh snow which we enthusiastically cut into. While exhausted, I'm also beaming from ear to ear. I couldn't ask for more.

Later, when we've deposited our skis in the personalised storage cabinets in the chalet's boot room, we head out again for dinner at Auberge, which is only accessible by a half-hour hike or snowshoe, meandering through coniferous trees and over bubbling streams. I'm admittedly a little reluctant to leave the comfort of the chalet, but all those lazy thoughts soon get blown away.

As we approach a small cluster of ancient buildings, flickering candle lanterns illuminate the path ahead. A nearby water trough tinkles with ice-cold spring water and we're each handed a metal tankard, which we fill and drink down thirstily. Our hosts welcome us and, heaped high with furs, we get comfortable around the fire pit carved out of the snow. Moreish canapés and aperitifs are swiftly offered, and the firelight, furs and food start to work their magic before we're ushered into the beautiful rustic Auberge, all cosy and invitingly warm, lit only by candles and the fire crackling in the corner.

In challenging circumstances (i.e. no electricity and no plumbing), the chef, Valentin, prepares an incredible three-course meal, which would not be out of place at a fine dining restaurant in Courchevel. There's a bijou wine cellar and tiny but well-stocked bar upstairs. My expectations of mountain hut cuisine have just scaled another peak.

If you're up for testing yourself with a trip that's a little more adventurous, challenging or extreme than usual, but don't fancy the usual sacrifices in terms of delicious food, comfy beds and first-class service, you'll find this trip ticks all the right boxes – with some wow factor extras thrown in. ■



Victoria squeezes through a snow hole leading to a secret rollercoaster ski track