



A Flight of

*French Fancy*

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*ROOKSANA HOSSENALLY* is pleasantly surprised by Les Airelles and loses herself in the surrounding slopes of Courchevel, its fine-dining restaurants and plush private jets



THE SUN BEAT down on the tree-lined runway that pulled into sight between fleecy white clouds – practically vertical, it looked alarmingly steep. Our six-seater private jet was headed right for the slope of the French Alps' Chambéry airport, also featured in the opening scene of Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies*, precisely for its drop. My (effortless) mission was to spend the weekend at the multi-award winning palace-hotel Les Airelles, a name on everyone's lips whenever there is a mention of Courchevel, the world's glitziest ski resort.

Panic took over me and my fellow passengers, interrupting daydreams, as we soared above the Alpine

expanse of varying hues of whites and icy blues. The plane rattled as it descended, and I closed my eyes and waited to feel the first bump of the runway. When I reopened my eyes, the plane was taxiing towards the terminal, the other passengers clapping with relief. We had made it. I looked out of the window at the pocket-sized airport, which nestled right in the middle of the hostile mountainous territory.

Mesmerised by the jagged outline of the snow-capped peaks covered with scenic fir trees and glistening against sapphire skies, I was nudged politely by a tall, dark and handsome stranger, dressed in full traditional Austrian ►



► hunting attire. He waved me to a white car with black tinted windows, emblazoned with the legendary Les Airelles logo on either side.

Courchevel is a veritable phenomenon. Non-skiers come here to play rather than ski; there are 15 five-star hotels, three of which have been awarded the prestigious French palace-hotel distinction; fine-dining restaurants (including six with Michelin stars) litter the resort; and there is an array of exclusive boutiques such as Chanel and Bulgari.

Dotted with VIPs from William and Kate to George Clooney and Vladimir Putin, the resort takes over for the winter from the exclusive summer resort of Saint Tropez on the French Riviera. It has become a brand in its own right, leading to a hike in property prices. This has made Courchevel 1850 (where '1850' denotes the altitude in metres) one of the most expensive places to buy a home. Located in Savoie, the resort is part of the Three Valleys domain, the largest skiable territory in the world. Inaugurated in 1946, Courchevel was built to be the first 'super ski resort' that was not based around an existing

village. However, despite its man-made beginnings, it holds all the charm of a typical Alpine setting.

I'd been told a great many times of the gaudily bejewelled fur-clad ladies of Courchevel at lunch in town or at nooks atop the slopes, but despite its flashy reputation, the resort is also an undisputed haven for top skiers due to its size, well-connected slopes and black runs, regarded as among the most difficult in the world. It also hosts the Ladies' Alpine Audi FIS World Cup every December.

My car pulled up at a 19th century style Austro-Hungarian forest mountain lodge, where I was met with an animated Christmas scene of full-size reindeer and bears with twinkling lights in the lobby. I longed to find out more about the hotel that was voted Best Mountain Hotel this year by Russian *Condé Nast Traveller*, and Best Mountain Hotel in France by the World Ski Awards last year. An icon of French savoir faire, the hotel's history goes back to the '60s. It started out as a rather drab affair that entrepreneur Madame Raymonde Fenestraz, who, inspired by the life of the Empress 'Sissi' of Austria, as well as her time among the high society of England, turned into a mountainside palace. Les Airelles is now part of the Lov Hotel Collection and has a Disneyland quality to it, paving the way for a fairytale winter wonderland experience that begins with a private jet transfer. I soon learned, at this resort, arriving by private jet or helicopter isn't about impressing the neighbours, it's the norm.

"I come here every year with or without my family," a guest tells me. "It's been ten years now. You can't find quality, service and food like you can here." Indeed, upon closer inspection, there was nothing slap-dash about the hotel. And while it's true that Les Airelles isn't testament to cutting-edge design, it's not what guests come here for. They come for the high-end facilities (the hotel also has its own ice rink), location, laid-back comfort and service.



