

# Taking The Piste

GETTING ON AND OFF THE BEATEN TRACK WITH CLUB MED IN THE FRENCH ALPS IS AN INTERESTING WAY TO PASS A FEW DAYS. WORDS AND PICTURES *STEVE WILLIAMS*.









The closest thing you get to snow in Australia in December is the spray-on window stuff to make your home look more Christmassy, and the only white Christmas I've experienced is Bing crooning about glistening treetops. So there was no hesitation in accepting Club Med's invitation to visit three of their resorts in the French Alps.

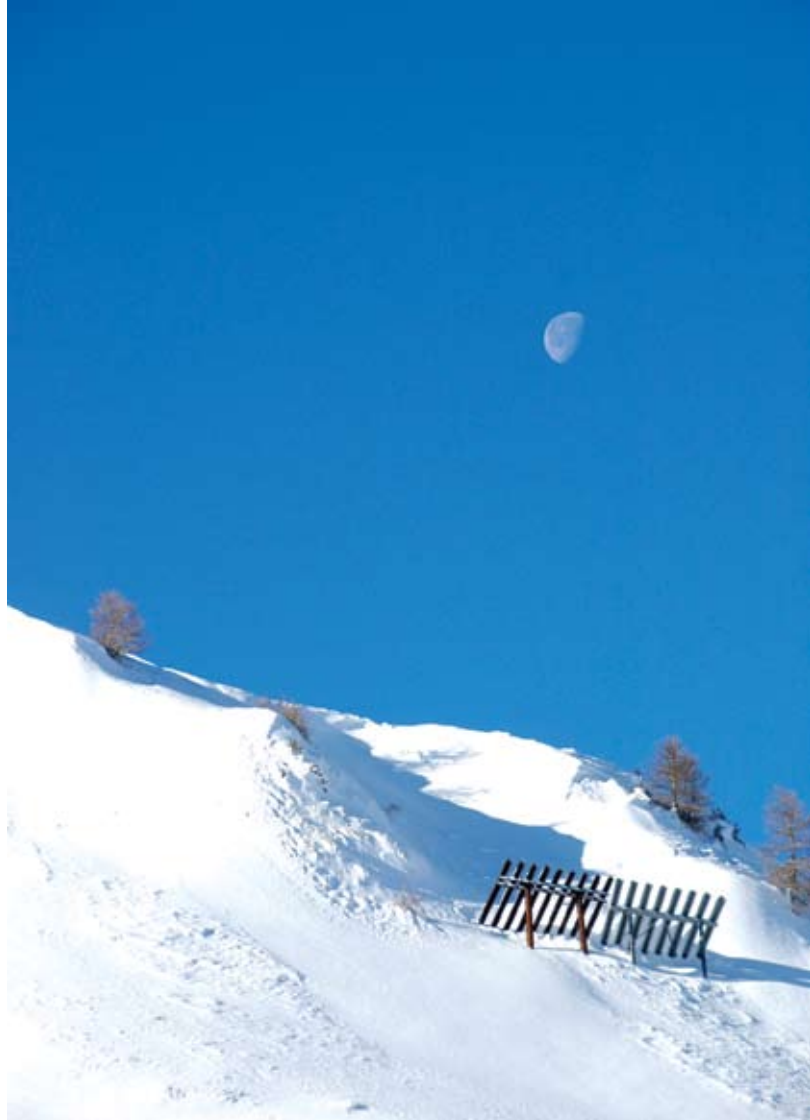
Friday was a fairly long day. The midnight Thursday flight out of Singapore touched down – rather bounced, swerved and skidded – in a wild and wet Paris at 6.30am.

My esteemed media colleagues and I were deposited at Gare de Lyon train station mid-afternoon and boarded the TGV which is one sleek and sexy looking train – complete with Star Trek style doors that make a very impressive pneumatic hiss.

On the journey we were approached by the very friendly Club Med GOs – which stands for *Gentil Organisateur* – they were very *gentle* and they were trying to *organise* what activities we wanted to do at the village on the weekend. My only problem was I hadn't slept or showered in over 30 hours, I'd been in numerous taxis, a plane that thought it was a rock, various travelators, two coaches and a train. "Can I get back to you?"

After a five hour trip the TGV pulled into Aime station. It was then back on a coach for the 45-minute trip to our first destination: Club Med La Plagne 2100. It was snowing right on cue and Christmas carol lyrics began scrolling through my head. As the coach snaked up snow-frosted mountains, our driver expertly negotiated the icy bitumen and some interesting hairpin bends – he'd obviously done this a couple of times – and I found myself wishing he'd landed our plane at Charles de Gaulle.

There, I'd arrived at my first Club Med village. We were greeted by a row of GOs in a guard of honour with flaming torches. Nice touch.







I wondered if when you left, did they snuff out the torches *Survivor* style with “Sorry, the tribe has spoken.”

“Discover new worlds, discover new people.” Club Med’s mission statement rings true. Launched as Club Méditerranée in 1950 by Gérard Blitz, a Belgian water polo champion, who set out to provide holiday destinations in the Mediterranean, with accommodation, sports activities and food included in one package. Club Med went on to become one of the most popular holiday brands in the world. Like any travel and tourism company, it’s had a clichéd rollercoaster ride over the years, overcoming all manner of hurdles including the events of September 11.

Today, Club Med has over 90 destinations around the world from Bali to Yasmina in Morocco, and in recent times has undergone a nip and tuck. François Salamon, Club Med’s Executive Vice President – Chief Operating Officer Europe and North America, told me millions of dollars were spent on updating the brand, refocussing and adapting it to changing times. He’s been with the company for five years and says his greatest reward is when guests in their 20’s start coming to Club Med, then bring *their* children to Club Med – which I assume happens frequently.

