

OutThere

EXPERIENTIAL JOURNEYS



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Eleven Chalet Hibou, Le Miroir, 73640 Sainte-Foy-Tarentaise, France

Peak freedom

Transcending the traditional, resort-bound snowsports holiday model, Eleven's French Alps super-chalet puts six stellar destinations at your ski tips – and stirs in a game-changing US-style heli-skiing twist.



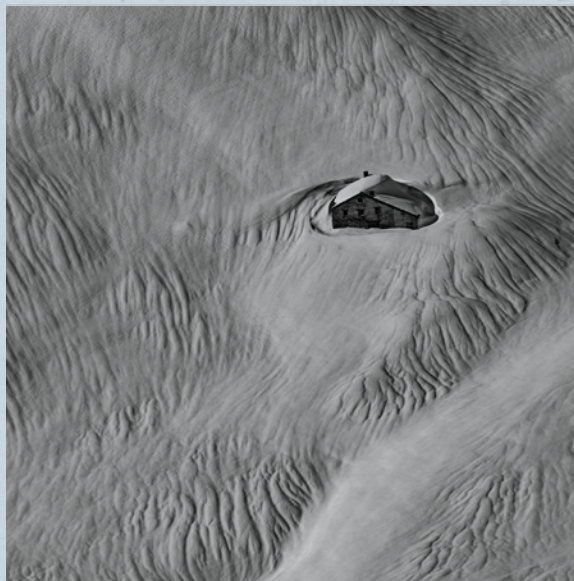
“Ze perfect egg,” our chef François declared as dinner arrived on our first night at Chalet Hibou, “must be cooked at precisely 64°.” Egg yolks cook at 66°, he explained, while whites cook at 62. “So 64, it’s in between – you get ze perfect mixture.”

I was reminded of his fastidiousness the following morning as a helicopter swooped up the rocky valley, spun on a sixpence and set down exactly in the middle of the ‘H’ that our guide had drawn in the snow. If François had served up the Platonic ideal of a poached egg (with soubise sauce and local ham), then this was surely its heli-skiing equivalent. Bright sunshine, half a foot of fresh snow and the world’s fastest taxi service to take us back to the top – it was hard to imagine a more perfect morning. Which, of course, was exactly why we’d come to Chalet Hibou.

Built into the hillside above the hamlet of Le Miroir near the Italian border, the chalet is owned by American outfit Eleven, specialists in combining adventure experiences with the kind of luxury trimmings you’d expect from a five-star hotel. The company was born in 2008 when Chad Pike, a managing director at the asset-management giant Blackstone, bought a remote ski lodge in Colorado. He now owns properties around the world, which offer fly fishing and mountain biking in the summer, and heli-skiing in winter, in exclusive locations from Iceland to Alaska.

The company’s name, according to our hosts, was inspired by the immortal quote in cult heavy-metal mockumentary *This is Spinal Tap* about the numbers on all the amps going up to 11, and the team at Chalet Hibou certainly dials things up to 11 when it comes to attention to detail. A few days before my arrival, experience manager Margaux Carre got in touch to ensure that the proposed itinerary was to my taste, that my food preferences had been factored in and that any rental equipment I might require for skiing was reserved in my size and delivered to the chalet in advance. Margaux and the staff were outside to meet me when I arrived, my bags were whisked away to my room and I was ushered on to the terrace for a Campari spritz expertly mixed by chalet host Anthony Deymier.

