



Roger Alton steps from his helicopter on a deserted Alpine ridge, ready for the long off-piste run down. Photograph by Arnie Wilson

The ultimate ski-lift to the Matterhorn

Heli-skiing once meant travelling to Canada, but Roger Alton discovered a superb European version amid the drama - and luxury - of the Swiss Alps

We are at the head of the Tête de Valpelline glacier, 3,802 metres (12,474 ft) high and just to the west of the towering summit of the Matterhorn. The thump of the five-seater Aerospatiale Squirrel helicopter that dropped us off fades into the deepest silence you can imagine. All around is a panorama of Alpine giants, cold and clear in brilliant sunlight. 'OK, let's go,' says Sebastien, our guide, and we glide behind him through the perfect spring powder. 'Welcome to the adrenaline-fuelled world of European heli-skiing.'

It's been a truth pretty much universally acknowledged that a person in need of a bit of decent heli-skiing has to hole up in a Canadian mountain lodge. Not any more. Thanks to a hyper-dynamic young Australian snowboarder called Danielle Stynes, you can heli-ski the pick of the Alps without needing the bank balance of Warren Buffet or the organisational skills of Nicola Horlick. Danielle has set up SwissSkiSafari, with the entirely commendable aim of combining superb skiing with overnight stays at some of the most luxurious hotels in the Alps. What's not to like?

In Europe, you can only really heli-ski in Italy and Switzerland, and it's so different from Canada. Better I think. There, the choppers ferry skiers up and down powder slopes; in Europe the terrain is so varied and landscape so wild and spectacular you can't do more than a couple of trips a day, often just one. On each you will ski more than 2,000m of

vertical descent, two or three times the length of a long run in Canada. You have to be more cautious here, and the skiing is more technical. Snow conditions and the setting are constantly changing in the Alps - that's what makes them so special.

Danielle's trips are for demanding and experienced skiers or boarders, with a taste for adventure - as well as luxury - and a feel for some of the most spectacular landscapes on the planet. But the skiing level doesn't have to be too high. Most of the slopes would rarely be much above blue/red in difficulty if they were pisted - but, of course, they are not and that is the joy. You can experience the Alps in a way that nobody else can.

'It can be intimidating in the places we're in, but our job is to make it feel completely safe,' says Danielle. 'We choose the easiest routes down the mountain. There are other more challenging ones, but this is not what our business is about.'

Danielle works with Sebastien Devrrent, a 33-year-old French guide with the regulation film star looks and, naturally, a beautiful actress wife. 'Seb and I are on the snow every day, and with our network of local contacts we know exactly where the best snow will be. This means we have maximum flexibility and can change descents at the last minute,' says Danielle.

'Weather, of course, is always tricky: winds, bad visibility, sudden changes in snow can appear within hours. But we go out in March and April, when there's the most settled weather. With mild temper-

ESSENTIALS

Roger Alton travelled with SwissSkiSafari (00 41 27 398 2194; www.swisskisafari.com). The five-night Ultimate Journey costs £4,447 including all meals plus cocktails and wine, as well as helicopter flights, insurance, lift passes, and the services of a ski guide.

atures, often amazing snow and clear blue skies, it's perfect for flying.'

Danielle took me to sample what she calls her 'ultimate journey', along with a small group, and it was totally memorable. We started in Verbier at the Chalet d'Adrien, a charming Relais and Chateaux hotel, with a champagne reception and delicious dinner. After a safety briefing, and getting thoroughly equipped with safety harnesses, avalanche beepers and the like, we set off the next day on our first trip, a thrilling flight over the familiar crowded slopes of Verbier and up to the 3,336m Rosablanche. Then a long, leisurely ski down before rejoining the pistes and eventually dinner. This was our last night in Verbier. The next day we would be in Zermatt; Danielle's team brings all your bags round by road so this is travelling light.