The resort of Club Med La Plagne 2100

(or “village” in Club Med speak) has been renovated to the tune of €15 million and it’s very well appointed with 329 rooms and suites. My room on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor was very spacious by European standards, a funky modern mix of chrome, dark timber and red feature walls, a theme carried through the village. The bathroom was impressive and the view of Mont Blanc from the room’s balcony was picture postcard stuff. I did find it odd there were no tea or coffee making implements, but François explained it’s to get people out of their rooms, engendering that whole community experience. It *did* get me out of the room, nice as it was; the caffeine craving won – and Mont Blanc wasn’t going anywhere.

Saturday morning was whitish grey and snowing. Breakfast was very good, as were all the meals – buffet style with a veritable smorgasbord of options. I bulked up on the bacon for the day ahead and explored the village. La Plagne 2100 falls into Club Med’s “have a taste of everything” category.

The village caters for children from two years old with a Mini and Juniors Club Med, so the little people will never be bored. Mum and Dad won’t exactly be short of anything to do, with snow boarding, fitness centre, sauna, spa, skating rink, snow-shoe

walks, snow-mobiles and a bob-raft – a *Cool Running*-style luge run that hits 80kph. Some of these activities aren’t part of Club Med’s all-inclusive package of course. You could always sit in the lounge with a drink (or several) gazing at the view or at each other. Sadly there is no water polo in homage to Gérard.

Did I mention skiing? La Plagne is in the massive “Paradiski” domain, which includes 420 kilometres of trails over 10,000 hectares up to 3,250 metres in elevation. You can ski in and out of La Plagne 2100 and enjoy lunch at any of the other Club Med Paradiski villages. That notion has a touch of James Bond about it – peel off the ski suit to reveal the tux.

Unfortunately my skiing career was tragically cut short by an old war injury, but as I hiked *up* the runs for photo opportunities, there were skiers and snow boarders carving it up (dude) while the kids were having a great time at their ski schools; the first lessons start at just four years old.

After a day on the piste outside, it was time for a lot of guests to get it on inside, and that whole Club Med community thing really kicked in.

The other days at La Plagne were spent chatting to guests, exploring more of the village, a bit of ‘walking in a winter







PHOTO: MISSIONNING/CLUB MED



wonderland' action – we even caught the cable car down to the village, then up another to one of the friendly neighbourhood mountains. Absolutely spectacular: I felt I was inside a Christmas card or on a log cake. Three hundred and sixty degree views, mist rising, on top of the world . . . you had to be there.

I spoke to and photographed a lot of the skiers and boarders before they launched themselves off the precipice for their ten-minute, almost 90 degree trip; all of them but one were very cool – as was I, it was well below zero. This one guy had a healthy dose of the stereotypical French arrogance (my only exposure to it the whole trip). “No photographeee!” he snarled. “No photographeee!” “Yeah, whatever mate.” As he headed down the mountain, he actually turned around to ensure that I wasn't taking any snaps. I had absolutely no idea what he would've done if I *had been* photographeeing him – it's all downhill from there.

It was time to check out another Club Med village, Peisey-Vallandry, about an hour's (beautiful) drive away. This village is only about a year old, with 284 luxurious rooms ranging from standard up to deluxe and suites. I'd be quite happy living in the standard room forever. Peisey-Vallandry is open year-round with white water rafting, hiking, mountain-

biking and tree climbing on offer in summer – and there are one or two trees to climb in the national park. Ski-wise, it's also part of the Paradiski domain and there's also an excellent gym and indoor/outdoor pool with stunning views over the Alps. Après ski you can be pampered in the very inviting Nuxe Spa. Peisey-Vallandry is definitely worth putting on your destination list.

Our final stop: Club Med Val d'Isère, which is about another hour's drive from Peisey-Vallandry. Val d'Isère is one of the world's most renowned ski areas and is surrounded by 300 kilometres of slopes that form the Espace Killy ski domain. Since it is set in a cul-de-sac of mountains, there are stunning views right out of your bedroom window – if you roll left. Unlike La Plagne, this isn't a family-oriented Club Med village; there are no children's club facilities. As with the other two resorts, your skiing and snowboarding lessons are included, and there are plenty of activities indoors as well, including a Turkish bath, sauna and cardio fitness room. The village bar was very inviting and the night we were there a jazz band was hotting things up, a good thing, because standing outside with a glass of red it was a brisk minus 12°C.

Make a point of seeing the wonderful old village of Val d'Isère. You can actually ski there

directly from the Club Med village or walk or catch a shuttle bus. The magnificent church named after Saint Bernard of Menthon, the patron saint of mountain dwellers, was built in 1664 and luckily was ignored by the French revolutionaries. When the church bell tolled, I was transported again inside that Christmas card – a vision I want to retain, so I'll end my journey here.

Over fifty years ago, the first Club Med village apparently consisted of beachfront straw huts in Mallorca, Spain with no lights and communal washing facilities; since then the company has progressed to become a global entity with luxurious villages scattered worldwide from surf to snow.

But I wonder, maybe they had the right idea half a century ago. Maybe that whole retro “back-to-basics, no mod-cons, no-anything, bread-and-water and a cup of hot gravel if you're lucky” holiday package could take off. Maybe we've all become too soft, too spoiled, too over-everything. I'm on to something here. Where's François' number . . . ? □

*Thanks to Stephanie and the team at Club Med Singapore for organising the trip and “Den Mother” Linda for putting up with us in France. To plan your next Club Med adventure, visit [www.clubmed.com](http://www.clubmed.com).*



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