Looking out from the balcony, it was instantly obvious why Chad Pike chose to add this particular asset to Eleven’s portfolio. Stretching out in both directions is the broad, sweeping curve of the Tarentaise Valley. Flanked by snow-covered peaks that reach as high as 3,855m (12,650ft) above sea level, this is home to some of the world’s greatest ski resorts. Up the valley to my left is Tignes, with its snow-sure, high-altitude ski area, and beyond it, Val d’Isère, favoured haunt of well-heeled Brits and France’s Saint-Tropez set since the 1970s. Directly across are Les Arcs and La Plagne, both big resorts in their



own right and linked by a 380m (1,250ft)-high cable car to create a combined skiable area offering over 250 miles (400km) of pistes. Our nearest neighbours, Sainte-Foy and La Rosière, are lesser-known gems ideal for those who want quieter slopes and more serious skiing. And all these resorts lie within a 30-minute drive. Le Miroir itself is quiet – I could hear chickens clucking gently in the farmyard next door – making it the perfect place to retreat to after a long day on the pistes, or a hard après-ski session.

Before long, I heard the chalet’s private shuttle bus coming back. Having arrived the day before me, the rest



of my party, a mixture of Brits, Americans and one Canadian, had been out exploring – both the slopes and the après bars, by the sounds of things. It didn't take much persuasion for me to join them in the hot tub for another cocktail and some poolside canapés, before we showered and sat down for dinner. The food was François's pride and joy – his perfect egg starter was followed by a piquant Thai prawn curry and a traditional tarte tatin – and Anthony's wine pairings complemented each dish beautifully. The only problem, if it can be called that, was resisting the temptation to over-indulge. Because hangovers and helicopters really don't mix.

Heli-skiing – that is, using a helicopter instead of lifts to ferry you to the top of a mountain – originated in North America as a way of allowing adventurous skiers and snowboarders access to untouched powder on every single run. The remote areas of the Rockies are large enough to accommodate any number of US and Canadian operations, but heli-skiing is banned in France, where ski resorts and alpine villages are more tightly packed together. This is where the genius of Chalet Hibou's location comes in. A short shuttle ride dropped us at the bottom of La Rosière, from where we caught a sequence of ski lifts over the border into Italy. Here, it was perfectly legal for a pilot to pick us up, and the bowl of previously distant peaks surrounding us suddenly became our oyster.

We were lucky that our party included professional ski photographer Jeff Cricco and his friend, pro skier Bryan Fino – together, Cricco and Fino for short. The pair both live in Summit County, Colorado, and have skied all over the world, including regular trips to Japan. Neither,

however, had spent much time in the Alps. Despite their familiarity with all things heli-skiing, they were genuinely awestruck by the terrain. "Dude, these mountains are steeper than anything we have in Colorado," Fino said, "and they just go on and on and on..."

With six of us in the group – plus Benjamin Bucci and Renaud Eveillard, our two expert guides – it took the helicopter a couple of drops to ferry us to the top of each run. But the pilot made quick work of it, leaving the rotor blades running as we piled in and out, crouching low to avoid the downwash. When he lifted off again, I couldn't help humming *Ride of the Valkyries* as he buzzed back down the valley to pick up the rest of the crew. The snow was gorgeous – pristine, untracked and the perfect pitch for cruising down in a group, not steep enough to be dangerous, nor gentle enough to feel too tame.

For our final flight of the morning, the pilot skimmed low along the top of a ridge before dropping us off on a large, gently sloping dome. Benjamin turned to the group. "Now, we go heli-skiing in France," he said, a wicked twinkle in his eye. "But, you see, we have landed on the border, we are not breaking the rules." With nearly 2,000m (6,500ft) of vertical descent, this run would basically lead us all the way back to Le Miroir, he told us. But halfway down, on the edge of a frozen, snow-covered lake, the Eleven crew had prepared another surprise for us. We stopped among a small cluster of shepherds' huts – some little more than roofless stacks of stones – and Benjamin started digging

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the snow out from one of the doors. "Voilà," he said, when he and Renaud had prised it open. "Je vous présente le Refuge du Ruitor."

