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## Neil English enjoys a breathtaking heli-skiing

**I**T RANKS as one of my greatest skiing thrills this winter. After flying by helicopter 11,000ft up the Col de la Becca in Italy, I started my descent and was presented with a perfect view of two of Europe's most imperious peaks - Mont Blanc and the fearsome Matterhorn.

It was a magical start to the day. We had arrived in Italy from the quaint and little-known resort of Sainte Foy, just over the French border.

Sainte Foy has long enjoyed a reputation for being a good-value destination for off-piste skiers due to the excellent, rugged terrain accessible from its ski lifts.

And it is attractive due to its proximity to Italy, where heli-skiing - being taken to remote locations by helicopter rather than ski lift - is still legal. The activity is banned in France because of noise and damage to the environment.

The village is also being discovered by discerning holidaymakers who are not looking for the hectic night-life offered in the nearby French resorts of Les Arcs, La Plagne and Tignes.

Instead Sainte Foy offers charming restaurants, some of the oldest surviving chapels in the Alps and listed buildings with quirky stone columns holding up overhanging roofs.

Officials in Sainte Foy have imposed strict guidelines on new buildings so that the chalet style is preserved. The main materials used are larch from the local forests, stone and slate.

Sainte Foy's ski lift and piste network has been extended to offer 13 groomed runs catering for those at strong intermediate level.

It is possible to take a long, rewarding cruise on blue or red (intermediate) runs from the top of the six-person La Marquise chairlift all the way down to the village centre. There are also black (expert) runs from the top of the 8,600ft Col de l'Aiguille.

It is reassuring to know that these off-piste slopes at 8,500ft, which offer ungroomed, freeride terrain, are patrolled by resort staff on the look-out for avalanches.

It is worth mentioning, too, that many people buy ski passes for five or more days in Sainte Foy because this gives them heavily discounted skiing at other resorts such as Les Arcs should they wish.

**W**E HIRED local guide Franck Grand, who led us from the Col de l'Aiguille on an hour-long hike (with skis strapped to rucksacks) up a ridge to the 9,600ft Pointe de la Foglietta.

Our effort was rewarded by an off-piste descent of several miles, followed by lunch at Sainte Foy's Bergerie where the wonderful house salads are so generous they put most oversized American portions to shame.

We skied more of Sainte Foy's

legendary off-piste sections the next day, and then had lunch at one of the best restaurants in the Alps.

Chez Merie - the family name of the chef and owner - is located in the hamlet of Le Miroir. As soon as you walk in, you swap ski boots for warm slippers, sit on comfy sofas by a roaring log fire and sip a well-deserved aperitif while looking through the menu.

Marie (with an a) is also the Christian name of the celebrated owner. This, of course, causes confusion, especially with the English, when they ask for her first name.

The signature dishes are cote de boeuf, foie gras salad and chestnut soup but it is the feeling that you are eating in your auntie's cosy dining room that adds to the Chez

Merie experience. The pièce-de-résistance of the whole trip was the helicopter ride to Col de la Becca. During the day, as well as that majestic descent with Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn in our sights, we also tackled another run with Franck, this time down the wide open bowl of the Glacier de l'Invernet.

This wasn't the most challenging descent of my off-piste career, but it still ranks near the top of my back-country experiences simply because of the unspoilt beauty of our surroundings and the fact that we didn't see another ski track - let alone a human being - the entire time we were there.

We let rip through a foot of fresh, untouched powder for several hun-

# Blown Peaks



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run in the shadow of mighty Mont Blanc – and the fearsome Matterhorn

# away by a Twin experience



**RIDING HIGH:** Neil gets ready to climb aboard the helicopter, with Mont Blanc in the background. Above: The picture-postcard resort of Sainte Foy

## GETTING THERE

**Yellowstone Lodge** (020 3058 1234, [www.yellowstoneskilodge.co.uk](http://www.yellowstoneskilodge.co.uk)) sleeps 12 adults in six double bedrooms plus bunks for three children. Until April 25, 2010, the lodge can be hired for seven nights from £8,500 – the equivalent of £1,417 in its entirety per double room. Prices include breakfast, tea, pre-dinner canapes and three-course dinner plus all alcohol. Travel is not included but Yellowstone staff are happy to advise on your best option.

Ski guide Franck is available at the **Sainte Foy Bureau des Guides** (0033 688 387204). A heli-skiing day, including helicopter lift from Sainte Foy to La Thuile in Italy, then two more lifts to Col de la Becca for long off-piste descents, including services of a guide, costs from £300 per person at low season or £400 per person at high season.

dred feet at a time, stopping only to catch our breath and to look back up to admire the decadent autographs we left on our 'own' glacier, before setting off for another dose of skiing and boarding heaven.

The flattish trail out was a bit of a slog for snowboarders but they wouldn't have missed the main course of this off-piste feast for the world. And the helicopter experience is amazing value for money.

While it is clear that Sainte Foy is a place where you can ski and eat well, there have been concerns about the level of accommodation in the village. It could be said that until now, the self-catering apartments were acceptable but nothing special. The good news is that this

reputation is changing and Sainte Foy has taken a huge leap towards becoming a top-class ski resort.

I stayed at Yellowstone Lodge which, proudly perched on its own rocky peninsula, is hard to beat for location. It is clearly the envy of the resort's other properties, boasting six sumptuously appointed double or twin en suite bedrooms, and spacious communal areas, including a lounge with huge fire, dining area and open-plan kitchen –

all affording superb views of the mountains. There are also treatment rooms which you can use for privately arranged massages, and an outdoor hot tub.

A highly trained chef conjures up meals fit for royalty, while dinner is served with complimentary wine from the cellar of a true connoisseur – a former senior executive of the Veuve Clicquot champagne empire.

I'll drink to that.