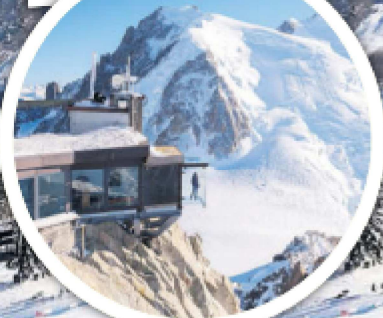


# SKIING PARADISE WILL LIFT YOUR SPIRITS

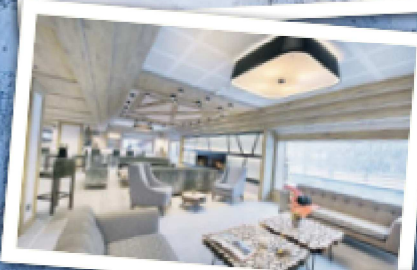
# AND TEST YOUR HEAD FOR HEIGHTS



**TASTE TRAP**... Stirlings dig into lunch, while La Cho restaurant was a cliff-hanger, literally



**SNOW BEATING IT**... stunning hotel, with its pool and sensational spa facility as well as a chilled-out bar area



# Les is more in Chamonix

**THOSE** early-morning flights can be sleepless agony, but they are ecstasy for ski junkies desperate not to lose one minute.

Take the red-eye from Edinburgh to Geneva, and you'll be cruising the slopes over the border in France by lunchtime.

My destination was Les Houches, in the heart of the world-famous Chamonix Valley. I was staying at the family-owned MCM Hôtels Résidences, sampling the delights of their 4\* Chalets Elena.

Les Houches (the natives award brownie points if you say "Laze Oosh") will match any identikit of your traditional alpine hamlet.

No high-rises or grey concrete, just authentic mountain character with formidable wood and stone chalets, slate roofs, and the obligatory quaint church, all nestling in the

## GO: CHAMONIX

**GETTING THERE:** Easyjet fly direct from Edinburgh to Geneva, with fares from £77. See [easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com). Chalets Elena arrange transfers.

**STAYING THERE:** Apartments at the 4\* Chalets Elena are from approx £820 per week (sleeping four), £1,086 (sleeping six), and £1,520 (sleeping eight). Short-stay, minimum two nights, on request. See [mcm-hotels-residences.com](http://mcm-hotels-residences.com)

**MORE INFO:** See [chamonix.com](http://chamonix.com) for all you need to know about taking a trip to the Chamonix Valley.

shadow of Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in Europe.

The low-slung and centrally-located Chalets Elena, second-youngest of nine developments in MCM's upmarket portfolio, was a very sympathetic addition to the village in 2018.

It melds the traditional with the contemporary, using the de rigueur timber beams and copious amounts of wood and stone. Ice-cracked glass that could once have been a Jeremy Clarkson windscreen surrounds the vast reception and bar.

The high-quality finishes should not surprise, since a carpenter founded Maurice Girard Montagne (MGM) 57 years ago.

His son, CEO David Girard,

has obviously stayed true to papa's legacy.

Chalets Elena's 49 beautifully-fitted self-catering apartments, for between four and eight people, each has a lounge, well-equipped dining kitchen, generous two or four en-suite bedrooms and large balcony.

The duty concierge will arrange shopping and bakery deliveries and there's a nearby supermarket for essentials.

And Chalets Elena will even supply a chef if you're late home from the apres ski and find that your dinner is in le mot.

To work off those holiday pounds – or not – the wellness centre (known as a spa in my day) has an extensive gym,

good-sized pool, saunas, and steam rooms.

In the treatment rooms, the boys can join the little lady in enjoying every manner of exotic pampering, while the family facilities are excellent and star-rated.

Chalets Elena's young home-town manager – as impressive in every way as his name, Corentin Leroy – can talk you through every downhill in the valley, suggest the best spots to eat and drink, and he even adjusted my bindings when my hire skis were delivered to their stylish boot room.

## Direct access to tree-lined slopes

You can even buy and lease your own pad at Chalets Elena and in their superb 5\* Le Crystal du Jado in Chamonix (assuming you have around £200,000 to spare) and around 25 per cent of owners are British.

Chalets Elena is just 300 metres from the Bellevue bubble lift and direct access to 55km of picturesque tree-lined

slopes on the local ski area. It has the valley's highest number of prepared runs, while all those trees mean you're still piste-busting when bad weather closes other areas.

Les Houches is the perfect place for beginners, intermediates, and families – a wise option for mixed-ability groups and a great base to explore the valley.

The more adventurous get their kicks, too. Halfway down is a suicidal vertical drop. One nervous peak and you realise why it's called "green".

I settled my tummy over lunch on the slopes at Prairies 1890. I can heartily recommend the local beer and Tartiflette – a Savoye dish of potatoes, reblochon cheese, lardons, and onions.

Upgrade to the regional Mont Blanc lift pass and a free bus whisks you 6km to Chamonix and five different ski areas.

January apparently is not a popular month among the French to ski – they find it too cold, the deers – so hardy Scots

will find the slopes unbelievably quiet then. And cheaper, too.

And while in Chamonix, you can experience the highest vertical ascent cable car in the world, an engineering marvel on Aiguille du Midi.

It's a 20-minute ride to Needle of the Noon (viewed from the local church, it's noon when the sun passes over its summit), and your reward is a truly inspiring 360° panorama taking in Mont Blanc, Switzerland and Italy.

## Improved beauty sleep

It's chilly that high up, and breathless, and positively heart-stopping for some when you are invited to Step Into The Void – a five-sided perspex box suspended over the 13,000ft drop.

The Needle – the closest you can get to Mont Blanc's summit without an ice axe – also boasts the highest toilet in Europe, a welcome relief for those with no head for heights. The experience is not cheap at €60 return, but it's worth it.

Les Houches is also well worth a visit, with enough bars and

restaurants to satisfy all but your committed party animals.

Under the Bellevue lift you'll find the Kitsch Inn, a pub-diner living up to its name with quirky decor and assorted crockery serving huge sandwiches, Mont Blanc burgers, and Rootin' Tootin' salads, all using local produce.

They do live music, there's a play area for the kids, and the atmosphere mirrors its bubbly owner, English-Aussie lass Claire.

Another Les Houches upside was improved beauty sleep. I suffer insomnia at altitude, but the village is only 1,000 metres up and I slept like a House of Lords backbencher.

And besides the Needle, there was another high-point – the Chalets Elena full-body massage from the lovely Ann-Charlotte, a snip at €85.

The wee lassie insisted I swap my swimming shorts for a teenie-weenie G-string. I actually took it home to tease Mrs S. She said: "At least they got your size right!"

You have to get up early to catch my missus – not to mention great skiing at Les Oosh.

DAVID STIRLING