After breakfast, our pilot decided to let rip. The flight was a rollercoaster as we flew towards crevasses and seracs, along glaciers, over and down past Mont Blanc de Cheillon (3,869m) before landing on the Pigne d'Arolla (3,772m). From here we skied to the valley floor for a wonderful picnic, before flying up past the mesmerising giants of Mont Collon, Tête Blanche and the Dent d'Herens. We landed high on the Zermatt ski system and took leisurely runs back to this most traditional, and expensive, of ski villages.

We were staying in the five-star Grand Hotel Zermatterhof, overlooking the main square. From here you look up all along the line of the Matterhorn's Hornli Ridge, where, 140 years ago, Britain's Edward Whymper made the first ascent. The following day, another thrilling ride round the south-east face of the mighty Matterhorn to the Valpelline and down to the village. Our last drop was above the car-free resort of Saas-Fee, where we enjoyed the pistes before a final night at the Ferienart Resort and Spa.

As Danielle points out, it would just be too much like hard work to organise this for yourself. I thought the safety instruction impeccable, the security superb and the experience wonderful. As Danielle says: 'We want you to come into our world and want you to enjoy it.' You will.

MARTIN BELL'S SKI CLINIC



The top racer and leading coach answers your queries

Q. Where do you recommend for a ski weekend? I'm flying from one of the London airports, and obviously the important thing are a short transfer and a good resort.

Jenny Stevens, Camden, London

A. Because the highest resorts tend to be in the central ridge of the Alps, they also tend to be furthest from major airports, and that rules out some great places. But there are still plenty of accessible, snow-sure high-altitude resorts to choose from less than two hours' drive from the nearest airports, which I've listed in brackets: Hintertux (Munich) or Obertauern (Salzburg) in Austria; Chamonix (Geneva), Alpe D'Huez,

or Les Deux Alpes (Grenoble) in France; Cervinia (Turin), Madonna or Val Gardena (Verona) in Italy; Davos, Flims/Laax (Zürich) or Verbier (Geneva) in Switzerland. If you can book late, you can check conditions and try one of these lower-altitude areas if they have good snow: in Andorra, Pas de la Casa or Soldeu (Toulouse); in Austria, Bad Gastein or Saalbach (Salzburg), Kitzbühel (Munich); in France, Flaine, La Clusaz or Méribel (Geneva); in Italy, Courmayeur (Geneva or Turin) or Sauze D'Oulx (Turin); in Switzerland, Grindelwald, Wengen (Berne), or Champéry (Geneva). If you want to get off the beaten track you could even fly to Nice and try Foux d'Allos or Isola 2000 or to Malga for Sierra Nevada.

Send questions on resorts, technique or equipment to Martin at ski.clinic@observer.co.uk. For details of Martin Bell's coaching see www.skimartinbell.com

ORIGINAL SOURCE.CO.UK



ORIGINAL SOURCE SHOWER

PACKED WITH NATURAL STUFF

SNOW REPORT

FRANCE

Lots of sunshine across Europe this week. **Alpe d'Huez** has a tasty 100cm of snow on upper runs, 75 at the bottom with good skiing on groomed runs. A little more snow is needed in **Argentière** (20/180), and pistes are nice once the sun has warmed them in **Avoriaz** (110/120) and **Val d'Isère**.

SWITZERLAND

Zermatt (19/167), **Villars** (25/110), **Saas Fee** (51/147) and **Davos** (49/114) have decent snow.

AUSTRIA

Mahyhofen (35/145) has great conditions on north-facing runs, but off-piste is worn. Clear skies and all lifts open in **Zell Am See** (60/105).

ITALY

Mild temperatures, with excellent conditions in **Madonna di Campiglio** (80/120) and **Cortina** (50/105).

CANADA

Plenty of snow, with western resorts benefiting most. **Kicking Horse** (131/161) is a powder paradise and **Kimberly** (112/142) has half a metre of fresh.

USA

Alta (333/333) has loads of snow but it's windy. **Snowbird** (285/305) had almost 30cm in one night last week and great conditions remain.

Data courtesy of the Ski Club of Great Britain (www.skiclub.co.uk).

