

WHY WE TRAVEL

FRENCH ALPS | OMAN | ISTANBUL

Going Off-Piste

A lover of hot holidays, **Isabella Sullivan** discovered a world beyond skiing in Courchevel 1850



Snow plough, snow plough,” my very French instructor Guy implores as he whizzes backwards down the Bellecôte piste. The snowy landscape stretches out like a crumpled white bedspread and the piste, perfectly manicured, leads down to the twinkling town below. The sun is almost blinding, the air as crisp as a ginger snap and Gucci-branded gondola lifts trundle past. After decades of favouring hot holidays and feigning little interest in skiing and Alpine sports, I have to wonder how I got here, legs trembling like Bambi as Moncler-clad alpinists ski past with vigour.

There are two types of families: those who ski and those who don't. Mine had been the latter. But in my head, I'd always longed for an Alpine escape, for the cheese, roaring fires and abundance of slick winterwear. While the world succumbed to the Omicron variant, the fresh air and peace of the mountains pulled me like

never before – and just like that, with no ski experience, I decided now was the time.

Every year from December through April, the rugged peaks and charming towns of Les Trois Vallées come alive with skiers, winter sports enthusiasts and luxury holidaymakers. The most chichi of them all is Courchevel, just a two-hour drive from Geneva and, subsequently, an easy pilgrimage from my UAE home. At the highest point in the resort, Courchevel 1850 is the supermodel of French winter destinations, perfectly preened and oozing with glamour thanks to its wealthy patronage. Amongst the mix of grand Savoyard-themed chalets and global hotel brands, one hotel feels more familiar to a sun-worshipper like me.

A far cry from the tropical retreats the brand is known for, Aman Le Mélézin seems more like a grand French fortress than ski hotel.



BOOK IT

Aman Le Mélézin closes for the season on 10 April, 2022 and re-opens in December 2022. *Doubles from AED 6,600; +33 4 79 08 01 33; aman.com*

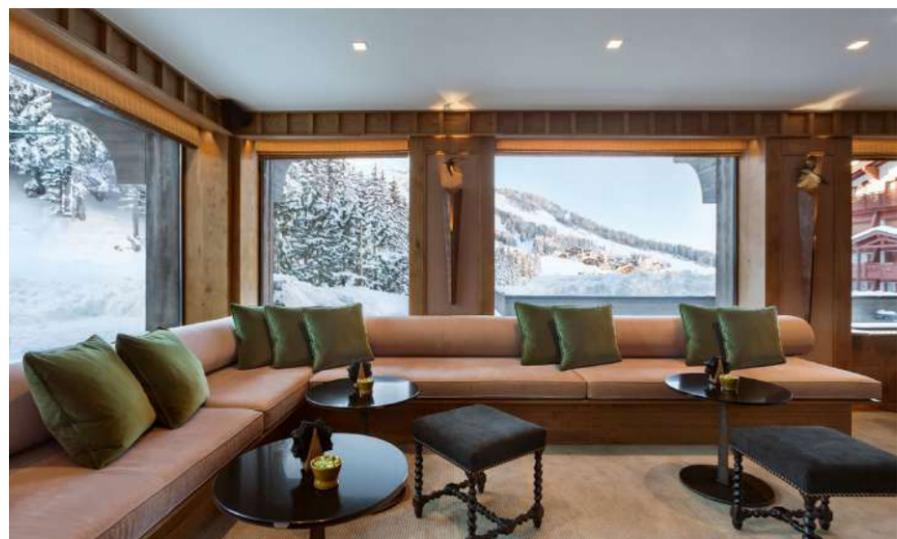
HOW TO GET THERE

Etihaad flies direct to Geneva from Abu Dhabi airport in just under seven hours, with return economy fares from AED 1,965 and business from AED 14,325. Guests travelling business class can experience Etihaad's door-to-door chauffeur service and airport lounges and relax on lie-flat private compartment seating. Guests are also treated to complimentary Acqua di Parma amenity kits and flexible à la carte dining on the flight to Geneva. *etihad.com*

It cuts an imposing shape on the edge of the Bellecôte piste, looking over the town and effortlessly combining the brand's signature Asian aesthetic with the locale. I'm greeted by polished general manager Alexandra and Henri, her right-hand man. Both have worked there for decades, the hotel itself opening in 1992 and still the only Aman property in France. There's a familiar comfort in its effortless mix between Oriental and Savoyard. Inside, solid oak panelling and parquet flooring are brightened by fawn carpets and orchids and bonsai trees sit by roaring fireplaces. The lobby centres around a gnarled 100-year-old tree and a Japanese-style fitness studio displays a projection of the gleaming white slopes. Naturally, it's ski-in, ski-out, the preserve of only the very best, so I'm told.

