

Skiing among giants on the roof of Europe

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Our spirits were as high as the air was light as we surveyed the mountain giants of the Alps from 4,300 metres.

When Inghams Ski first suggested the idea of a trip to the cosy Chalet Hotel Dragon in the Italian resort of Breuil-Cervinia (2000m), I was hooked right away. The thought of enjoying an action-packed holiday in the shadow of the idyllic Matterhorn bordering Italy and Switzerland was the first that sprang to mind. Then of course there was the Italian hospitality and gastronomy - fine food and wine are items which the people of the Valle d'Aosta have prided themselves on for centuries.

Most enticing of all though was the fact that on both sides of the Italian/Swiss border heliskiing is permitted and an opportunity to marvel at the majesty of the fabled giants of the Alps from both above and below was just too good to miss. What an opportunity it turned out to be, thanks in no small part to mother nature who provided buckets of powder right on cue. After enduring two days of welcome snowfall on the wide and sweeping pistes of Cervinia, Valtourneche (Italy) and Zermatt (Switzerland), it was 'powder time' for our group as we descended from the landing zone on the roof of Europe - near the peak of Monte Rosa (the second highest peak in the Alps).

Breathtaking

The helicopter trip may only have lasted a matter of minutes but soaring high above the Alps is nothing short of breathtaking (literally, at that height) and something everyone should do at

least once before they kick the bucket. Trips with Heliski Cervinia are not limited to winter sports enthusiasts, longer lasting panoramic tours have proven a big hit with those not keen to take on the mountain on snowboards or skis.

At 4,300m with crystal clear skies there's an array of the European mountain giants to survey - in the distance is the vast Monte Blanc standing in a sea of snow capped mountains while the mighty Matterhorn maps our route to Zermatt. The Monte Rosa landing zone is well known as the highest heliskiing point in Europe and

provides a truly mesmeric descent on one of the longest and most spectacular glaciers (the Grenzletscher) on the famous mountain.

It was certainly a case of being 'all down hill from here', as we set off on what was to be the most memorable of off piste adventures I'd ever experienced. Of course there were a couple of tumbles on the steeper sections of the powder descent - including one particularly spectacular fall by one of our group who had decided to try the extremely difficult art of telemarking off piste for the first time.

Thankfully, he wasn't seriously injured and no one disappeared into any of the many crevasses which the experienced Alpine guides of Heliski Cervinia steered us safely clear of during the descent. Interested readers may be heartened to know that each member of the group was fitted with avalanche beacons (to help trace anyone unfortunate enough to be buried alive in snow) and climbing harnesses (to allow the guides to fetch anyone who slips into the depths of a crevasse).

At the end of the off piste adventure -

which included a few kilometres of sweat inducing cross country skiing - was a very welcome pint (or two) weissbier in Zermatt. It was then that I reflected that the experience was well worth the 240 euro cost. From there it was back to the much less costly Italian resort, through the historic Theodul Pass which connects the Swiss Valais region and the Valle d'Aosta.

Cervinia (Breuil is the old name for the village which was established by former Italian king Umberto Primo who built a still extant hunting lodge there in the 19th century) is home to an impressive pisted ski area of 350 kilometres and is suitable for all levels of skiers and boarders all year around.

On our first day in resort we were met by friendly and engaging Inghams ski host Joanna who invited us and other Inghams Ski guests to 'Meet the Piste' in what turned out to be a very enjoyable day of light skiing to help us get to know the area.

Her Inghams colleague Alessandra ensured that there was entertainment for each evening of our week in resort and although a pub crawl was not up our street, we leapt at the chance to sample five fine wines and a host delicacies from the Aosta Valley - at a cost of just 18 euro

I recommend it very highly.

Nevertheless, the apres ski atmosphere in the Chalet Hotel Dragon is hard to beat. Weather permitting, a band belts out live music on the terrace which is no stranger to weary skiers and boarders dancing off whatever energy they have in reserve after a day on the slopes.

Cosy retreat

The Chalet Hotel Dragon is a warm, cosy mountain retreat which has long prided itself on being Cervinia's apres ski hotspot. General Manager Gianluca Zocchi - an experienced manufacturer of custom skis and expert skier - explains that the Dragon's reputation has grown steadily over a 30 year period in which its guests have been entertained with live music daily in its lively bars and terrace. The nighttime fun may not be to everyone's taste but for those looking for the perfect balance of skiing and partying in the shadow of the majestic Matterhorn then the Chalet Hotel Dragon is an ideal destination.

The property was recently added to Inghams' large offering of accommodation in the Italian Alps but already the courteous staff at the chalet hotel are like one big happy family. During our stay someone was always on hand to help out or offer advice on anything from towel changes to where to find the best off piste skiing.

For a three star catered chalet, the dining experience soared well above what we have come to expect. Canapes and aperitifs were followed each evening by a choice of two starters, mains and desserts, and unlimited wine, tea/coffee/hot chocolate. It was difficult to fault any of the offerings, indeed we were increasingly impressed by the dishes served up by the accomplished kitchen team as the week progressed.

The table service was markedly impressive as the waiting staff who doubled as general purpose hotel staff greeted everyone with a broad smile and kind welcome.

As one would expect, the morning fare is a choice of a continental breakfast including pan au chocolat, croissants, ham, cheese, yogurt, prunes etc or a limited sized hot option including eggs, bacon, sausage and porridge. For those not opting for a beer or famous bombardino (the famous Alpine hot egg nog, cream and brandy concoction) refreshment after descending from the surrounding mountains, there was an abundance of fabulous homemade cake and afternoon tea/coffee to get stuck into in the chalet hotel.