The ground-floor fireside, open-plan lounge, which also serves as La Table du Jardin Alpin restaurant, leads into the signature Cala di Volpe restaurant in the evenings. The exclusive two-Michelin-star Pierre Gagnaire restaurant, which I was to experience that night, is in a separate salon. The wood-panelled lounge, complete with frescoes, chairs upholstered in velvet holly-bush greens and reds, views of smooth white slopes, a log fire, and the sound of ski boots shuffling across the thick lavish carpets, evoked all the mountainside magic of the winter season.

I sat down to lunch in the lounge, which opens onto a sun-drenched outdoor terrace. Never a fan of buffets, my scepticism vanished as I lay eyes on the glorious spread of fresh seafood, local hams, Savoyard cheeses, salads, cooked meats served right off the bone, and a multitude of homemade desserts.

Upstairs, the snug 37 rooms and 14 suites – and giant 550m<sup>2</sup> apartment with 100m<sup>2</sup> terrace – are all decorated similarly with varying layouts. Mine was composed of open-plan living, dining, office and bedroom areas complete with a walk-in wardrobe. A large bathroom came with a private steam room and the signature Hermès amenities. Even the tissues had a sparkly sheen to them.

The time had come for a sumptuous meal at Pierre Gagnaire's restaurant. Served with Pommery Brut Champagne, the delectable *defilé* of dishes included blue lobster corolla coated with crustacean jelly, roasted turbot on a bed of leek, sea urchins with scallops and caviar, homemade pasta filled with white truffle, and violet artichoke with burrata. It could only be described as otherworldly. The experience was capped off by a glass of century-old Louis XIII cognac in the lounge by the log fire, served true to tradition, out of a handsome T.T. leather trunk and by a white-gloved young man in a three-piece suit wielding a long glass pipette.

The next morning, resisting the temptation to spend the day lounging in the dream-inducing king-size bed, I was out on the slopes first thing. I made a quick pit-stop at the well-known La Folie Douce on the slopes in neighbouring Méribel for a bite to eat, a bout of uplifting electronic music and 360° views of les Trois Vallées. While badly executed cabaret acts accompany average Savoyard dishes inside, the day-club ambiance and sunbathing outside is the real draw.

For skiers, the hotel has a fully equipped boot room and a host of recommended ski instructors, but for those who would prefer to avoid the slopes, the sumptuous Cellcosmet spa has a large pool, Jacuzzis, steam room and a sauna. Upon my return, I sank into the moodily lit pool, and had a holistic treatment with practitioner Marilyn Pellier, who believes that a mix of approaches, from hypnotism to Reiki, can work on body,

mind and soul to cure all matters of ills. Before slipping off to my room, I popped into the hotel hair salon for a miracle capillary cure for my lacklustre locks. Hairdresser Cyril, who swears only by luxurious Philip B hair care, primped and pampered my hair with divine smelling products called things like 'scent of Santa Fe' shampoo and 'Russian Amber' conditioning cream, giving it an invigorating boost.

Spending the day out on the slopes, and the late afternoon exploring my inner psyche with Marilyn, left me as hungry as a mountain wolf, and the hearty home-cooked traditional cuisine at Cala di Volpe that evening was ideal. Manned only by Sardinians, the Cala is an outpost of the glamorous hotel of the same name on Sardinia's Costa Smeralda. It's the best place to come for fresh cannelloni stuffed with minced beef, melt-in-the-mouth gnocchi or the signature 'Fregola' durum wheat pasta with vegetarian seafood sauce, alongside bold Mediterranean wine.

Feeling as content as could be after dinner, I relished in the cosiness of the delightfully kitsch theme of Les Airelles and I understood the appeal of this unusual hotel, despite slicker rivals. The warm wood surroundings are top of the range in comfort, the service seamless, the cuisine of the highest standard and the location striking. I found myself taken over by a small wave of regret at having to return to my urban Parisian base the next day, worlds apart from the magical snowy peaks of the French Alps and its fine enchanting chateau. ■

*This year Courchevel will open on 5 December 2015 until 24 April 2016.*

*Rooms at Les Airelles start from £791 per night for a standard valley-side room.  
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