Le Mélézin's warm, inviting ski room is where I find myself each morning – that is, after yoga sessions in the Japanese-style studio and breakfast overlooking the Vanoise peaks. It spills right onto the groomed Bellecôte, manned by a small army of tall, smiling gentlemen issuing words of encouragement. The team fuss as they measure for ski boots and skis and wave goodbye as I tackle the gentle green, or “bunny” runs, with Guy. Surrounded by lofty snow-capped peaks, I tremour, tumble, but quickly perfect the snow plough. After little more than an hour, I see why the sport becomes so addictive.

“Now we ski home,” Guy says with a roguish grin, pointing to the fur-lined slope unfolding before us. And just like that, slowly, and in rigid snow plough, I glide into the town itself, abuzz with shoppers scurrying around in the dazzling sunlight.



Clockwise from top left: The snowy peaks of Les Trois Vallées; Aman Le Mélézin; a hot tub in the Suite Ski Piste; Suite Le Mélézin; gondola lifts over Courchevel 1850. **Previous page:** The slopes and chalets of Courchevel 1850

But you don't have to ski, or even attempt to ski, to experience the magic of the Alps, and moon biking and snowshoeing are all other popular pursuits. Jan, a veteran snowshoeing instructor and Courchevel native, takes up hiking up the slopes past whizzing skiers and groups perched in piste-side cafés sipping on steaming cups of le chocolat chaud. “It hasn't been like this so early in the season in 35 years,” he says as he takes on a five-foot-high wall of powdery snow. Later on, it's moonbiking, zooming around a track on the edge of a dusty fir forest. The blue sky turns from red to purple and finally to star-speckled night.

I find myself looking forward to dashing, rosy-cheeked, to my room to cosy up in the private lounge or soak in the marble tub after such pursuits. Rooms at Aman Le Mélézin are nothing short of sumptuous, a boutique 31 with cosy beamed ceilings, sink-your-toes-in carpets, fireplaces and

gleaming marble bathrooms. Baths and powerful rainfall showers are stocked with essential oils and Aman Spa products and I soon drift into a slumber as the black-out blinds cover the floodlit piste slope.

Aching from snowy explorations, I visit the two-story spa built below the piste, where a vaulted chamber houses an aquamarine pool flanked by Jacuzzis and white loungers. There's something magical in this ritual, entering, still thawing from the freezing Alpine air, to find steam rising from the limpid waters. That, and après-ski, the most convivial alpine tradition.

In Courchevel 1850, the place to be seen is Chalet du Pierre, its front terrace cluttered with skis and its wooden floor dusted with half-melting snow. All around, pink-faced skiers zip off their jackets and pile in for oysters, French onion soup and tartiflette – a bubbling pot of reblochon cheese, potato and meat. Aman Le Mélézin's half-board

package allows for dining in six restaurants across the town, including rustic Les Airelles hotel with its Savoyard restaurant and elegant Italian. Keen skiers can catch a gondola lift to nearby Meribel for open-air La Folie Douce – the most famous party in the Alps. Le Mélézin itself is home to an understated Japanese restaurant and a cosy bar serving French all-day fare. I dabble in them all, the balance adding sublime variety not expected of Alpine holidays.

One doesn't have to ski to appreciate a mountain holiday. There's something about gazing onto brilliant snow-capped peaks and breathing in its fresh pine-scented air that is undeniably restorative. Not only did it resore, but it gave me a burning desire to ski with the vigour of those whizzing down the Bellecote. I'll be back on the slopes next year, riding those Gucci-emblazoned gondolas for myself and gliding out of the ski room. Just you wait. ☺