The sleeping accommodation at the Chalet Hotel Dragon is also quite

impressive for a three star chalet. Although the entire building only sleeps 26 guests, the rooms are spacious in terms of three star ski accommodation and are cleaned daily.

The Chalet Hotel Dragon is the perfect Alpine getaway for medium sized groups seeking a fun packed holiday of fantastic skiing in Breuil Cervinia perfectly balanced with the best apres ski in town.

Whether seeking good apres ski, extreme off piste, cruisy blue runs, challenging black slopes or beautiful scenery, Cervinia - in the shadow of the fabled Matterhorn - is an ideal destination for winter sports lovers.

Staying in Italian mountain resort also has the added bonus of allowing visitors access to Swiss slopes without them having to pay Swiss prices.

Add to those gems the opportunity to enjoy the highest heliskiing in Europe, gastronomy which is second to none and some fresh powder, and it offers the perfect winter sports package. I personally can't remember enjoying a more memorable skiing adventure.

Ian Cullen travelled to Cervinia with Inghams Ski

■ Inghams features 16 ski resorts in Italy, including the resort of Cervinia.

■ Inghams offers a 7 nights stay at the 3* Chalet Hotel Dragon on a catered basis (skiers breakfast, afternoon tea, coffee and homemade cake, 5 course dinner with unlimited complimentary wines, tea, coffee and chocolate) with prices starting from £759 per person, including return flights from Belfast to Geneva and resort transfers. For more information and bookings visit www.inghams.co.uk or contact 0208 780 4447.

■ Ski pack items can be pre-booked:

Lift Pass: 6 day Whole Area lift pass starts from £224 Adult; 6 days local lift pass starts from £174; Free lift passes for children up to 7 years

Ski Hire: 6 day adult ski and boot hire starts from £80; 6 day child ski and boot hire starts from £62

Ski lessons: 6 day adult ski school (2.5hrs a day) starts from £141; 6 day child ski school (2.5hrs a day) starts from £141

Ski offers: 2-for-1 ski/snowboard hire for guests staying at the Chalet Hotel Dragon; Free child ski school when 2 adults pre book ski school

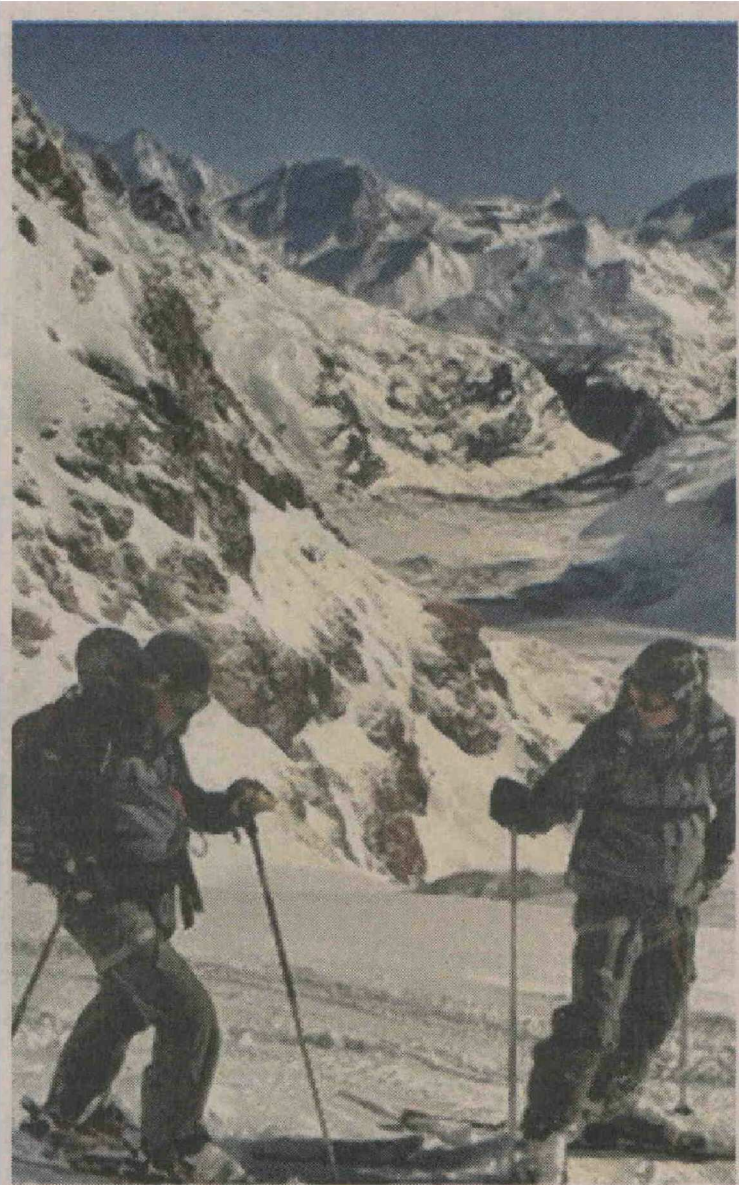
■ For further information on the wide range of heliskiing opportunities in Cervinia log on to heliskicervinia.com, email: info@heliskicervinia.com or call 0039 0166 949267.



ALL DOWNHILL FROM HERE . . . Ian is pictured amid a helicopter snow storm after being dropped off at 4,300m on Monte Rosa, the second highest mountain in Europe. 1603IC05



COSY APRES SKI HOTSPOT . . . The Hotel Chalet Dragon in Cervinia is the perfect mountain getaway for those seeking a fun-packed ski holiday. 1603IC04



**BREATHTAKING SCENERY ... Ian (right) chatting with brother Seamus during a descent of the Grenzletscher glacier en route to Zermatt.
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