This high-alpine cabin, originally built by shepherds, was bought and completely refurbished by Eleven five years ago, with running water plumbed in and solar panels installed on the roof. Accessible in winter only by skis or snowmobile, it was nonetheless enviably stocked for our visit. Before long, we were sitting in the sun, washing down the tasty sandwiches François had prepared for our lunch with cold craft beers from the nearby Brasserie du Mont Blanc. Afterwards, there were fortifying shots of vintage Génépi, a herbal liqueur which Fino, in particular, took a fancy to. If this was one of his first experiences of the French Alps, he was definitely doing it right.

Like all Eleven's properties, the refurbished interior of Ruitor is effortlessly tasteful. It might be a humble







shepherd's hut, but no detail had gone overlooked. The style could be described as rustic, were it not so comfortable. The period furniture is covered with cosy sheepskins and fur throws, vintage hiking backpacks hang by the door and there are even binoculars for birdwatching. Downstairs, where shepherds once locked their flocks by night, Eleven has installed six couchette-style beds, complete with curtains. These design details are the work of Chad Pike's wife Blake, who runs her own studio – called, with perfect spousal one-upmanship, No. 12 Interiors.

Her touch is visible in Chalet Hibou too, which is decked out in a style that is utterly in keeping with its French Alpine aesthetic, while at the same time carefully incorporating all the comforts a seasoned American luxury traveller might expect in their high-end Aspen condo. Pen portraits of Napoleon's generals adorn the walls, old maps figure prominently, while stags' heads and stuffed birds add a hunting-lodge vibe. It is the kind of place you could imagine Henri IV himself coming *pour la chasse* – if he'd lived in the 21st century, washed his hands with Aesop soaps and been partial to a detoxifying ginger shot for breakfast each morning.

One evening, in the chalet's own on-site après-ski bar – complete with kitsch ski-boot glitterball – we met Julie Gaidet, Eleven's French operations manager. An elegantly dressed woman in her 50s, she married a man from Le Miroir, "whose family have been here for hundreds of years". She was, it struck me, exactly the kind of French local who might have reservations about the arrival of wealthy Americans, yet she had nothing but praise for Eleven and its approach. Her own company started off working with them on a part-time basis, she said, but she was so impressed she packed that in to become involved full-time.

After several delicious cocktails by Anthony – including a creation of his own devising called a Tarentaise – and yet another spectacular dinner courtesy of François, I retired to the subterranean cinema room with a glass of 15-year-old Talisker, where Cricco and Fino had already booted up Greg Stumps' classic 1980s rockumentary-style ski film *The Blizzard of Aahhh's*. A riot of neon one-pieces and wrap-around shades, it includes an unforgettable sequence of a group of American pros and their incredulous reactions as they ski in France's mountain sports capital Chamonix for the first time.

The following morning, Cricco could almost have been quoting them word for word as we headed out into the



backcountry around Val d'Isère. Incredibly, despite photographing skiing professionally for more than 25 years, he'd never skied in this area before. He was especially blown away by the scope of the terrain that you can access with just a short hike from the lifts. Once again, our guides sniffed out the best pitches, with the finest snow. And once again, we skied – or in my case snowboarded – until our legs burned. But our Eleven adventure wasn't quite done, because Sunday night's dinner was the most special yet.

After we had hot-tubbed, sauna'd, showered and dried ourselves off with the fluffiest of towels, we set off walking up the hill to Hibou's other outpost – a private restaurant called L'Alpage. Here, Anthony greeted us by an open fire pit with drinks, having remembered each of our personal cocktail preferences. Then we headed inside for cheese fondue, followed by François's signature côte de boeuf. Both are dishes I've eaten a hundred times in the Alps, but I've never enjoyed either more. High-spirited toasts were made. Copious wine flowed. Courvoisier was downed. It was only when we put on head torches, grabbed bum sledges and began the hilarious walk/slide back to Chalet Hibou that I remembered I had an early start and a long drive home the next day. But when the morning arrived, I found myself unbothered by my mild – and richly deserved – headache. After all, if you want to make an omelette, you've got to break some eggs. And if you want the perfect skiing weekend, well, a long drive home feels like a small price to pay.