

Cold comfort

PAMELA GOODMAN VISITS TWO RECENT OPENINGS IN THE TROIS VALLÉES – A STYLE-CONSCIOUS SKI-IN, SKI-OUT HOTEL AND A HIKERS' REFUGE THAT OFFERS UNEXPECTED SOPHISTICATION IN SCENIC SURROUNDINGS

As I write, details of how the upcoming ski season will function are still thin on the ground. It is a conundrum, I should imagine, for any tourist board trying to deal with the dichotomy facing the Alps: on the one hand, all we apparently crave in our strange new world is fresh air and outside space, thus the mountains seem to offer the perfect solution; yet, on the other, jostling lift queues, cramped cable cars and huffer-mugger restaurants and après-ski bars present – as we now know – precarious pitfalls for virus transmission. What to do?

One answer comes in the form of Refuge de la Traye, a tiny bolthole that opened last season on a remote plateau above Les Allues, part of the Trois Vallées commune of Méribel. It is no easy find – a grid reference is all I am given for my meeting point in the village of Le Villard, from where I am taken by four-wheel drive up a rough track to meet a custom-made snowcat for the last four-kilometre climb through thick forest, which emerges onto high Alpine pasture with commanding views of whitewashed mountain scenery.

A smattering of summer barns – partially buried under deep piles of snow when I visit – dots the landscape, among which are two refuges. The first of these is Refuge du Christ, still operating as a traditional walkers' sanctuary, but with the added bonus of an excellent lunchtime restaurant. A fraction higher up is Refuge de la Traye, a cluster of traditional wooden farm buildings concealing a small lodge of such exquisite charm and good looks that it feels almost as unlikely as the journey itself. Snow boots are exchanged for furry slippers and the front door closed against a raging blizzard outside.

Jean-Victor Pastor, scion of the Monaco construction-industry family, is the discreet force behind the Refuge, adapting the interiors in a way that embraces the cutesy, cowbell-and-antler Alpine aesthetic, but overlays it with sumptuous sophistication. There is room for only 16 guests at one time (take note, if thinking of an exclusive-use takeover*), divided between five good-sized double rooms, one tiny double room and an adjoining chalet that sleeps four. Outsiders – many of whom have walked or snowshoed up from Les Allues – often join for lunch (pizzas are cooked to order on a huge terrace), but in the evenings a peace and stillness descends such as I have never experienced in the Trois Vallées. This is Méribel, but not as you know it.

And this applies to the skiing, too. It would be hard to describe the Refuge as a skier's paradise. Yes, you can ski here – but with difficulty. The team can transfer skiers to and from the lift in Les Allues, but it is a long trek to connect with the major lift system of the resort itself. Consider this more of a destination for a non-skiing holiday, where you can read and relax in splendid isolation, or don snowshoes and follow hiking trails through miles of high-altitude scenery. Return to the Refuge for an unusual spa treatment – a milk bath, for example, Cleopatra-style, or a hay-bed ritual involving immersion in detoxifying mountain grasses.

Refuge de la Traye was not the only newcomer to Méribel last season. Different altogether, though sharing the same Small Luxury Hotels of the World accreditation, Le Coucou is designed through and through for skiers with perhaps one of the most enviable locations in the resort, right on the piste near Le Rond Point. Family owned and part of the Maisons Pariente group, which also owns the Crillon le Brave hotel in Provence, Le Coucou is a newbuild of 55 rooms and two private chalets. It was masterminded by the architect and designer Pierre Yovanovitch, who has riffed on the Savoyard vernacular to create unusual, and unusually playful, interiors – an abundance of terracotta, tangerine and yellow; blue or russet-coloured carpets spotted with white snowflakes; armchairs that resemble white fluffy teddy bears; cushions like snowballs.

It is imaginative and creative in a no-expense-spared kind of way but, for me, the winning aspect of the hotel is the ease of access, thanks to a super-efficient ski room, where staff will organise ski passes, help you in and out of your boots, ply you with croissants and hot chocolate, set you gently on your way down the slopes and welcome you back with a smile. And for spa and spa-brand aficionados, Le Coucou has a Tata Harper spa – allegedly the best in the business – which operates alongside a beautifully designed indoor/outdoor pool.

Both hotels plan to open this season, though with inevitable Covid-19 restrictions in place. No breakfast buffets, therefore, lots of mask- and glove-wearing, socially distanced tables in restaurants and bars, and lashings of hand sanitiser. Staff-to-guest contact may be a different experience, but the mountains will remain unchanged – pure, clean, cold and uncontaminated. Quite literally a breath of fresh winter air.

Ways and Means

Pamela Goodman visited Méribel as a guest of Small Luxury Hotels of the World (slh.com), Le Coucou (lecoucoumeribel.com) and Refuge de la Traye (refugedelatraye.com). Double rooms start at €440 a night, B&B, at the former; prices at the latter are on application □



PHOTOGRAPHS: JÉRÔME GALLAND; GILLES TRILLARD. *AT THE TIME OF GOING TO PRESS IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT REFUGE DE LA TRAYE WOULD OPERATE ON AN EXCLUSIVE-USE BASIS ONLY FOR THE 2020/21 WINTER SEASON

